Summary

A ferry was now treading the vast ocean. It's destination; the Tenla Region. The boat was loaded with trainers ready to conquer a new region, one filled with chances. But, someone had a more fervent enthusiasm than anyone else and his name is Ash Ketchum. Follow him with companions both old and new as they fight and meet old and new things. And to confront the darkness hiding beneath everyone in Tenla.

Notes

Setting: The story takes place in my fan-made region of Tenla. As such, many towns, cities, ideas, etc. are all coming straight from my mind. Tenla will have its own twists and turns. See below for ages of main characters present in the story.

Chronology: In terms of canon, the story takes place after Ash's Sinnoh journey but before his Unova journey. In terms of my story canon, Nova and Antica is the sequel to Pokemon Story: Sinnoh Journey, the latter itself taking part during Ash's Sinnoh journey. All story-specific events – shown, mentioned, and implied – from the previous story will be taken into account.

Pokemon: Even though the chronology will place the story between Sinnoh and Unova, Pokemon from every region will be featured and recognized – that means from Kanto to Kalos. None of the main canon characters will get Unova or Kalos Pokemon. In addition, original Tenla-native Pokemon will be featured.
Forewarning: The story will contain the following: instances of violence ranging from cartoon to occasionally serious, humor ranging from childish to young adult, minor language from Pokemon and older characters, and the prevalence of OCs. This story also might have more serious undertones and overtones in an overall sense. You have been warned.

Ages
Ash - 14
Misty - 14
Brock - 17
Gary – 14
May – 13
Dawn – 12

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Welcome

"Welcome to the Tenla Region, and the World of Pokemon."

Assistants and researchers, some from other parts of the world, listened attentively to the calm voice of the man standing before them on stage. The brandeis blue eyes behind his spectacles scanned the medium-sized audience inside a white and grey auditorium. His lilac hair reflected the light coming from the screen behind him and the rows of lights above. Before moving on, he cleared his throat and adjusted the purple ascot around his neck.

"Allow me to introduce myself to those who do not know me," the man said, taking a slight bow to show his respects to the people who graciously paid attention to him, "I am Xavier Ironwood, the Tenla Region's designated Pokemon Professor."

Professor Ironwood reached into the pocket of his white, long lab coat and took out a pen-like object, pushing the red button on top with his thumb. The screen behind displayed the image of a Poke Ball and, in a second, opened up. The computer projection that promptly appeared showed a doglike creature with two, thin tails and flawless beige fur. The audience marveled at the sight of the Pokemon, a Doyubi as some of them recalled, applauding as the creature barked.

"As you know, the world is inhabited by beings like this one, known to us as Pokemon." Professor Ironwood pressed the button again. The computer projection disappeared as the auditorium lights dimmed down to the point the screen was the most dominant source of light.

A slow-paced slideshow then commenced, showing various instances of Pokemon interaction. Some examples included a trio of children riding on top of a Rhyhorn, Diglett and Drilbur creating wide tunnels, and Jumpluff and Pachirisu meandering about on a forest floor.

"For centuries, perhaps millennia, have Pokemon resided in the world," Professor Ironwood said as a soft, soothing melody played to accompany the slideshow, "And, as long as humans have lived, we have coexisted peacefully with them. We've lent our strength to one another to forge an undisturbed bond."

The slideshow reached its end but froze as it presented the Starter Pokemon of each region: Bulbasaur, Charmander, and Squirtle from Kanto; Chikorita, Cyndaquil, and Totodile from Johto; Treecko, Torchic, and Mudkip from Hoenn; Turtwig, Chimchar, and Piplup from Sinnoh; Snivy, Oshawott, and Tepig from Unova; and finally Chespin, Fennekin, and Froakie from Kalos.

"Today, we send off more promising young trainers to strengthen our relationship with Pokemon," Professor Ironwood declared as his assistants rolled in a mechanical table behind him, "And discover that which we've yet to find!"

On cue, two trainers, one boy and the other a girl, stood up from the front row as the lights returned to normal, revealing their appearances. Both of them had dark brown hair, the girl wearing a white headband to keep her short bob in place while the boy opted for a small white fedora over his wavy,
sleeked-back hair. The girl wore a sleeveless, white biker jacket, an emerald green undershirt that possessed a white Poke Ball symbol, dark green Capri pants, and green and white traveling shoes. The boy wore a gold and white sports jacket, gold slacks with a fading gradient of black dots near the hem, and black and gold traveling shoes.

The assistants and researchers clapped their hands as the young trainers, beaming with pride and excitement, went up to the stage where Professor Ironwood, his assistants, and the table stood. The two waited patiently for the professor to speak once more.

"Allow me to present to you your choices for Starter Pokemon in the Tenla Region," Professor Ironwood declared, turning to his assistants and nodding to give them permission to activate the machine. Each assistant punched in something behind the table, and the machine hissed to life. Three holes opened on the top surface, allowing short shafts to come out that each held a Poke Ball.

After that, the Poke Balls then popped open, releasing bright white light onto the space before the shafts. The formless lights then began to take shape, becoming three distinct beings. The creature on the far right was a sea blue, fishlike sea creature with beady grey eyes, cerulean highlights along its small body, and a caudal fin shaped like an X. The one in the middle was a forest green eyas with small black eyes, a mane of dark green maple leaves, and light green talons. The last creature on the far left was a blood red salamander with smooth skin, light red eyes, white claws, and a long tail.

"Transpy, Avany, and Gouzatile." Professor Ironwood introduced the three Starter Pokemon in respective order. As he did so, enlarged digital images of them appeared on the bigger screen. The girl beamed as she clasped her hands together while the boy simply smirked at the sight.

"They represent Water, Grass, and Fire – the three types that define what Starter Pokemon are." Professor Ironwood stood between the two trainers and placed his hands on their shoulders. "Novak, Antia, this marks your coming of age. The minute you select your starter, you open up an innumerable quantity of doors for your future. Whether you decide to become the next Champion or pick a less dramatic career, the World of Pokemon will accept whatever you become."

"Now, enough of the folderol," Professor Ironwood stepped back as he raised his arms in an ornate manner, conveying how monumental this occasion was physically as well as verbally, "Pick! And start your lifelong career!"

The audience gave the two a standing ovation as Novak and Antia shared smirks, eyeing down at their selected companions.

"To think, all that happened so quickly...Time flies when you're having so much fun..."

Fourteen-year-old Ash Ketchum lied on his bed and looked at the ceiling, reminiscing on the events of his most recent journey in the Sinnoh Region, from the very beginning with Pikachu and Aipom down to the very end when he parted with Brock and Dawn.

Pikachu curled up near his trainer. "Pika...(Yeah...)"

It was probably, in his opinion, one of the most action-packed adventures of his life since the Silver Conference in the Johto Region. He participated in Pokémon Contests the most, including the
prestigious Wallace Cup, finding them to be an interesting refresher from his primary occupation. As a result, he met people like Zoey, Nando, and Kenny that he grew fond of. He even reconnected with May. However, if he had to pick the best parts of his previous journey, it would definitely be the Lily of the Valley Conference and the Sinnoh Grand Festival.

The Lily of the Valley Conference was the farthest he had ever gone in a Pokemon League competition, heading all the way into the final round. But, alas, he was knocked out and had to settle for runner-up. Ash smiled contently at thought. He had lost to a trainer named Aaron Shadow. His Pokemon and strategies were just simply better at the time – something he concluded in hindsight. He even got to see Ritchie again even though Aaron eliminated him before he got a rematch. At least Ash managed to beat some respectable opponents like Paul and Nando. He was especially proud of Infernape in his battle with Paul, showing just far it went since its days as a Chimchar.

In the Grand Festival, he was nothing more than a spectator as he wished Dawn all the best. Of course, the competition was tough in the battle portions, containing viable competitors like Zoey, Nando, Ursula, Aaron, and Ian. However, in the end, Zoey proved to be the best, sending the likes of Aaron using Magnezone and Bastiodon, Nando using Kricketune and Lopunny, and Dawn using Togekiss and Piplup packing in the quarter, semi, and finals rounds respectively. In the end, though, Ash was amazed at how much Dawn progressed since they met in Twinleaf Town.

Now that he thought about it, all of his previous journeys had their own special moments he would reminisce deeply about, such as Butterfree's departure, his lost against Ritchie, and the whole Groudon-Kyogre incident. In conjunction, he met many memorable people along the way. Ash closed his eyes, exhaling through his nose.

"What if everyone I knew just came together at once? It would be pretty cool to see them on the same Pokemon League battlefield. Along with any new friends I make. That would be the best."

"Ash! Lunch is ready!"

Pikachu's ears perked up when Delia Ketchum called out to his trainer from downstairs. Ash yelled down in response, "Coming, Mom!" Pikachu uncurled itself and hopped out of bed as the boy got up, in his PJs, and sauntered out of his room and downstairs. Upon arriving to the lower portion of his small home, his nose was greeted with scent of the delicious food. "I already know what's cooking."

Hearing his voice, Delia peeked her head out of the kitchen. "There you are, honey!"

"Hi, Mom." Ash greeted with a smile.

Delia went back in and removed a plate from the cabinet. "Go ahead and situate yourself at the table."

"OK!" Ash sprinted to the dining room table, which was actually in the living room, and sat eagerly in his seat. Pikachu followed at a slower pace.

A minute or two later, Delia walked out with a plate of sukiyaki – a dish made up of paper-thin slices of beef, vegetables, and cubes of tofu cooked in broth, served with a side of gohan (boiled rice). "Here you are, sweetie." She placed his early afternoon lunch favorite on the table. She then gave Pikachu a bowl of Pokémon Food.

"Thanks, ma!" Ash clasped his hands together and bowed his head. "Thanks for the food." Then, he
picked up his chopsticks and proceeded to eat his meal.

"And did you change your underwear before you came down here?"

"MOM!"

As Ash and Pikachu were having their lunch, a knock on the front door sounded. "I'll get it, Ash," Delia announced as she entered the living room and approached the door. She opened it, and Samuel Oak now stood before the mother, "Oh, Professor Oak! A pleasant surprise."

"Sorry for coming over on such short notice, Ms. Ketchum." Professor Oak said apologetically, bowing his head.

"No, it's OK!" Delia reassured before stepping aside, "Please, come in." The Kanto regional professor stepped inside the house, and Delia closed the door behind him.

Ash set down his chopsticks and slouched back into his seat while rubbing his full, bulging stomach. "Ahh, that's good eatin'!"

Pikachu's stomach was just as full from the Pokemon Food. "Pika pi. (Sure was.)."

Professor Oak smiled at the sight and chuckled, approaching the young trainer. "Enjoying yourself, Ash and Pikachu?"

Seeing him, Ash quickly shot out of his chair to look dignified in front of the wise old man. "Professor Oak! Good to see ya!"

"Likewise, Ash."

"So what's up?" The young Ketchum asked curiously. There must be a reason for his sudden arrival. Did it concern his collection of Pokemon at his lab?

Samuel smiled, causing the young boy to tilt his head. "Well, you've been home so long, so I thought I would tell you that there is someplace new you can travel to.” He saw the excited glint in Ash's eyes after he spoke, so he decided to continue before he would be bombarded by a series of questions, "It's called the Tenla Region."

A ferry rode through the vast, crystal blue ocean, heading to its destination of Tenla as quickly as possible. The boat was practically overflowing with many trainers, young and old, ready to conquer another region. However, none of them held a candle compared to a certain someone whose enthusiasm comprised a sizeable fraction of the overall hype.

Ash Ketchum currently stood at the bow of the ship. He leaned on the metallic bars as he looked toward the horizon, hoping to be the first aboard to see the Tenla Region. His long-time buddy Pikachu was on his shoulder. As per a self-imposed tradition, he left behind all of his companions besides Pikachu at Professor Oak's Laboratory.

When Samuel gave them the information, the two immediately made plans to leave Pallet Town and
head to Tenla. He knew his mom was probably saddened to know he was leaving again since this was the longest he had stayed home between regions, but she had reassured him this was his career, and he had to keep going.

To that end, Delia had given Ash a new set of clothing for the occasion. He now wore a white overjacket with three red stripes going across the torso reminiscent of a mountain range. A blue turtleneck was beneath this, and he finished his ensemble with black denim jeans, black sleeveless gloves, and red and white tennis shoes. His red hat featured a black rectangular section on the front that harbored a traditional red and white Poke Ball symbol.

"Finally," he thought, "I get another chance at becoming a Pokémon Master."

He grinned when he suddenly saw land peek over the horizon. He knew what that meant—the Tenla Region was here. He could see the extensive and elaborate port where his ferry would inevitably have to dock. If Professor Oak told him correctly, he was witnessing the first parts of Zumi Town. On cue, the captain's voice boomed throughout the whole ship using the intercom system: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Tenla Region's Zumi Town is dead ahead. Please be prepared for docking so that progression can be as orderly as possible."

"A new journey begins now," Ash said softly.

Soon enough, the ferry rested in the docking bay, another successful voyage completed. As he waited for the workers to set up the fleet of stairs for unloading, Ash gazed at the clear blue seawater and light blue sky, admiring the day's weather. "Sure is a beautiful day. If only I could've gone swimming with Brock, Misty, and…"

Ash's voice trailed off at the thought of all his good friends. It had been awhile since he saw any of them. Lack of communication dated back to Dawn and Brock's departure after his Sinnoh adventure. Before that, there was May. Finally, there was an even longer drought if he factored in Max and Misty. And that didn't account for people that didn't travel with him.

Pikachu looked at him worriedly, but Ash gave him a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Pikachu, it's always tough to part with good friends, but it only makes me happy knowing that I'll meet them again someday." Ash then heard loud mechanical clicks as well as the chatter of people. He looked over and saw that the loading stairs were set and people were getting off. Ash's former gloomy demeanor disappeared completely and was replaced with sheer excitement. So much, that he couldn't contain himself and sprinted off the ferry, bobbing and weaving through the crowd.

Little did he know, three shadows were watching him from around the corner.

"Well, whaddaya know, Jessie? The little twerp and his Pikachu really are here!" The smallest person of the trio commented.

Jessie grinned proudly and eyed her targets like a hungry lioness. "What did I tell you?"

"C'mon, you guys. Let's get that Pikachu right now!" the other male ordered as he and his compatriots slipped away. This planned ambush was going to happen when Ash least expected it.

Compared to other ports he had been to, Zumi Town Port was more akin to a terminal. The area immediately following the docking bays was shielded by an extremely large, angular awning. It was held up by a system of pillars and frames that matched the coloration of the light gray concrete. For newcomers, there were a few directories throughout the entire port and even a small, outdoor
restaurant for people and Pokemon in the middle of it all.

All that however did not interest Ash and Pikachu at the moment. They went off to find the nearest public video phone, which was just outside the northern entrance. Ash had promised to talk to Professor Oak the minute he stepped foot in Tenla.

"So, you made it to the Tenla Region, huh, Ash?" the Pokemon professor inquired, "Have you paid a visit to Professor Ironwood?"

"Not yet, I was just on my way there, but I wanted to call you first. Like I said I would," Ash answered as Pikachu's tail swayed.

"Well, I'm glad you made it there safely, Ash. Train hard, catch amazing Pokemon, and do your best in the battles to come," Samuel said. Ash smiled appreciatively and nodded, preparing to end the call. Professor Oak then remembered a critical detail. "Oh, Ash! Wait! There's something else I wanted to tell you!"

Ash stopped quickly and looked at him. "What is it, Professor Oak?" Pikachu tilted his head curiously, scratching himself behind the ear with his tail.

Professor Oak smiled, knowing that this piece of information made him proud, and it would make Ash very excited. "Gary decided to take a break from Pokemon researching. I believe he's already in Tenla trying to get Gym Badges."

Ash stared at the screen.

And stared.

And stared.

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...

"WHAT?!"

Ash’s body jerked backwards as if something physically hit him, causing Pikachu to fall off. Sheer disbelief, an electric shock worse than any Electric-type move, ran through Ash. Gary, his former longtime rival, was back in action, back to being his rival. Slack-jawed, Ash had a hard time believing it. Gary hadn't been part of the battling craze since losing at the Silver Conference in Johto. Pikachu crawled up his trainer's body and repositioned himself back on Ash's shoulder, a rather large bump on his noggin.

"I just thought that might brighten up your experience," Professor Oak said as a tint of nostalgia tingled within his chest, "I remember when you two first came to my lab. You were late and in your pajamas, and Gary refused to show you his selection. Looking at you two now, you two have helped each other mature and grow immensely."

"Y-You really think so, Professor?" Ash questioned, crossing his arms as Samuel nodded. Well, now that he thought about it, Ash considered himself to be fundamentally the same person as when as he was ten but with a hint more wisdom and experience under his belt. He smiled to himself. Well, that was one thing to look forward to. Plus, he needed to repay Gary for his Electivire beating Pikachu handily the last time they battled.
"Well, have fun, Ash! I must be going!" Professor Oak said as the video clicked off, ending the transmission.

"I don't know about you, Pikachu, but I'm ready for anything now! We gotta get loads stronger now!" Ash said enthusiastically, turning his head to look at his career-long partner and friend. He blinked in confusion when he noticed the large bump on his head, "When did you hit your head?"

The electric mouse rubbed his sore head with his tail. "(Take a wild guess.)"

Ash shrugged his shoulders, putting the idea behind him as he turned away from the phone and looked around. He spotted a sign nearby that indicated all paths from the port led to the downtown Zumi Town. "'Kay. Then we go from there to find Professor Ironwood." As he proceeded to walk out of the establishment, the raven-haired trainer thought aloud, "I wonder what he's like?"

Pikachu pondered on the question, scratching his head with his tail as if trying to stimulate his brain. "(Who knows for real?)"

"Yeah, you're right, Pikachu."

Then, Pikachu's ears twitched as they picked up on an odd sound. The Electric type looked behind himself, only to be suddenly snatched off his trainer's shoulder. Pikachu shouted in distress, struggling in the grasp of his captor.

"Huh? PIKACHU!" Ash sharply turned around. A large mechanical claw had Pikachu in its hold, extending from a large hot-air balloon modeled after the face of a Meowth. Inside the basket, there were two adults each sporting a white and black uniform with a red R on the shirt. Ash could recognize those certain shades of red and blue hair anywhere, and his eyes dilated at the thought. No hint nor clue they were in the same area as him? Already in their getaway vehicle without any word? Still managed to snatch up his buddy after repeated offenses through several regions? Ash had to give credit where credit was due – these guys were getting better.

"TEAM ROCKET!" Ash glared daggers at the villains, "Don't you guys ever know when it call it quits?" Team Rocket began to say their motto, but Ash continued to yell, "I don't want to hear that lame motto you guys have! Give back Pikachu!"

Jessie leaned over the basket's edge to shoot Ash a vehement glare. "Don't interrupt us, twerp!"

"It doesn't matter, Jessie, we have what we came for," James said as he operated the contraption that imprisoned Pikachu. The yellow mouse tried to break free from the machine's grip or use Thunderbolt to destroy it. None of that work. James only smirked. "You should know by now, Pikachu, that we would safe from electricity."

Hopping onto the edge was Meowth, placing his paws on his hips as he sneered at Ash, "And to answer your question, twerp, we don't. This Pikachu was gonna be ours sooner or later. And, then, whatever other Pokemon we think will be a valuable asset to Team Rocket! So good luck tryin' to get rid of us!"

"And when will you guys realize that we won't let you?! Azumarill, Aqua Tail!"

Out of nowhere, an Azumarill jumped onto Ash's head and propelled itself toward the Team Rocket balloon, causing Ash's hat to fall off. He scrambled for it before it fell to the ground. When he
looked up, he watched as the end of the Aqua Mouse’s tail released a stream of spiraling water. Tearing though the hot-air balloon, the Aqua Tail destroyed the mechanical claw that held Pikachu and caused the hot-air balloon to explode.

"WE'RE BLASTING OFF AGAIN!"

The Team Rocket trio were sent flying into the sky, leaving behind a twinkle in the sky. Pikachu and Azumarill landed before Ash, both of them pleased with the outcome of the situation. Ash sighed in relief; his buddy was safe yet again. Now, there was the issue of who exactly saved the day. "I'm over here." He turned around and saw who it was. His and Pikachu's eyes bugged out like saucers. The girl standing before them eventually frowned when neither Pikachu nor Ash responded like she expected. "Well that's rude." She crossed her arms. "You should at least say 'hi'!"

When his shock went away, Ash managed to find his voice, "Misty…is that you?" He croaked, unable to believe his eyes.

Misty changed in terms of clothing from what he last recognized her in Hoenn. Her vibrant orange was still in its side ponytail, just like he remembered. She now wore a sleeveless bluish-white blouse with blue, cloudlike and wavelike decorations. She also wore short, bluish-white shorts and matching traveling shoes. Lastly, she wore an ivory jacket in which the cuffs, zipper lines, and underside were blue.

Ash still gaped in shock. "Wait, but…y-you're really here?"

Misty shook her head. Her old friend was as slow-witted as ever. "Pikachu, you might want to give Ash a jolt to reactivate him."

Pikachu nodded, placing his tail on his trainer's leg and delivering a brief electrical charge. Ash yelped as the jolt surged through his body. Thankfully, Pikachu held back significantly so that Ash wouldn't end up looking like coal after a barbecue. "Gee, thanks, Pikachu" He felt residual tingling all over his body. He then looked at at Misty and said, "But, Misty, it's so glad to see you after all this time! What made you come here?"

Misty answered, "Well, I heard about this region, and I thought should give it a look around and to look for some more Water Pokemon. I guess I needed a bit of a break from being a Gym Leader. She then shook her head with a sigh. "Course, it was met with some opposition from my sisters." She then placed her hands on her hips, imitating one of her sisters' posture and mimicking their preppy tone, "Like, who's going to take care of the Cerulean Gym noooow?"

Ash and Pikachu laughed, finding that to be a perfect impersonation of the Sensational Sisters. "But, luckily, Tracy was there to lend a hand, and Daisy backed up after that," Misty added in.

"Hey, no complaints here," Ash said and then looked at the Azumarill standing beside Pikachu, "I guess that's the Azurill I saw with you at Hoenn?"

Misty sighed longingly. "Yeah. Just imagine, first it's a cute, little ball of blueness, then it's one of my go-to Pokemon for Gym Battles."

Ash was proud to hear that Misty was developing her skills. Although it looked sort of weird seeing her without a Pokemon in her arms or following her like a mother. First, there was Togepi who had to stay behind at the Mirage Kingdom. Now, Azurill had evolved into a powerhouse that had to remain inside its Poke Ball.
Although Pikachu understood this was a reunion, there were still some things needed to be done. Taking initiative, Pikachu tugged on Ash's pant leg to get his attention, "(Ash! We're here to do something! Did you forget?!)

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"OH MAN! I completely forgot I had to see Professor Ironwood!"

Pikachu chuckled sheepishly as Misty shook her head with her hands on her hips.

Chapter End Notes

To people who keep up with my FanFiction (CertainDestiny) account in addition to my AO3, one will recognize this as the first chapter of the Pokemon Story 2: The Great Adventure. Now, it is the new and improved Nova and Antica.

In Latin: Nova = "New", and Antica = "Old"

Also, be on the lookout for a side-story called Pokemon Story Chronicles which has some events that tie directly into this story, especially the background, motives, and key events of recurring OCs. This is for you guys to get better acquainted with them.

Now for a bit of trivia: Misty's outfit is based on how she appears in Pokemon HeartGold and SoulSilver. The opening sequence is meant to be styled like the beginning of a Pokemon game itself, and Novak and Antia would be the player avatars.
Trouble Right Out the Gate

Chapter Summary

Ash and Misty head to the laboratory of Professor Ironwood, but they soon find themselves in the middle of danger. In just the first town of the Tenla Region.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Trouble Right Out the Gate

A twinkle in the sky appeared again as Team Rocket came falling down, landing in the stern of a boat approaching the Port of Zumi Town. Jessie, James, and Meowth all groaned in pain as they shifted around, massaging their sore body parts that landed hard onto the wooden floor.

"Well, looks like we landed on another ferry, I think." James commented after noticing where they were

Meowth was quick to point something out, "Doesn’t this ferry seem a little small?" Indeed, the boat was significantly smaller than the one or two ferries could they could see at the moment. He shot up to his feet as he then said, “Aw, whatever. We’re heading back to land, and that’s all that matters.”

"And that means we get a second choice at redemption." Jessie said determinedly as she stood up, "Now let's go find whoever else is on board."

The Team Rocket trio began their search for fellow passengers. No one else besides them were outside; strange considering most people on a ferry would be outside to enjoy the view or to see the lands of Tenla. And, when Meowth pointed it out, this boat was considerably more streamlined compared to the ships they could see in the bay. The lack of people and the different design was enough to raise suspicions. Did they land on someone's private boat?

When they reached the front, they heard voices. Deciding to use the element of stealth, they clung to the surface of the bulwarks as they peeked around the corner, seeing three people conversing on the bow of the boat. Two of them were males and the other was a female. They sported black and blue trench coats draped over their shoulders like a cape, sunglasses, black vests, dark green dress shirts with rolled-up sleeves, and black and blue boots. The males wore black trousers while the female wore a skirt. The most distinguishing feature of their getup was the golden H embroidered on left part of the vests. The horizontal line of the letter was replaced with a scythe-like blade outlined by
"Hey, who are they?" Meowth whispered curiously, eyeing them warily. He was promptly shushed by James and Jessie as they wanted to hear their conversation. They were shady characters wearing suspiciously similar clothing. As they were part of one themselves, Jessie and James knew without a doubt these people were part of a criminal organization.

"I swear, Luis, you worry too much," the other male criticized as he leered at the blonde male, "Maybe that's why you got demoted in the first place, you scaredy cat."

"I can't help it, Isaiah!" Luis replied, fidgeting in his spot, "You know how people get when someone utters 'Team Hectic' in the public. We're pretty much the plague in Tenla. Either people will run or fight back." He frowned and pointed accusingly at Isaiah after realizing he called him a fraidy-cat, "And listen, you! Let's not forget who has better Pokemon! And, if I remember correctly, you haven't even started your big assignment yet!"

Isaiah visibly balked and then growled defensively, "I'm getting there! And that's because you used to be Head Grunt! Of course your Pokemon are going to be better than the rest of ours!"

"Oh, you men, always letting your pride determine your reactions." The sole female sighed, looking on ahead with crossed arms.

"Nobody was talking to you, Antrenique!" Isaiah barked, "And what you should be doing is making sure everyone on the other side of town is getting ready to do their part!"

"They are," Antrenique replied matter-of-factly, "Even so, whether they fail or not, we can always step in. Even if our aid proves futile, we will accomplish this one small goal."

Luis pounded a fist into an open palm, realizing the wisdom of Antrenique's words, "Oh yeah! We still have those Pokemon we captured onboard. The research department will definitely need them. I guess 'high risk, high returns' pays off sometimes."

"Okay, enough of the chatter," Isaiah demanded, cutting in, "We're almost at the point where people can see us. Let's make ourselves scarce." The man reached up to his sunglasses and tapped one of the arms. This prompted a section of the bow to open up behind them, revealing another passageway. Isaiah, Luis, and Antrenique proceeded to go in, the compartment closing as they did.

"The only thing I got from that convo was that Pokemon are inside this ship." Meowth commented, straightening up now that the coast was clear.

"Well, that just means one simple thing," Jessie said as she grinned devilishly. James and Meowth shivered in fear. "We steal them in the name of Team Rocket right under their noses."

Blazing through the dusty road on Route 1 was a black van, shooting dust and rock everywhere as its tires went at maximum speed. The vehicle even moved fast enough to produce wind that caused some of the leaves of the pine trees to sway in the gust. Then, the wheels on the black van suddenly stopped as the vehicle skidded loudly to a complete stop, turning to the side. The light of the sun reflected off the dark hull of the van but failed to penetrate the black tinted windows. Then, the doors proceeded to open as the people inside stepped out. They were dressed just like Luis, Isaiah, and
Antrenique before them.

"You certainly don't waste any time." One of the grunts commented to the driver. Sure, she was driving nauseatingly fast, but they couldn't afford to waste time or stay around for long.

"Tried not to." The driver replied, adjusting her sunglasses. She then looked on forward, witnessing vaguely on the horizon the urban portions were of Zumi Town. "It's a good thing most people don't take the backcountry route to Zumi Town." She said with a small hint of relief in her voice.

"That's because the Pokémon farther down are stronger than the measly ones they'll see in Route 1. This route's important after all – novices have no business going down this path." The other grunt explained.

"Will you two cut the chatter and help me out?" The third grunt ordered from behind the van. After he said that, locks were heard unlocking as the backdoors opened with a loud creak. Then, angry noises and banging were heard. The two other grunts quickly went to the back of the van. Inside appropriately sized cages were all the fully evolved forms of each native bird of a region – Pidgeot, Noctowl, Swellow, Staraptor, Unfezant, and Talonflame. They were all extremely unsettled, knocking themselves against their cages restlessly and chirping aggressively. They obviously were not the nicest of their species.

"These little feathered rats with wings will cause the perfect distraction while we carry out our mission." A grunt said with an evil smirk, dragging out a cage.

"What if they're captured, and they find out about what we did to them?" One of the grunt asked, pulling out one of the cages and placing it on the ground.

"Don't you remember? One of the admins gave us express permission to use them for this mission. She's not at all worried if they find out." The female grunt reminded, doing the same.

The three grunts positioned the cages harboring the unruly birds in the direction of Zumi Town. One of the male grunts smirked maliciously as he held up a remote control device. "Alright, birdies," he said, tapping the button on it, "go cause some destruction."

The cages flew open, and the birds went to do their task, speeding away into the sky like a row of jets.

Ash, Pikachu, and Misty at long last arrived at the laboratory of Professor Xavier Ironwood. Located in the rural outskirts of Zumi Town, the superstructure was a largely natural environment, featuring lush green pastures and tall white windmills. Most likely for research purposes, areas of the backyard were divided into regions in accordance to the existing types. The land was enclosed by a widespread white fence. The facility itself was of pure white metal with a heavy dependence on blue-tinted windows. Rows of them were all around the building. Most of the front was composed entirely of large window panels. Lastly, a glass dome topped the structure, styled similarly to the front entrance.

When they approached the front entrance, the lowermost window panels automatically split apart and granted entrance into the establishment. They were greeted with a room full of technological equipment. It included several machines used for Pokémon testing, computers and display screens,
Poke Ball Transfer machines, and equipment and tables with various chemicals in them. The solid, smooth walls and the tile floors were all pure white. Hanging above on the ceiling were simple lights. If Ash and Misty had to guess, due to the size of the facility, this wasn't all of the laboratory.

"Good day, trainers!"

Among some of the lab aides and assistants, two of them noticed Ash and Misty and approached them. They were both girls only a little older than them. One of them had dark blue hair and wore a dark tan T-shirt and midnight blue knee-length skirt in addition her lab coat. The other was shorter and had bright red hair, wearing khaki cargo shorts, a khaki vest, and a lab coat.

"Welcome to Professor Ironwood's Laboratory," the blue-haired one stated professionally, "We are two of his assistants. I'm Wilma Reinhardt, and she's Renee Mordinger." When Wilma introduced the redhead, she waved at them enthusiastically.

"Hello to you too!" Ash and Misty greeted in unison as Pikachu piped in using his language.

"I'm Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town. This is Misty from Cerulean City, and my friend Pikachu." Ash introduced himself and his two companions. He then said, "Professor Oak said I should come here to see Professor Ironwood."

"Very well then. Let me go retrieve you a Pokedex for this region." Wilma stated as she walked off to do the mentioned task.

While she went to do that, Renee decided to make small talk with the two to pass the time. "So, Pallet Town and Cerulean City? Wow, that's pretty far away!"

"Yeah. All the way back in Kanto." Misty said.

"What brings you two to Tenla?" Renee asked curiously, tilting her head as she rocked back and forth on her feet.

"I'm here to challenge the Pokémon League! This'll be my fifth region on my way to becoming a Pokémon Master!" Ash declared resolutely.

"And I'm visiting. I'm actually the Cerulean City Gym Leader." Misty explained in a kind tone.

"So we got one who's participated in four league conferences and a Gym Leader from Kanto." Wilma pointed out and chuckled, coming back with a mechanical box in her hand, "It's been awhile since experienced trainers came along. We usually get ten-year-old newcomers from Zumi Town or nearby."

"Well, Ash still probably acts like a ten-year-old, so it's not that big of a change." Misty commented slyly, prompting the two aides to laugh as Ash glared flatly at her. Pikachu agreed completely – Ash still adhered to same hot-blooded and charismatic attitudes he established since he first started.

"Well, regardless, here is your Pokedex." Wilma presented the box and pressed a button on the side. It hissed as the top opened up, revealing a dark gray and blue, bar-shaped machine whose screen comprised much of its face. Ash smiled as he accepted the Pokedex, it fitting perfectly inside his hand.

"That Pokedex will tell you everything you need to know, especially about Pokémon in Tenla. Any
new Pokémon you analyze will be submitted to its internal list, thus allowing you scroll and study them to your liking. The Pokedex will also recognize the Pokémon you have in your team. The list will allow you to view specific information on Pokémon you have already caught such as their moves, abilities, evolutionary chain, and friendship rate." She explained.

"It's also motion-sensitive!" Renee added in, "If you just point at the Pokémon you want to scan, the Pokedex will activate automatically and get to business! Otherwise, press the tiny button on the top to turn it on. It's also got an interactive touch screen, meaning the power button will be the only physical button you'll need to press."

"Wow! Thanks!" Ash said appreciatively. Pokedexes were advancing with each new region. He remembered the original Kanto Pokedex he started off with was rather bulky; now, they were light and could fit in one hand.

Wilma gestured everyone to follow her, obviously leading the way to the region's Pokémon Professor. The group walked past another automatic door in the back of the main room. This led to a spacious white hallway with transparent walls, showcasing the huge research lab down below that made up the entire bottom floor. Ash and Misty were right; the main room was simply a preview to what they saw now.

The hallway with transparent walls soon ended to give way to a regular hall with an elevator, windows, and three doors – one of which was at the opposite end. After going through this door, the group arrived at another room in the back. It looked the same as the main room except with less equipment and machines, the integration of a comely study room and bookshelves, and large dark red carpet on the floor. This room also included a staircase leading up to an inner balcony that had a row of windows that allowed one to overlook the land in the back. Below it were larger window panels the same as the ones at the main entrance.

"This is Professor Ironwood's personal room," Renee stated as Ash and Misty looked around, "This was the original lab before the facility was expanded some years ago."

"Yeah, I can tell. It's a bit different from the rest." Misty remarked, looking around and examining the quaint room.

They didn't have to go much farther. Standing right in the middle of the room was Professor Ironwood himself. However, he was currently talking to a trainer, so nobody said anything so as to not disturb them. An Avany was perched on his left arm while a Gouzatile crawled up on his other arm.

"Are you absolutely sure you want an Avany?" Xavier questioned firmly, feeling the heat on his right arm escalate slightly as a result of Gouzatile. This would be yet another trainer who selected an Avany or Transpy over the Fire type, and its frustration was beginning to show.

"Yep! I'm sure!" The trainer replied without delay, reaching up and taking the Avany away from Professor Ironwood. The Grass type chirped happily, taking its new spot on its trainer's shoulder. The sight, however, sickened Gouzatile as it jumped off Xavier's arms and scurried away, slipping through the slightly ajar door to the back of the establishment.

"(Why do I have the strangest feeling that happens a lot?)" Pikachu thought offhandedly, watching the Fire-type starter take its leave. That didn't go unnoticed by Ash either. Speaking from experience himself, only someone who was supremely irritated would barge out like that. It even made Ash a little sad.
After handing over Avany’s Poke Ball and bidding the new trainer farewell, Professor Ironwood finally noticed his new company. "More?" He thought tiredly. However, he projected a completely different outward demeanor. This was his job, and he had to conduct himself becomingly.

"Glad to see you, young trainers." He greeted, bowing respectfully to the youth of today's world. Ash and Misty noted Professor Ironwood was, of course, younger than the wise Professor Oak or Professor Rowan, but he was somewhat older than the young Professor Elm.

"Nice to meet you, Professor Ironwood!" Ash and Misty responded in unison, deciding to return the kind gesture.

"I'm Ash from Pallet Town."

"And I'm Misty! Cerulean City Gym Leader!"

"Let us go ahead and skip straight to why you're here in the first place." Xavier said, assuming that either Ash or Misty wanted a Starter Pokemon, "But I bear some bad news."

"What do you mean, Professor?" Renee questioned as the others looked on with confusion expressions.

Slumping his shoulders, Xavier answered, "Well, as you probably just saw, that trainer just took the last Avany, so we have none of them to give." He then glanced over his shoulder at the window panels that acted as the backdoors, "Secondly, it seems Gouzatile has become rather hostile."

"Oh, great." Renee huffed disconcertedly as she turned to go get something.

"I blame the influx of trainers we've had in the past weeks." Wilma said, shaking her head.

Ash stepped in, trying to get an understanding of the situation, "Wait, hold on. What's wrong with the other two?"

"Gouzatile, the Fire-type starter, is experiencing some issues based on its hostile behavior. Transpy, the Water-type starter, on the other hand is completely available and problem-free. Avany is the Grass-type starter in case you were wondering and might want to wait until we acquire another." Xavier explained.

"Um, actually, we're not here for that." Misty announced sheepishly, rubbing the back of her hand, "Ash here was sent by Professor Oak."

"Ah, so you're from Samuel's neck of the woods, I see." Xavier commented, looking at the raven-haired trainer.

However, Ash had spaced out a little, Hearing what Gouzatile was going through spoke out to him. He always believed in helping out someone in need, sometimes even without a reason, and making worthwhile bonds as a result. Emboldened, Ash looked at Xavier, a confident fire brewing in his dark eyes, and requested determinedly, "How about I go speak to Gouzatile? I wanna see if I can break through it."

Professor Ironwood quirked a brow at him, "Are you certain? I don't want this to become an imposition."
"It's no problem at all! I think I might be able to help!" Ash said confidently. Professor Ironwood decided to give it a try. This young man seemed responsible enough to take care of something like this. Plus, if he was affiliated with Professor Oak, Ash might know a thing or two. Xavier smiled graciously and nodded his consent, leading the way back outside as Ash and Pikachu followed him.

"So what's the problem, professor?" Ash asked as the two went outside.

"Well, recently, trainers have opted to pick Avany or Transpy as opposed as to Gouzatile. This particular one has been at the lab for quite some time as a result. I guess now it's bitter."

"Oh man." Ash sentimentally looked down. While it wasn't abandoned, abused, or anything like that, Gouzatile never experienced the feeling of being loved or cared for. Trainers mistakenly overlooked it, and it was forced to watch it happen, resulting in it feeling inferior and unwanted. It may had a great place to stay, but it had no one to really enjoy it with.

"Aww, but who's going to keep poor Transpy company if that works?" Renee whined sympathetically, coming back to the room with the Transpy in her arms. The Water type sung, its soft voice equivalent to a sustained but beautiful chime. Transpy's melodic voice was almost music to Misty's ears, and its appearance was interestingly cute as well – the voice of a Chimecho combined with the appearance of a Finneon. "Poor Transpy will be all alone! It's so sad!" Renee continued fretting, pouting as her eyes shone with unshed tears.

Transpy didn't look sad at all as it sung again.

"I'll take care of it!" Misty spoke up impulsively, raising her hand. Wilma and Renee looked at her while Transpy titled its head quizzically. The Cerulean Gym Leader smiled as she explained, "I'd hate to have Transpy here all by itself without anyone to talk to, so I'll take care of it. Besides, I'm here to get more Water Pokemon anyway, and Transpy will make a great addition to the team."

"Yay!" Renee bounded over to the orange-haired trainer and extended the Transpy to her, "Transpy, say hello to your new trainer!"

Transpy gazed at Misty with a titled head and then reached out its fin to her, waving it slightly. Misty giggled lightly, realizing it wanted to shake hands and get acquainted. She extended her hand and grasped the fin with two fingers, shaking it a little. Then, right as when she went in to take it out of Renee's hands, her entire head was suddenly engulfed in a fast jet of water. Misty sputtered out her words after the rush of water stopped, coughing.

Mortified, Wilma slapped her forehead with her palm. Renee laughed hysterically. "Y-You j-just took a Water Gun to the face! Hahahahaha!"

Misty tried to blow away damp strands of her hair out of her face. "This is might take some getting used to."

Meanwhile, outside, Professor Ironwood led Ash and Pikachu to a part of the backyard pasture that contained a sandy field with rocks. It was a perfect location for Pokemon of the Ground or Rock types as well as those who enjoyed sand, burrowing, or exposure to the sun.

"It's over there." Xavier mentioned, pointing at the Salamander Pokemon lounging on the surface of a flat rock and basking in the sun's rays. Its back was turned, and it was motionless.
Ash nodded as he stepped forth, with Pikachu following at his feet, as Xavier stayed behind to watch. Gouzatile heard the sound of footfalls on the sand and abruptly turned around. The Fire type scowled and snarled, showing that it wanted no one around it. However, Ash was dauntless as he approached it but left some space between them as a way of minding Gouzatile's personal space.

"Hey, Gouzatile." Ash greeted, "I'm Ash. I'm here to talk to you. That okay with you?"

Gouzatile rudely turned away, resuming its lounging, "(Get lost, boy."

"Hey, come on. Don't be like that." Ash cajoled before taking a step forward, "I just want to talk to you." Pikachu, meanwhile, kept its eyes on Gouzatile. Its behavior reminded him awfully of Charmeleon and Charizard when they were disobedient. If that was the case, he needed to be on guard in case Ash's advances incited Gouzatile's ire. "What's got you so angry, Gouzatile?"

"(Look, boy. Listen to me closely if you can.)" The Salamander Pokemon snapped, suddenly facing Ash again. It stood on all fours as its sharp teeth were bared. Its light red eyes burned like torches, glaring vehemently at the Pallet Town resident. "(Go back inside and just pick either Transpy or Avany like everyone else has done and get lost!)

The demand was accompanied by Gouzatile opening its mouth and launching a small stream of red-orange sparks.

However, a weak yet sudden zap of electricity beat Gouzatile's Ember to the punch, dissipating the Fire-type move with minimal effort. The Salamander Pokemon was taken aback and saw that the Mouse Pokemon by Ash's feet was sparking electricity in its yellow cheeks.

"(One thing I don't tolerate is people or Pokemon trying to attack Ash. So choose your next move carefully.)" Pikachu stated, narrowing its small eyes at the Salamander Pokemon.

"C'mon, Gouzatile. I just want to talk. Let's work this out." Ash said persistently, "Just tell me why you're so hostile."

Gouzatile exchanged stares between Ash and Pikachu, thinking. That electric rodent just utilized the weakest variation of Thunderbolt possible and cancelled out its strongest move. None of the Pokemon around here could do that. Not to mention, that strong Pokemon belonged to this trainer who was showing kindness to it. If there were two things it liked, they were proving oneself and strength.

Gouzatile smirked and jumped off the rock, landing before Pikachu and saying challengingly, "(I want to see if you can back up that talk. Let's battle.)"

Ash recognized the eager look on the Salamander Pokemon's face instantly. He looked down to Pikachu, and Electric type nodded in understanding. The raven-haired trainer grinned and looked at Gouzatile, clenching a fist, "If it's a battle you want, you got it!"

"Well, this is an unorthodox way to play therapist." Xavier commented with a blank face, watching as the two competitors put an equal amount of space between them.

"Kay, Pikachu, let's start off with Iron Tail!" Ash commanded.

Pikachu's tail was coated in white light. Then, it turned into iron but kept a glowing white light around it. The Electric type then dashed toward Gouzatile and leapt, swinging its transformed tail at the Salamander Pokemon. Gouzatile retaliated by using Slash, making its front claws to glow white and elongate. It swung its claws at Pikachu's oncoming Iron Tail. Briefly, white sparks flashed from
the point of impact. Then, the difference in strength and experienced showed itself, allowing Pikachu to overpower Gouzatile and knocked it away.

"Great job, Pikachu!" Ash complimented as Pikachu landed and Gouzatile skidded across the sand to a stop. The Fire type remained vigilant, shaking its head to alleviate any dizziness caused by the Iron Tail. Then, it leered at Pikachu and built up flames inside its mouth, launching another Ember. This time, it put more power and effort into it, resulting in a more widespread stream of flames and fiery sparks.

"Thunderbolt! Don't hold back this time!" Ash ordered, holding up a fist.

"Pikaaaa," Pikachu produced heavy amounts of electricity inside its red cheeks and then streamed it throughout his entire small body, "CHU!" The yellow rodent released all that pent-up electricity, launching approximately 100,000 volts at the oncoming Ember. The powerful Electric-type move overcame the Ember, making its way through it, and headed toward Gouzatile. Quickly, the Fire type jumped to the side, but the Thunderbolt that hit the ground caused an explosion that jettisoned Gouzatile into a nearby rock.

"(Convinced yet?)" Pikachu asked, landing on the ground as Gouzatile pried itself off the rock.

Ash adopted a serious expression and walked over, passing both Xavier and Pikachu and kneeling before Gouzatile. "I like your spirit, Gouzatile! I don't see why people aren't seeing that." The Salamander Pokemon opened its eyes, sending a glare his way. Ash smiled and continued, "I dunno why they're picking Transpy or Avany over you, but I see Pokemon for who they are, not what."

Pikachu stood on its hind legs as Gouzatile jerked its head to the side brusquely. At least attacking Ash was out of the question for now. Then, for some reason, his ears twitched and picked up on the sound of volatile winds. "(Huh?)" The Electric-type looked up and saw something in the sky getting bigger and bigger. Its small eyes widened as a gasp escaped it, realizing that the falling object was heading straight toward Ash and Gouzatile.

It was a Talonflame whose entire body was currently covered in a sparkling blue aura.

"(ASH! GOUZATILE! WATCH OUT!)" Pikachu quickly dashed over. The electric mouse jumped, bounded off Ash's shoulder, and headed toward the dive-bombing Scorching Pokemon. He invoked Volt Tackle, cloaking his small body with golden electricity. Both Pokemon clashed in midair, creating an explosion on contact. Pikachu was jetted back to the ground while Talonflame flew back into the air.

"What the heck's going on?!" Ash shouted in distress, standing up and glaring at the Talonflame.

"Why did that Talonflame attack so suddenly?" Xavier questioned, instantly sensing the danger of the situation. Gouzatile growled venomously before bringing back its head and launching another powerful Ember. The attack struck, but it antagonized the Scorching Pokemon moreso than it did damage. The Talonflame made strange sounds that were a mixture of squawking and huffing as it erratically flew about, some of his plumage even molting. To make the situation even odder, the Talonflame suddenly flew away without any more fighting.

"What was that all about?" Ash wondered as he picked up Pikachu. The attack was unprovoked seeing as nobody around could disturb its nest or anything. And the way it acted before it left was nothing Ash had ever seen before.
Xavier and Ash looked to see Wilma, Renee, and Misty running toward them. They knew immediately something else was amiss. The Pokémon Professor looked at them and asked uneasily, "What's the matter?"

"We just got a call from town," Wilma answered, "There are several bird Pokémon flying around causing trouble! Real trouble!"

"Are you serious?!" Professor Ironwood exclaimed, blanching at the news. A Talonflame attacking wantonly followed by several other birds wreaking havoc in the town. That could not be a coincidence; these events had to be connected in some way. Whatever the cause, this issue needed to be addressed. "Misty, Ash, this may sound like a tall order, but please go back to Zumi Town and apprehend all those bird Pokémon. Bring them back to me."

"Don't worry, Professor. It's no trouble at all." Ash replied understandingly.

"We'll get them. No matter what!" Misty added in confidently. People or Pokémon, anything that disturbed the peace needed to be answered.

"And Gouzatile?" Xavier spoke as the Salamander Pokémon looked at him. It made neither a sound nor a motion ever since Talonflame attacked. "Go with Ash. You might learn something."

"Yeah, c'mon!" Ash kneeled down and offered his arm to the Fire type, trying to mimic what he saw of Professor Ironwood. Gouzatile only stared, weighing its options. It had to give Ash credit showing it kindness and consideration unlike the others who spurred it for the other two starters. However, its closed heart made it reconsider. As much Gouzatile wanted to reject the offer and stay, it wanted payback on that Talonflame. With a huff, the Salamander Pokémon crawled up Ash's arm and positioned itself there.

"We'll be right back, Professor Ironwood!" Misty declared confidently as she and Ash took off.

"Thank you! We will try our best to aid as well!" Xavier yelled back. As much as he wanted to help out, his role called for him to remain at the lab and be ready to treat those birds. Professor Ironwood then looked at Renee and Wilma and requested seriously, "You two, please contact Mr. Metacia and see if he's in this part of Tenla."

"Yes, sir, but why?" Wilma askedquestioningly. She was sure between Ash and Misty, good samaritans, Office Jenny and assisting constables, and the lab aides and assistants that they would be enough to quell the problem.

Xavier closed his eyes and answered uneasily, "We'll need all the help possible for this… and I just have the feeling there's more to the situation than this."

In a residential portion of Zumi Town, young Novak placed his white fedora back on his head after hanging his shoulder-strapped messenger bar over his body. He took a deep breath and looked at his own reflection, taking this opportunity to ruminatively examine himself. Here he was, thirteen years old with his starter Pokémon and with as much as preparation as desired. Now, it was time to realize his goal: earn the eight Gym Badges of Tenla, win the conference, battle the Elite Four, and be
crowned with the prestigious title of Champion of Tenla.

While Novak acknowledged such a goal was universal among everyone just starting out, he felt as if he had more to offer than just that. He was pithy, preferring action over conservation; he was competitive, striving for success as it granted him the initiative to continue on; and he was astute, very much willing to put himself in scenarios to better himself and his future crew of fighters.

Novak smirked in satisfaction. Giving himself a brief overview of his ambitions and strong points always reinforced his confidence. He had been eagerly waiting for this day; the time had come to leave and get some work done.

"Unless, of course, my sister takes her precious time." Novak muttered irritably, smirk dropping as he exited his small room. He approached the door right across the hallway and opened it. To his annoyance, thirteen-year-old Antia was sitting on the rug in a cross-legged position, emphatically playing on her black Wii U console. Though, based on the fact that her satchel was nearby, she was ready to leave as well. "Antia! What are you doing?!" Novak yelled.

"Since we're leaving for a long time, I wanted to beat my high score," Antia answered, never taking her eyes off the screen as she played her video game, "Go back to vainly looking at yourself in the mirror."

Novak suppressed the growl that threatened to come out, opting to defend his idiosyncrasy, "I don't do it vainly; I do it to coach myself. People always tell you to look at yourself in mirror and ask yourself questions such as 'Is that the right choice?' or 'Am I going on the right path?' It keeps you on the straight and narrow."

Antia gave her brother a brief glance of uncertainty as if questioning the efficacy of such a method. "Whatever you say. Thinking about stuff like that all the time is bad for your health. Plus, it's better when you have more than one Pokémon who you can talk to on an emotional level." When she was at a point the game allowed it, she gave her brother a longer glance, "A trainer is only as good as his or her Pokémon."

Novak sighed irefully, reluctantly understanding the truth behind her words, "Fine, fine, I'll cut down on that if you please hurry up. It's time to go."

Antia grinned, both at her performance on the video game and at her brother's compliance, "Good." Despite her seemingly laxer attitudes in comparison to the concentrated Novak, Antia too shared the desire to become Champion by doing all the required prerequisites. She, however, was going to approach this task as if it were a game: go in with an open mind, learn and adapt through the myriad of situations awaiting her, and master her niche through consistent practice and battling. Her mom called it trial and error; her brother called it spontaneity.

"Kids! Are you ready?!"

"Coming, Mom!" Both Novak and Antia replied in unison to their mother's call. The latter, seeing as time was drawing near, maximized her performance pace on the video game. Within a few second, she finished, and the score results were shown to her. A massive grin appeared on her face as she jumped to her feet, "HIGH SCORE, BABY!" She shouted rapturously, dancing around her room in a celebratory manner as the console inputted her achievement to the game's online leaderboards.

Novak closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose in agitation, cursing his luck to have Antia as a sister and now a traveling companion.
Once they were done upstairs, Novak and Antia made it downstairs—the latter now wearing a white visor. The bottom floor of their house combined the kitchen with the living room, and the last remaining bedroom was separated by a door on the western wall.

"We finally made it down, Mom." Novak announced, walking over to the living room portion with his sister. Resting on the couch was a doglike creature with two, thin tails and flawless beige fur. Upon hearing Novak's voice, the Pokemon jumped off and trotted over.

Antia giggled and knelt down, gesturing to the Pokemon to come to her. "Hey, Doyubi." She greeted as the Pokemon affectionately rested its front legs on her and licked her as she smoothened out of its fur and petted it.

"Jeez, I thought you two were never make it down here." Novak and Antia's mother said as she walked out from the kitchen part of the room. She was a brunette with blue eyes, wearing a black sleeveless jacket over a white dress shirt, a blue cloth hanging from halfway up her stomach to her knees, and black Capri pants with slippers.

"You have Antia to blame for that." Novak explained. He ignored the sideways glance she gave him as continued petting Doyubi.

The mother gave them a prolonged glance, feeling a sense of emotion sweeping over her. They had moved into Tenla approximately a year ago, achieved an apprenticeship under Professor Ironwood, and now graduated from it with the reward of a Starter Pokemon and a new journey. Her two twins were growing up before her very eyes so quickly. She smiled warmly as proud tears began to appear in her eyes.

Antia apparently noticed the sustained look her mother was giving her and her brother – who was checking over his supplies. "Something wrong, Mom?" She inquired.

The mother blinked away the unshed tears and replied, "Just watching my babies getting ready to take on the world." In response, Antia giggled and blushed in flattery while as Novak nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders.

"Breaking news, people of Zumi Town!"

The tender situation was abruptly stopped by the announcement coming from the living room television. Everyone looked over to see a news report airing, showing the anchorwoman being filmed amid downtown Zumi Town. She had a hard time focusing in the camera as she constantly looked around, and the background showed shattered glass on the ground.

"Literally just minutes ago, irate bird Pokemon have invaded Zumi Town and started attacking for seemingly no plausible reason! We urge citizens to take cover and let the officials handle the situation!"

As the anchorwoman spoke, the cameraman perceived something coming down from the sky through the lens of the camera. "LOOK OUT!" He shouted, impulsively shooting from the behind the camera and tackling the anchorwoman. A Pidgeot flew over, knocking into the camera with great force. Promptly, the network in charge of the breaking news forced a SMPTE Color Bar screen with a "Tenla To Go! News" logo to appear on all televisions tuned in.

Antia gaped in disbelief. "Oh my God… All that's happening in town?
"Let the officials handle it, huh?" Novak said as he crossed his arms, "Hard to do that when we almost saw a Pidgeot dive-bomb a reporter."

"Then we need to ship out and lend a hand!" Antia shouted as she darted toward the door.

"Now, hold on, dear!" Their mom pleaded, holding a hand out to her as if trying to beckon her back.

"Antia, we need to take time to think about the situation," Novak said rationally, "We don't know what we're up against."

Antia opened the door and turned back to her brother, responding indignantly, "We saw a bird trying to hurt innocent people. All the other stuff we can figure out in the field! Now stop wasting time and come on!" Done debating, Antia sprinted out of the door to go assist with the situation.

Novak watched expressionlessly as his sister left, unable to figure out how to react to that. He looked to his mother with an inquiring glance, hoping she would give him a good answer. His mother sighed and gestured toward the door, "Go. Make sure she doesn't get hurt." She requested. Her children were trainers now; they had Pokemon to help them out. Plus, now that Antia was out there, they was no going back.

"Yes, ma'am." Novak replied respectfully, quickly heading out of the door in pursuit of his sister.

Their mother walked over to the door and watched him and Antia disappear over the horizon of the trail. She exhaled lightly and closed her eyes, wishing them luck. "I guess this is their first trial as trainers."

Chapter End Notes

When drafting out the first few characters of the story, I racked my brain trying to think of ways to make the beginning stand out. After all, in a story, beginnings are the most important part. How else will you be able to keep your readers' attention for the rest of the story?

So, I thought, "Hey, let's make the regional villains be responsible for the Zumi Town mini-arc!" That's right, in just the second chapter, I'm introducing you to the regional criminal syndicate. I don't see many fics do that, and the Pokemon anime certainly takes its time introducing them. Pokemon Black and White, thank you for bringing Team Plasma in at just the SECOND location of the game; what a refresher.
A Feather in Distress

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Feather in Distress

The line in the Zumi Town Pokémon Center stretched from the counter to the door. From murmurs of the latest gossip, to chatter about the sunny weather, the people seemed to have all the bases of noteworthy conversation covered, unaware of budding chaos outside. At Tenla, both Trainers and Coordinators could receive IDs and Contest Passes for the Tenla League and Tenla Contests, respectively, right here in Zumi Town, attesting to the length of the line.

Two sixteen-year-olds sat at the waiting area, playing chess. The two boys studied the positions of the chesspieces and carefully planned their next movement. All the while, they discussed something rather philosophical.

“I don’t know, Jacob.” The brunette glanced up to the orange-haired male sitting across from him. His brown eyes returned to the chessboard as his hand hovered over a knight. “Some things can’t be avoided. I mean, don’t you ever look back and think how surreal certain encounters were? It just doesn’t feel natural.” He advanced his chosen chessman. “Like someone or something is pushing you into that direction.”

“That’s a bit of an extremist’s view, Aaron.” Jacob Forut replied, smiling slightly as he adjusted his glasses and staring at his old friend with burnt sienna eyes. “Surely, our choices in life make a difference. We aren’t like the pieces on this board.” He moved his bishop and captured Aaron’s knight. “Why do you think there are so few constants in life?”

“And yet they are meaningful, universal.” Aaron Shadow leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms, adjusting his silver-grayish hat as he pondered. His outfit consisted of a dark blue blazer, a metallic silver Henley shirt, and dark blue pants that had a metallic silver belt with a Poke Ball symbol as its buckle.

Jacob sighed, closing his eyes and slumping into the couch. “I guess.” He wore what could be best described as a hip-length, viridian panling lanshan. It was composed of bell sleeves, ivory edges and trim, and a round collar secured with a button. To cement the idea this apparel was a modern variation of its more traditional counterpart, he wore jeans along with it, and they were fastened by an ivory belt.

The two heard heavy footsteps coming their way, followed by the exclamation of ‘Finally! I’m done!’ Aaron and Jacob looked to see a black-haired boy their age, wearing a pitch-black cape
fastened around his neck, a sleeveless zipped-down turtleneck sweater, and matching trousers and 
shoes.

Jacob sighed. Now that Ian was back, it appeared this game would be left as a tie. “Aw man, Aaron 
and I aren’t done yet.” He started putting up the board as Aaron stood from his seat.

The brunette tossed a grin Ian’s way. “Was the line long enough for you?”

He released a displeased grunt, glancing at the line with his sea green eyes. “Remind me to never 
take a bathroom break when there’s a line full of selfish people.”

With that said, the three finally left the Pokémon Center. This particular trio was back together again 
for the first time since Johto, more mature and experienced than ever before. They were ready for 
Tenla themselves.

"SWELLOW!"

Not even three feet from the establishment, Aaron, Ian, and Jacob heard a deafening crash and 
screaming. That almost sounded like a car wreck. They all whipped to the direction of the noise and 
witnessed a sort of blur passing through a building, heading straight into the sky again.

"W-What is that?!" Ian shouted, unable to tear attention from the destruction he just witnessed. 
Aaron narrowed his eyes, trying to pinpoint where the blur went. Preemptively, he released his 
Magnezone, cautious as ever. Even the people inside the Pokémon Center were beginning to 
murmur, having heard the same thing as they flocked to the windows.

They heard the sounds of destruction again, accompanied by the same furious squawks as before. At 
one point it was close, only to be faraway the next. After about the fifth time, Magnezone looked up 
and witnessed a Swellow diving directly toward them. Its navy and white body was coated with a 
stringy white aura as it aimed itself at the Pokemon Center.

Static electricity surged along the inorganic creature’s body. "(Not a step closer.)" Magnezone 
unleashed a large stream of yellow lightning at the incoming bird. The Normal/Flying type screeched 
as the Magnet Area Pokemon landed a direct hit. Magnezone kept up its attack, ignoring the bird’s 
shrieks of agony. When Swellow finally stopped making noise, Magnezone ceased fire, allowing the 
Swellow to fall to the ground as residual static sparked on its body.

Ian expressionlessly watched the fallen Swallow Pokemon twitch and groan. "Well. That’s not at all 
suspicious."

Jacob walked over and knelt beside Swellow, checking on its wellbeing. "Why did it just come out 
of nowhere? Just what was it doing?” His brow furrowed the most he thought about it. Stuff like this 
didn't just happen on normal occasions.

Just then, the Pokémon Center's doors flew open as Nurse Joy rushed outside, emerging from the 
crowd of people. "Oh dear! That was one of the bird Pokemon, wasn't it?"

Jacob stood and got out of her way, asking, "Nurse Joy, what do you mean?"

"A news report just came on saying that dangerous and rowdy bird Pokemon all over Zumi Town, 
causing disruptions, attacking people, and destroying things for seemingly no reason at all," Nurse 
Joy explained as she scooped up the Swellow in her arms, "I just saw lightning from outside and
came out to check. I see you subdued one of them."

"So, in other words, we got cleanup to do before we head out." A smirk slowly formed on Ian’s face. "All right then. We’ll go help out." Removing a Poke Ball, he released his Gengar and ordered, "Gengar, you stay with Joy. Keep an eye on that Swellow while we're out."

Aaron looked at the Steel/Electric-type floating by him. "You too, Magnezone."

Jacob followed Ian’s example and sent out a Yanmega into the sky. "Yanmega, you’re doing guard duty with Magnezone and Gengar."

Nurse Joy shook her head. "No, no, that won’t be necessary."

"Don’t be silly," Ian replied insistently, "You’ll need some bodyguards just in case Swellow decides to rejoin its crew. My Gengar, Jacob’s Yanmega, and Aaron’s Magnezone are more than capable of keeping it at bay."

Not giving Nurse Joy any chance to deny the help, Aaron took out another Poke Ball. "Come on, Ian, Jacob. Let’s go bird hunting." Ian grinned and removed another Poke Ball from his person with Jacob doing the same with a serious expression. The three then dashed off in search of any other feathered attackers in the vicinity.

Nurse Joy watched them go and sighed as she tightened her hold on the Swellow. "What could possibly be disturbing them…?"

Meanwhile, at another part of Zumi Town, Ash and Misty—with Pikachu, Gouzatile, and Azumarill with them—pursued the confused and restless Talonflame. The Scorching Pokemon flew at speeds high enough to uproot and knock down two streetlights. Then, it launched Flamethrowers in random directions, not caring if anything caught on fire. Whenever it attacked, the screams of frightened people and the sound of scurrying feet were heard.

"Ash, we have to calm down that Talonflame before it causes any more trouble!" Misty said concernedly as the Transpy in her arms fired a Water Gun to douse some shrubbery that caught on fire.

"I know, but we have to get to them first!" Ash replied, not slowing down as he jumped over one of the fallen streetlights and shuffled through the group of people fleeing in the opposite direction. Ash knew there was no other choice but to battle. He didn’t want to harm the Pokemon, but it wouldn’t calm down unless something was done. Steeling his nerves, he called out a command. "Pikachu, use Thunderbolt!"

The yellow rodent jumped up and unleashed a massive electrical burst from his red cheeks at the bird. Ready for payback, Gouzatile followed suit by opening its mouth and releasing a spray of hot flames.

Talonflame sensed the attacks coming and veered left using Quick Attack, striking one of the decorative trees in the street and causing something to fall out with the severed branches. It was a small warbler with sandy brown and grey plumage, a white stomach, and a thin but long beak. Talonflame saw the creature and, blinded by whatever was clouding its rational judgment, began
brewing up an orb of flames in front of its beak.

Ash saw this, and his eyes dilated to the size of pennies. The creature was going to attack a defenseless Pokemon like a monster. "No! Don’t do it!" He impulsively dashed over to go save the bird that Talonflame was aiming at.

Gouzatile beheld Ash, eyes widening in surprise at the sight. It couldn’t believe this human was putting himself in harm's way to protect yet another Pokemon it didn't even know. "(W-what are you doing?! You're gonna hurt!)

Misty pointed to the demented bird. "Hurry! Azumarill, Bubble Beam! Transpy, Water Gun!" The Tenla starter in Misty's arms launched a stream of water at the Scorching Pokemon, hitting the Flamethrower it unleashed and producing hissing steam. As soon as both moves cancelled each other, Azumarill fired a series of bubbles at the Talonflame.

Misty and her Pokemon provided the perfect distraction as Ash went over to the bird. The Pallet Town resident kneeled down and watched as the avian creature shook its head to alleviate any lingering pain. "Hey, are you okay?" Receiving a nod, he took out his Pokedex and scanned it.

"Rockler: The Strength Pokémon. These tiny birds are capable of amazing feats of strength. They can sustain flight with one person holding one of its talons."

The Rockler shot a nasty glare to the Scorching Pokemon that was busy with Misty's Pokemon. Suddenly spreading its wings, the Strength Pokemon jettisoned past Ash at such speeds his hat almost flew off of his head if it weren't for his reflexes. Eyes narrowing in concentration, Rockler left behind a white trail of energy as it approached Talonflame. The Scorching Pokemon never saw it coming. Rockler rammed into Talonflame with great force, sending the screeching bird back several meters with its Quick Attack.

"Oh man, that's strong!" Misty and Ash commented in unison, seeing that.

"(Remind me not to make it mad.)" Pikachu and Transpy said.

Gouzatile rolled its eyes, unimpressed. "(Big deal.)"

Talonflame stretched its wings to steady itself in the air. Between the two humans, their Pokemon partners, and that stray, and with its energy levels falling, it had to even the odds somehow. Talonflame's body glowed white, and it then created multiple copies of itself. Then, they all flew high into the sky to the point most of the sun was blocked out, resulting in shadows hanging ominously above the area.

Misty’s eyes constantly moved around, trying to count the sheer number of them. "That’s such a powerful Double Team." She suddenly felt sick; the sky above them was practically filled with a clan of Scorching Pokemon. Transpy, Azumarill, and Rockler all were unsure which one was real.

"Just imagine if all of those things attacked at once." Ash thought in horror. Buildings would be toppled instantly, and the city would become leveled in minutes. Confirming his fears, all of the individual Talonflames became surrounded by red-orange fire before falling downward like a missile. Most of the copies fell indiscriminately, content with simply hitting the environment. There were more than enough of them to strike their enemies anyway.

Fear starting to well up in her, Misty shouted impulsively, "Azumarill, Aqua Tail!" The Aqua Mouse
Pokemon summoned a large stream of water from its glowing tail and swung it. The move did little to abate them. The small number of the Talonflames it was aimed at were able to tear right through the waters, steam hissing out on contact. Misty's nerves got shot seeing that, sending shocks of fear through her body. "Th-That did nothing!"

While Ash too was panicking a little bit, seeing that gave him an idea. "Misty! Do that again!"

The redheaded Gym Leader was going to question him, but there was no time for hesitation. "Azumarill, Aqua Tail again!" The Water type reused the move, aiming for the ones at the center and hoping that would provide some help for whatever Ash had planned.

The raven-haired trainer pointed up to the sky. "Alright, Pikachu, jump up there and give us your best Thunderbolt! Behind him, the electric rodent run up to Ash, jumped on his shoulder, and then springboarded off of them. Pikachu wound up in the middle of Aqua Tail right as the Flare Blitz-induced Talonflames prepared to make contact.

An aura of golden-yellow lightning encompassed Pikachu's body. "Pikaaa-Chu!" His cry echoing, the resulting Thunderbolt was conducted by Aqua Tail, and a bright flash engulfed Pikachu and the Talonflames. It was as if lightning from the heavens came down and exacted judgment right on the spot.

Misty, Transpy, Azumarill, and Ash protected their eyes from the flash, which was accompanied by the fierce crackling of electricity and pained crying of Talonflame. Gouzatile and Rockler only stared on with expressionless faces, finding this to be a suitable punishment for such a rowdy creature.

After a certain amount of time, the crackling slowly ceased its roar and the light faded. The sky was now free of copies, and the Aqua Tail evaporated. Two soft thuds sounded as Pikachu and Talonflame hit the ground. The Scorching Pokemon was unconscious, and its red and black feathers were singed and out-of-place. The Mouse Pokemon weakly lied on his stomach, panting laboriously as it tried to recover from overexertion.

"(I certainly could have done that given the right circumstances.)" Gouzatile boasted. Though, there was no denying it was certainly impressed by Pikachu's performance. Yet again it demonstrated its power and worth, something Gouzatile had to appreciate. Did every Pokemon under this Ash kid's care wind up being like that?

"(Then why didn't you?)" Rockler asked dryly, descending to the ground, "(I did more than you did.)"

Gouzatile glared at the Strength Pokemon. "(Listen, birdbrain, nobody asked you).” Rockler merely shrugged off the look.

"Man…is that really the same Pikachu from before?" Misty asked herself as Ash dashed over to ascertain the welfare of his buddy. Sure, there were remarkable victories of Pikachu she had born witness to, such as against Lt. Surge's Raichu and Drake's Dragonite, but this was a new high. Then again, she should have expected this when she left Ash and Brock. As if Ash was going to sit around and twiddle his thumbs. No, he was going to get stronger.

"(Well, let's not forget that was only possible because of Azumarill. So let's not give it all the credit.)" Transpy piped in. The efforts to defeat Talonflame were an act of teamwork, not individuality.

Misty recognized the sense of Transpy's words and laughed. "Yeah, you're right."
Ash ran over to Misty with a weary Pikachu in his arms. Worry decorated his face. "Pikachu used too much energy. He needs rest." Despite the success of the situation, whenever Pikachu was hurt, Ash was hurt.

"I would say let's go to the Pokémon Center," Misty watched as Gouzatile, Azumarill, and Rockler huddled over, looking at the defeated Talonflame. Gouzatile retook its spot on Ash's arm, "But we can't leave that thing alone even for a second."

Misty was absolutely right. If Talonflame was irate enough to cause so much damage, the minute it had enough energy, it would return to wreaking havoc.

Rockler politely cleared its throat and flew up to Ash's shoulder. "(If I may interject…)" All eyes fell on it. "(I can be of assistance. Allow me to haul the insurgent.)"

"But, Rockler," Ash contested, "You got more involved than needed. I don't want innocent Pokemon like you being in this." Despite its help, Rockler was still a wild Pokemon who was doing nothing other than minding its own business before Talonflame disturbed it.

"(It would be classless of me not to aid you. What I begin, I finish.)" Rockler insisted. To put to rest any other objections, the Strength Pokemon flew off Ash's shoulder and over to the Fire/Flying type. It gripped Talonflame's neck with its talons and lifted it off the ground.

Deciding it was useless to keep objecting, Misty looked at Ash and said, "Let's just go, Ash. We've got other things to worry about that. Let's just count ourselves lucky that we've got extra help."

Ash found sense in Misty's words. "All right." Firstly, Pikachu needed to go to the Pokémon Center. Then, they had to round up the remaining birds and ensure the safety of innocent citizens. Not wasting any more time, the group went on with the Rockler hauling the unconscious Talonflame.

At the park, Staraptor used a number of Giga Impacts and Brave Birds to topple over benches, dumpsters, poles, a few trees, and some statues. Its presence had driven away all humans, leaving the area currently abandoned. The Normal/Flying type alighted on a broken slab of concrete, folding its wings and closing its eyes. Staraptor then became surrounded by an orb of energy. Seconds passed, and the small nicks and bruises on its body went away.

By the time Roost finished, Staraptor saw a bright flash appear on the horizon. Its murderous instincts activated, rekindling the desire to cause more pain and suffering. A flash of that proportion meant something was there that could sate its bloodthirstiness. In addition, it was a new area with more destructible objects and possibly more people to terrorize.

"Swampert, use Focus Punch!"

Before Staraptor had even a chance to take off, a Swampert suddenly obscured its path. The Mud Fish Pokemon balled its right fist as an orb of white light encompassed it. Frozen with surprise, Predator Pokemon was struck directly in its face and sent flying back into a thick oak tree, releasing a screech of pain as its back rebounded off the bark.
"Great job, Swamplert." The Water/Ground-type's trainer walked over, watching the Staraptor hit the ground. He was a tall, tan-skinned man wearing an orange V-neck shirt, a black T-shirt, and greenish pants with light brown boots.

"(Always ready to lend a hand, Brock.)" Swamplert replied, giving its trainer an acknowledging nod but keeping its eyes on the downed Staraptor. The Mud Fish Pokemon tensed up when he saw Staraptor twitch and balance itself on its talons. Brock backed off and steeled his nerves, preparing to issue a command. The Predator Pokemon initiated Roost again, alleviating itself of some of the damage before taking flight. "(Time for Round Two, it seems.)" Swamplert placed its hands on the ground in a ready stance.

Staraptor darted forward as its body was surrounded by an orange sphere of energy. The orange color turned purple with the rest of it spiraling around Staraptor. Brock immediately recognized the move as Giga Impact. Thankfully, he had a move in Swamplert's repertoire to handle such a powerful move. "Counter!"

Swamplert's body became outlined in orange as it waited for the Giga Impact-induced Staraptor to come closer. When the Normal/Flying type was near enough, the Water/Ground type drove its palm into it. The Counter redirected all of Giga Impact’s power back to Staraptor, an explosion occurring right on the spot. The Predator Pokemon skidded across the ground for a few seconds before coming to a stop, unconscious. "(And that's that.)"

"Thank Arceus." Brock said in relief, but he continued to stare at the defeated Staraptor with a pensive expression. He recently arrived only to be shoehorned into this entire fiasco with these bird Pokemon, just like everyone else in and around Zumi Town. As such, he didn’t have the slightest idea why these wild Pokemon were attacking so indiscriminately.

Swamplert looked over to his trainer and, reading his expression to give it an idea of what he was thinking. "(Do you think they were provoked?)"

"It's a possibility, Swamplert," Brock answered, crossing his arms, "In fact, I can't think of any other reason. Wild Pokemon just don't exhibit such unusual behavior. Are they lashing out at humans in general because of abuse? If that's the case, not all humans are bad. You just have to give us a chance. Do they represent a sector of Pokemon life that despises human occupation? While sometimes it's good to let it all out, they can't expect us or other Pokemon not to retaliate to the danger they hold."

"(Well, we can mull over their reasons later.)" Swamplert reasoned. Its fins were picking up on distant screams and screeches, meaning a few more bird Pokemon were still running rampant. "(Our work is not yet finished.)"

"Alright, Swamplert, let's go." Brock said as he turned around and dashed out of the park with Swamplert tailing him.

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Team Rocket cautiously walked into a room on the private boat. A sizeable number of Pokemon were held behind glowing, light blue panels within the walls. Each confinement was separated by pitch-black metal on all sides. Stands on the wall held Poke Balls beside each prison, one for each Pokemon. The entire room was eerily lit by the panels and rows of small white lights along the
walkway.

"Never seen anything like this before." James remarked, looking around. Many of the Pokemon inside their prisons looked at the trio hopefully, pressing themselves against glass and desperately wishing they would free them.

Meowth contemplatively cupped his chin. "Now, if we can just figure out how to free 'em so we ship 'em off to the Boss." Not only would doing that put a dent into whatever those shady characters onboard had planned, but it would also provide their boss, Giovanni, with necessary resources for his own plans.

Jessie continued to walk forward, exchanging glances between each wall and the Pokemon they held. They ranged from measly Rattata and Weedle to rare Dratini and Kabuto. It would have to do. "At the very least, it would remind him we still exist." Jessie thought, unsuccessfully trying to remember the last time she and her two male friends contacted Giovanni.

Jessie then heard incessant banging and frowned. This room appeared state-of-the-art, so she would have thought soundproof walls were a given. She followed the sound and spotted a nearby Arbok pounding against the glass with its tail. Once their eyes met, the Poison type cried out to her, but its voice was barely audible. Jessie blinked in confusion, wondering why the Arbok was acting so strangely. The Arbok even started to weep. Was this simply a more desperate attempt at pleading for its and the others' freedom?

Jessie walked over to the glass panel and crouched down slightly so that she and the Arbok were eye-to-eye. "Why do you look so... familiar?" The Cobra Pokemon lifted up its tail and pressed it against the wall in a longing manner, and Jessie couldn't help but place her hand on the same spot. She couldn't describe what was going on. It was as if a part of her was magnetically drawn to the Arbok – an unknown connection subliminally apart of her being. The Arbok screamed out once again, loud enough that the Team Rocket female actually heard its faint voice, and her eyes widened as everything came crashing down on her.

This feeling was the inseparable bond between a Pokemon and her trainer.

"Arbok!" Jessie cried out, placing both hands on the glass now. The Poison type smiled, extremely relieved to know that its former trainer recognized it. Now, it had an even better chance of escaping this dreadful ship. "James! Meowth! Get over here!"

Sensing the urgency in her voice, the two Team Rocket males dashed down the hall and stopped where Jessie was. "Something the matter, Jessie?" James asked.

Jessie pointed to her Arbok while looking at James. "Take a good look and guess who that is."

James and Meowth titled their heads at Jessie before looking at Arbok, who started banging against the glass as it did with Jessie. James and Meowth had difficulty understanding the frenzied gestures and did not catch the increasingly irritated expression on Jessie's face. Then, Arbok used its tail to point at something behind them. James and Meowth turned around, looking at two imprisonments behind them. One nearest to the floor had a Weezing floating almost lifelessly in it, and the one above it had a Victreebel leaning against the glass resignedly.

The color in James's face immediately went away. Unlike Jessie, James would never forget the faces of the creatures closest to him. "W-Weezing? V-Victreebel?" His darling Pokemon almost seemed like criminals in their death row cell, awaiting imminent execution.
"What the-? Then, that means…” Meowth turned around and pointed at Arbok, "You're Arbok!"

"Took you long enough." Jessie said exasperatedly with a slight growl.

James hurried over to that side of the wall, kneeling down to where Weezing was and started banging on the panel. "Weezing! Weezing! Look at me! I'm here!" After some seconds, the Poison type managed to lift its body to look at what was in front of it. All life and hope returned into Weezing, shocked to see its former trainer before it.

"Don't worry! Me, Jessie, and Meowth are going to get you guys out of here!" James said reassuringly, standing up and stretching out his arms so that he could capture Victreebel's attention next. The Flycatcher Pokemon, already bothered, curtly turned around and glared at the offender. However, its features softened when it recognized that familiar shade of periwinkle hair. The Grass/Poison type hopped up and down gleefully, waving its leaves to show that it too was ecstatic to see James was here.

"We gotta figure out how to get 'em outta these cages!" When Meowth said that, Arbok tapped the glass again to get everyone's attention. When it did, it gestured to the Poke Ball stand and then itself, repeating the motion several times so that they could pick up on the instruction. Meowth then pointed out, "I think Arbok's saying use the Poke Ball."

If anyone was going to test that out, it was going to be Jessie. She went over to the Poke Ball, snatched it off, and pointed it at Arbok. "Come back to mama, my dear Arbok." An infrared beam was shot out from the button on the device. The beam actually phased through the glass panel and hit Arbok, recalling the Poison type into the Poke Ball. "It worked!"

James proceeded to take the Poke Balls corresponding to Victreebel and Weezing and returned them to the Poke Balls. His gaze lingered on the Poke Balls, a tearful smile forming on his face. "You're back home."

"Hold on! Hold on!" Meowth exclaimed, ending his two human friends' celebration, "Bring 'em back out here! I wanna hear why they're in this place!" Jessie and James nodded, wanting to know themselves, and released Arbok, Weezing, and Victreebel from their Poke Balls. All three of them stretched their bodies and made content sounds, glad to have their freedom once more. "Okay, you three. Spill it. How did those goons get their hands on ya?"

Weezing, Arbok, and Victreebel looked at each other somberly, but they knew they had to tell their trainers the reason for their presence here. Arbok slithered forward and spoke up, "(Those people you saw outside were members of an organization called Team Hectic. Remember back in Hoenn where you told us to stay behind to guard the Ekan and Koffing from a poacher?)"

"Yeah, we do." Meowth replied as he relayed the information to Jessie and James.

"(These Team Hectic people were much more forceful. We couldn't protect them, and they captured us, seeing us as the strongest of the bunch. Those who tried to save us were incapacitated.)"

Victrreebel looked down, seeing as it was its turn to narrate its story. "(Well, as you know, I was released by that salesman… I met up with another Victreebel, and we fell in love. Everything was great! We enjoyed each other's company and took residence at the Berry Forrest at the Sevii Islands. Then… Team Hectic came.)" The Flycatcher Pokemon’s eyes lowered. "(They started forcibly
catching Pokemon. We tried to run, but their Pokemon cornered us. My darling tried to fend them off, but the enemy was stronger. She kept trying to fight.)’ Victreebel sighed and shook its head. "(My poor darling never made it to the ship.)"

To say the least, Jessie, James, and Meowth were outraged by the stories. These Team Hectic lowlifes dared to threaten their Pokemon's lives and cause them pain. Revenge was definitely in order, and it seemed like they were in the perfect place to seek it.

"Okay, dig it, we're gonna ruin those creeps while they don't know we're here." Meowth suggested, "We're gonna free all these Pokemon onboard the same way we did youse guys. They're goin' to the boss anyway. If push comes to shove, we'll boot 'em off this ship and into the public, exposing 'em!" The Scratch Cat Pokemon outstretched his paw. "Now who's with me?!"

"I am!" Jessie and James placed their hands on top of Meowth's paw, followed by Arbok's tail, Victreebel's leaf, and the sphere amid the tube that connected both of Weezing's heads.

Team Rocker was ready to cause some trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Brock's outfit, like Misty's, is based on his appearance in Pokemon HeartGold and SoulSilver. Now the fact that this story is a sequel shows itself -- Aaron, Jacob, and Ian all appeared in Pokemon Story: Sinnoh Journey, and the plot (for this arc at least) begins to thicken.
Turn of Events

Chapter Notes

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Turn of Events

Pidgeot wildly flung balls of wind in every direction, tearing up the ground. Every time it saw even an inch of land, an Air Slash was promptly thrown that way. Many of the little, defenseless Pokemon immediately ran for cover, knowing they couldn’t stop it. The demented bird was outside the limits of Zumi Town and heading toward the first route. It had grown tired of seeing the same scenery. Now, it wanted to expand its horizons, traverse the routes of Tenla, and leave other places in a panicked frenzy like Zumi Town. Heading swinging, body twitching; every single feather on its body craved destruction.

"Blaziken, Fire Spin!"

"Piplup, Hydro Pump!"

It would not get chance. Before it was able to throw another Air Slash, two opposing Pokemon suddenly jumped high enough to obscure its path. Piplup opened its beak and released a powerful stream of water while Blaziken released a spiraling flame as its wrist blazed with fire. Both moves connected, sending the Bird Pokemon flying back from impact.

Blaziken fell back to the ground as Piplup softly landed on its head. The Fire/Flying type looked up to the smaller creature and formed a small smile. "(Not bad for an ankle biter, Pip.)"

Piplup looked down to Blaziken with a dull expression. "(If I had fingers, this is the part where I flick you off.)" Blaziken, unaffected by the Water type's attempt to show some superiority, chuckled. Piplup huffed and jumped off the Blaze Pokemon. Shortly, they were approached by two girls.

"Phew. Told you there was no need to worry, May. We caught up to it." The blue-haired one said. On her head was a pink and white Poke Ball headband. She also sported a navy romper featuring exposed pink zippers at front with pockets. Over it she wore wear a faded, striped, pink long sleeve cardigan. Her looked was closed with navy tights and pink boots.

The brunette shook her head, her red and white bow swaying. "Barely, Dawn. Barely." She wore a red tank top with a black undershirt, white short shorts over bike shorts, and red and yellow shoes.

Pidgeot shook its head and glared at Blaziken and Piplup, releasing a loud screech at them and their trainers. An unfazed Blaziken’s wrists blazed with fire as Piplup stuck out his chest proudly.
Pidgeot's wings glowed light blue, and it flapped them repeatedly, producing a powerful gust that formed into a massive tornado. The high winds threatened to blow away whatever wasn’t anchored, and those that were contorted in shape. Dawn and May knelt down and held their arms up, bracing themselves against the Hurricane.

"Piplup, use Ice Beam!"

"Blaziken, Overheat!"

Dauntless, Piplup opened its beak and formed a light blue ball inside it, then firing light blue beams from the ball. Once the Ice Beam made contact with Pidgeot’s Hurricane, the fierce winds slowly began to subside. Pidgeot stared on in shock as its Hurricane even gradually froze over. Once nothing more than a tower of ice stood in the attack’s place, Blaziken's body gained a faint red hue before unleashing a white inferno with a red-orange flame spiraling around it from its mouth. The Overheat bore through the tower of ice, steam hissing loudly. Eyes dilating, Pidgeot quickly turned around to escape, but the Overheat struck it, and bird squawked in pain.

Some seconds later, Overheat died away as a burned and charred Pidgeot fell to the ground. The tower of ice had a massive hole. Shortly after, crack formed on the surface, and it slowly broke down into numerous ice shards.

"(Ha! My attack was more beautiful!)") Piplup boasted, pounding its chest with a fin.

"(Only because of me.)" Blaziken replied matter-of-factly as the Water type shot it another glare.

May breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness, we did it."

"Sure did! We're the best!" Dawn held her hand up, and the two girls high-fived each other.

Back in town, officials were making sure to keep any innocent bystanders out of harm’s way. Designated safe zones included the ferry, the police station, the Pokémon Center, and the Pokémon Mart. Others took their warning and stayed indoors in their rural homes. The officers could accept buildings and land as collateral damage but not people or Pokemon. As soon as the birds were quarantined, the constables would allow pedestrians back on the street.

"Hurry! Hurry! Into the police station!" Office Jenny shouted, ushering a large group of people toward the mentioned safe zone. Her Arcanine made sure no one strayed off. Assisting Officer Jenny and her Arcanine in directing human traffic was Aaron and his Lucario alongside Jacob and his Typhlosion.

Seconds later, another but smaller group appeared down the street, heading to the police station. "Move it or lose it, people! Quit dawdling!" Ian demanded, escorting them all with the help of his Dusclops. The two were also keeping a close eye out for the skies in case one of the birds decided to ambush them.

Jacob noticed Ian leading the next batch of citizens their way. "Officer Jenny! We have more coming!"
"Okay! Keep them under control and moving in an orderly fashion!" Officer Jenny replied as other officers brought the first group into the police station. "Good. They made it." Safety was the number one priority during any type of crisis. Then, she looked back to the approaching group and her eyes widened in horror. Dividing for them at high speeds from the skies above, an Unfezant surrounded itself in a clear aura with white energy. "Look out behind you!" She shouted, cupping her mouth on either side to amplify her voice.

That instantly caught everyone’s attention. Aaron and Lucario turned their heads and gasped when they saw the Unfezant preparing to attack the group with Sky Attack. The Aura Pokemon sprinted off, going as fast as his feet would allow. 

"Hit the deck!" Ian yelled at the top of his lungs. Knowing that would take too long, Dusclop's eye glowed red and forced the group to the ground, all of the people shrieking and screaming as the Ghost type’s Psychic manipulated them. Despite the forwardness of the tactic, it did the job. The Sky Attack-induced Unfezant barely missed them.

As it passed by, Unfezant looked out the corner of its eyes and saw that it missed everybody. Huffing in annoyance as the light around it died down, it looked forward again, only to see Lucario coming its way.

"Metal Claw!"

The spikes on the top of Lucario's paws glowing and transforming into three claws, he lunged at the Normal/Flying type. Unfezant quickly flapped its wings to gain altitude, narrowly avoiding a dual slash from Aaron's Lucario.

Lucario landed on the ground in a kneeling position and turned his head to see the Unfezant rising into the air, looking down at him almost mockingly. "(Dishonorable. Only someone of the most intense amorality would dare harm the weak and defenseless.)" Lucario gritted his teeth, his eyes glowing slightly at Aura appeared in them. That Unfezant having the audacity to attack innocent people so callously insulted Lucario's creed as a warrior. This monster—it couldn’t even be called a Pokemon anymore—needed to be put down now.

Typhlosion rushed up to his side, glaring at the menace. "(You don't say.)"

Then, out of nowhere, an immense jet of water struck Unfezant, the Proud Pokemon screeching in pain as the attack knocked it out of the air and into the wall of a nearby building. "What the-? Now what?!!" Aaron balked in surprise, frantically looking around to see where the attack came from.

"Don't worry! I'm here to help!"

The brunette looked to see Brock and a Swampert hurrying over. A Sudowoodo was with them, hauling an unconscious Staraptor. Aaron stared long at him; he recognized the face but couldn’t exactly put his finger on it. After staying quiet for a few seconds, it finally came to him. Brock was the guy with Ash and Dawn, all of whom he met at Mesa Verde Town in Sinnoh.

“Well, long time no see, Brock,” Aaron finally said, looking sheepish as Brock shook his head. “But I’m glad you’re here. We got trouble.”

"Um…"

Aaron wanted to slap himself for forgetting that Jacob had never met Brock. "If I may do this
quickly. Brock, Jacob. Jacob, Brock."

"Nice to meet you."

"Likewise!"

That aside, Brock went back to the matter at hand. "As you can see, I've already taken care of one of them." He looked to the Unfezant and tensed up when the Normal/Flying type pried itself off the wall, getting ready to fight again. "Head's up."

Officer Jenney rode past them on her Arcanine, more focused on the civilians. "You three! Keep that Unfezant busy while I tend to the citizens!" The three males nodded seriously as she and her Arcanine went over to the people. "Everyone, keep moving toward the police station and don't compromise their battle!"

"Okay, people! That's over and done with! Let's go, let's go, let's go! Up and at 'em—Lady, don't talk back to me, just move your butt!" Ian barked out, ushering people once again and relinquishing his supervision of them to Officer Jenny and her Arcanine. He and Dusclops kept an eye on the group, however, to make sure no one did anything unruly.

Meanwhile, Unfezant flew up high enough to block the sun, casting a huge, bird-shaped shadow over Aaron, Lucario, Brock, Swampert, Jacob, and Typhlosion. Generating a white orb of energy with a pale pink center in front of its beak, it fired down a pale pink energy beam with bright white energy around it right at its targets.

"We have to dodge that!" Aaron said urgently as Lucario prepared to leap out of the way.

"No, wait!" Brock objected, "We have to strike! Think of what that Hyper Beam will do to the street!"

Aaron's eyes widened when he realized the truth of the breeder's words. He calmed down and then nodded, wordlessly giving Brock his consent to a plan of action. "So what do you suggest then, Brock?" Jacob inquired, his bespectacled eyes never leaving the incoming Hyper Beam as Typhlosion's mane of fire intensified.

"Follow my lead!" The former Gym Leader pointed to the Hyper Beam. "Swampert, Hydro Pump!" The Mud Fish Pokemon opened its mouth and unleashed a powerful stream of water with white rings around it. The Hydro Pump and Hyper Beam clashed, energy and water spraying out from the point of collision as the two sides battled for supremacy. "Can either of you get your Pokemon high enough to attack Unfezant?"

"It certainly can with some assistance." Aaron answered. He then looked at Jacob and nodded.

Jacob nodded back. This was a demonstration of the long friendship Aaron and Jacob shared. No words needed to be said at all. "Typhlosion, jump on Lucario's back so you won't get wet!"

"Lucario, go!"

Once Typhlosion was on the Aura Pokemon's back, Lucario kicked off its feet, leaping at Brock's Swampert. The Aura Pokemon spring-boarded off its shoulder, heading straight into the Hydro Pump. The rushing stream of water swiftly carried both of them skyward. When he got close to where Hydro Pump and Hyper Beam fought for dominance, Lucario used the momentum of the
stream to perform a clean jump over Unfezant's Hyper Beam.

"Lucario, throw Typhlosion!"

"Typhlosion, you use Flare Blitz!"

Reaching over his head to grab ahold of the Volcano Pokemon, Lucario threw Typhlosion with the speed of a fastball. Grinning excitedly, Typhlosion's mane burst with flames, burning so brightly that the red-orange fire turned light blue and consumed her whole body.

"(Suck on THIS!)" Typhlosion released a roar and rammed into Unfezant with great force, a shockwave of flames pulsing outward. The Normal/Flying type cawed in agony as fire engulfed its body, and it spiraled down to the ground uncontrollably after Typhlosion completed her attack.

Lucario and Unfezant landed on the ground simultaneously, the former on its feet with its back turned while the latter crashed hard onto the concrete. "(Remember that the next time you try to harm pedestrians in my presence.)" Lucario said remorselessly. Typhlosion soon landed as well, hunching over when shots of pain racked her body.

"That's another one down." Brock said in relief. Sudowoodo ran over to fallen Unfezant, picked it up, and tossed it on top of the unconscious Staraptor it was still holding. The Rock type gave Brock a salute afterwards.

"I'm telling you, Brock, you appeared at an opportune time." Jacob remarked as Lucario, Typhlosion, and Sudowoodo walked over to them, "That could not have gone anymore perfectly."

Of course, Brock's presence simply raised more questions. At least for Aaron. "Wait, so is Ash with you?"

Brock shook his head. "No, but I wouldn't be surprised if he was here since he's trying to become a Pokémon Master. I'm here because my brother Forrest wanted me to check out the Rock-types in Tenla. He's now the Gym Leader at Pewter City in Kanto. Plus, I heard Tenla was big on industry and technology, so I wanted to see if I could find anything that could further my career as a Pokémon Doctor and Breeder."

"Hm. Well, I wish you luck in your-…” Aaron's expression turned blank, followed by a heavy sigh as he closed his eyes. Suddenly falling on his butt, Jacob slapped his hand over his mouth to prevent an unseemly squeak from coming out.

Brock noticed this strange change in behavior. "Uhh, something wrong?" There was small delay in time before Aaron gestured behind the breeder with a withheld expression of annoyance. More confused than ever, Brock turned around.

"Dus…clops…" Voice deep and raspy, Ian's Dusclops hovered directly behind Brock. Its single eye was glowing a sinister crimson, bleeding through the shadows obscuring most of its body. In front of the Beckon Pokemon was a black oval. The top part formed into an eye with a pure black pupil, surrounded by a bloody crimson aura and many smaller eyes. Once Brock made eye contact with Dusclops and this shadowy construction, the eyes blinked, none at the same time.

"W-whoa!" Brock's natural human instincts forced his body to fall backwards. Unfortunately for Aaron, this meant the breeder's back went straight into his chest, and the two of them went to the ground. Dusclops dropped the Mean Look as it and Ian snickered cruelly.
Brock shot back to his feet, heart pounding in his chest. "What was that for?!"

"For not leaving me a piece of that Unfezant." Ian said simply as Aaron was helped up by Lucario.

"Okay, okay, let's go back to the subject at hand," Jacob spoke up. Though, he was still disappointed that Ian continued his scaring habit. At least the frequency of instances had decreased since they were ten, his all-time high. Jacob still remembered the first time he experienced Ian's scaring habit. He actually fainted. "What do we do with these birds?"

"That's why I came over here to the police station. I wanted to know myself." Brock answered.

"We captured this Swellow a little while ago," Aaron informed, "It's over at the Pokémon Center with Nurse Joy, Yanmega, Magnezone, and Gengar."

As the gentlemen conversed, Officer Jenny returned from the police station – the citizens now safe and sound – and approached them, hearing the last part of Ian's statement. "The citizens are all fine now. Are you three planning on taking the birds to the Pokémon Center?"

Ian looked at her and replied, "Well, we thought it was a good idea at the time since the town was in danger."

"Then I'll go take Unfezant and Staraptor to the Pokémon Center, and we'll go from there," Brock declared, "I'll tell your Pokemon to go meet you at the police station."

"Good idea.” Aaron crossed his arms, thinking. “We still don’t know for sure how many are around, and we need to keep people safe.”

Officer Jenny removed her two-way radio from its compartment on her belt, pressing a button on the side to activate transmission. "Attention all constables and officers, here are your new orders. Maintain security of the safe zones at all cost. If any of the bird Pokemon have been apprehended, direct them to the Pokémon Center. I will be contacting Nurse Joy soon to let her know of the procedures. From there, we will figure out what to do with them. Jenny, over and out."

Brock looked at Aaron, Jacob, and Ian. "Let's get moving." The three other males nodded and went off to separate directions with their objectives in mind. Though, in the back of their minds, they couldn't help but wonder what caused all this to happen. Whatever the reason, one thing was certain.

The answer could not have been pleasant.

The black van came to a screeching halt at the mouth of the road with Professor Ironwood's laboratory visible in the distance. The three Team Hectic grunts inside hopped out of the seats, making sure they had all of their equipment ready for the next phase of the operation. Now that the irate birds were distracting the masses, nobody would be able to focus on them.

"Status report." The female voice on the other side of the communicator spoke.

One of the two male grunts pressed a button on the side of his sunglasses and replied, "The lab is just within sight. We're on our way to apprehend Professor Xavier Ironwood right now."
"Get in and get out. We've no idea how close the people of Zumi Town are to taking care of those birds."

"Trust me, we don't plan on taking long. Not that we can afford to. Over and out." The grunt shut off communication as he and his two comrades started trudging down the lane.

Meanwhile at the ship, which was now idly docked at the port, Antrenique shut off the transmission at the bridge and leaned back into her leather seat. "Now, we wait. Remember, their getaway vehicle is going to be coming in hot, so make sure the gate is ready in advance."

"Right." Isaiah smirked viciously. "Finally, after all this prep and waiting, we get to act. Home base was getting boring real quick."

"Oh, yes, I agree." Antrenique lifted up her cup of tea with her slender hands, sipping the drink gingerly. "And we're going to do everything without a single second wasted. We won't waste time, and we're only doing what's necessary."

"I-It's the Noctowl!"

Luis's shriek nearly made Isaiah fall out of his seat and Antrenique drop her tea. Looking over, they saw Luis watching surveillance nearby, and it showed Noctowl beginning its rampage. Because it was a designated safe zone, the officials barricaded the entrances and tried to keep the Normal/Flying type from entering using their own Pokemon. Meanwhile, a large percentage of the people kept within the terminal were starting to panic. An enraged and destructive Pokemon like Noctowl could do serious damage to them.

"I can see why Admin Penny let us use them," Isaiah deadpanned, "They're stupid and obviously prototypes."

Antrenique growled. "And it's going to throw a wrench in our escape plan if those people don't hurry and dispatch it." The van would be faced with armed and ready officers and the bedlam of the panic-stricken citizens. It would never reach the boat.

Luis spotted something on screen and pointed at it. "Oh! Check it out!" Antrenique and Isaiah looked more closely, spotting the Noctowl suddenly turning its attention to a Transpy and Avany near the entrance. "Looks like someone decided to step up."

Outside the terminal, Noctowl's faced the Transpy and Avany daring to oppose it. Taking the situation in stride, the officials backed off and kept up the barricade that would keep the Noctowl out. Should the two trainers fail to take it down, they would immediately step in to the finish the job.

"A Noctowl, huh?" Novak carefully observed the Owl Pokemon. "If I'm correct, Noctowls have good support and are more Specially inclined..." He exchanged glances between the Noctowl and his Transpy. The Owl Pokemon was doubtlessly dangerous, and his Transpy was fresh despite his own knowledge. He wasn't sure how the odds would stack up. "This is going to be tough."

"Well, let's put your analysis to the test, bro!" Antia pointed at the Noctowl. "Avany! Bullet Seed!" The Chick Pokemon opened its mouth and released multiple gold seeds surrounded in rapid succession. Seeing the attack coming, the Owl Pokemon promptly veered right to avoid them. "Keep pressuring it!" Motivated, Avany continuously launched seeds at Noctowl like a machine gun. "It's not a very proactive one, it seems. I'll just keep pressuring it until it cracks!"
"Antia may be on to something. Noctowl aren't fast." Novak thought. He figured that was all the preliminary information he was going to get. "Transpy, Water Sport!" Summoning a sphere of water in front of its mouth, the Translucent Pokemon angled its body and released a fountain of water from the orb into the air. Covering a wide range, the water blinded Noctowl's eyes and restricted its movements. This diversion allowed Avany's Bullet Seed to hit its mark.

"Bull's eye!" Antia shouted happily, grinning, "Now keep it up! Whittle away at its defenses!"

"Transpy, stop and use Water Gun. Go!" Novak commanded. Promptly, Transpy ceased using Water Sport and then fired a jet of spiraling water at the Noctowl. Both attacks connected, and the two kept up the assault. Strained hoots escaped Noctowl as it flapped its damp wings wildly, finding the strength to break away and find some to catch its breath.

Antia stamped her foot on the ground. "Darn it! I thought we had it!"

Novak sneered. "Tch. Annoying rat with wings." Maybe this would not be as straightforward as he thought. Noctowl then flew downward to Avany and Transpy as its eyes glowed red, releasing red circles that expanded as they moved closer and closer to them.

Antia recognized the move. "Careful! That's Hypnosis! It'll put you to sleep!" Understanding the gravity of the situation, the Grass-type starter chirped in response and jumped off to the side. Transpy followed suit, swimming through the air behind the Chick Pokemon to avoid Hypnosis. "This may take longer than we thought, but we'll do whatever it takes," Antia said as she looked Novak, "Right, Novak?"

Novak smirked. "We won't be able to call ourselves Pokémon Masters otherwise, wouldn't we?"

---

"Okay, Ash and Misty, your Pokemon are now back to full health."

Nurse Joy and Chansey placed trays on the countertop. One had Pikachu and Gouzatile sitting on it with a Poke Ball that contained Rocker. Ash had decided to capture it after how helpful it had been. The other had just two Poke Balls, Transpy and Azumarill. After seeing all the Water Pokemon in Cerulean Gym, Ash expected Misty to have a full party of Pokemon.

"Thank you!" The two teenagers took their Poke Balls with Pikachu and Gouzatile occupying Ash's shoulders.

"Also, thank you for bringing in that Talonflame." Nurse Joy said appreciatively, "That makes two of them."

Ash and Misty blinked in confusion. "Two?"

"Earlier today, three trainers brought in a Swellow and left their Magnezone, Yanmega, and Gengar here to look after it," Nurse Joy explained. Ash looked down thoughtfully when Nurse Joy mentioned Magnezone. He someone from his previous journey that owned one, but he doubted it was the same person. Besides, he had also seen plenty of people with a Gengar. He was just glad their owners were gracious enough to help out.
"And I'm here to tell you they're relieved of their duty."

Ash and Misty turned around, jaws dropping as they saw who the voice belonged to. "BROCK!"

Brock himself seemed pleasantly surprised to see his longtime friends. "Ash! Misty! Good to see you two!" He and Ash raised their arms and bumped their forearms while Brock and Misty shared a long hug.

Ash wondered if that was some sort of illusion conjured by a Darkrai. "I can't believe it… you're here!" When Brock said he was going to study to be a Pokémon Doctor at the end of their time in Sinnoh, he was sure that would be the last they would see each other for a while.

"Right back at you two," Brock said as he looked at the redhead, "Course, I'm surprised to see Misty here. Weren't you doing duties at the Cerulean Gym?"

"Let's say I have a bit of a break thanks to Tracey and Daisy," Misty replied and then sighed resignedly, "I just have to hope she isn't giving away Gym Badges for free." Brock, Ash, and Pikachu laughed, knowing that the Sensational Sisters used to be prone to arbitrarily distributing badges. Misty then noticed Brock's Sudowoodo standing behind its trainer with a patient smile on its face and two unconscious birds in its arms. "B-Brock?! Did you get those by yourselves?!"

"Huh? Oh, no, no! Staraptor, yes. But the Unfezant I had help with." Brock answered sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. "I'm just delivering them here because Officer Jenny told me to do that. And I wanted to tell Magnezone and his pals to go back to Aaron."

Ash's suspicions were confirmed. "So he is here!" Excitement started to well up in his chest. "Now it's him and Gary, huh? Heh."

"Officer Jenny told you to bring them here?" Nurse Joy piped in from behind the group.

A series of questions that needed a series of answers. Firstly, Ash and Brock informed Misty that Aaron was yet another rival they met in Sinnoh. Secondly, Ash and Misty told Brock and Nurse Joy that Professor Ironwood himself asked they round up the bird Pokémon and bring them back to his lab. Thirdly, Brock let everyone know that all of them, when captured, were going to be sent to the Pokémon Center as per the instructions of Officer Jenny.

"Okay," Nurse Joy spoke once everything was cleared up, "I will call Professor Ironwood and tell him all the birds will be here, and that you all will bring them to him. I'll also make sure Officer Jenny hasn't called and let her know I'm aware of the situation." The pink-haired woman headed to the back as Sudowoodo followed to drop off Staraptor and Unfezant.

Ash exchanged glances between Brock and Misty – the first two people he ever travelled with. This moment was too surreal. It felt like a dream. "Man… I can't believe all this is happening."

“You're telling me. First this problem and now seeing you guys." Misty said softly.

Brock sent a teasing smirk her way. "I love how you said that last part in the same tone as the first part."

Misty playfully shoved Brock. "You know what I meant!" Both Ash and Brock chuckled, but Misty spoke up again, "But really… I missed you two."
"C'mon now, Misty, don't be getting emotional on us," Ash replied as a grin formed on his face, "The Misty I know is a more of a fire-breather."

_BOP!_

"Like that?" Misty asked with a disgustingly sweet smile, glaring down at a dazed Ash. Brock had no idea whether to laugh or feel bad for Ash. Pikachu sighed exasperatedly, scratching one of his ears with his tail.

Meanwhile, Nurse spoke to Professor Ironwood using a video phone. With her were Magnezone, Gengar, Yanmega, and Sudowoodo so that they would know the proceedings in-depth as well. "Okay, Nurse Joy. Even though I told Ash and Misty to bring them back to the lab, it would make more sense to keep them at the Pokémon Center. You're better equipped at monitoring their health. Some of my aides and I will just have to migrate there periodically," Xavier explained, "I just wanted to figure out why they're acting so violent."

"I'm sure everybody wants to know too, Professor Ironwood." Nurse Joy replied.

"Well, just make sure that everyone who has apprehended one of the Pokemon get them there as soon as possible," Xavier said worriedly, "I wouldn't want them to wake up and cause any more disturbance in transit."

The Pokemon nurse gave him a reassuring smile. "I've already talked Officer Jenny. She says she'll give out the word. So don't worry. It seems like another crisis is avert——"

"Everybody, don't move! Hands where we can see them!"

A loud voice suddenly boomed through the speakers of Nurse Joy's video phone, interrupting the entire conversation. This was followed by startled screams from the aides and assistants in the same room. The screen showed Professor Ironwood turning his head and gasping. "Why are you people here!?"

"Off the phone, Ironwood! You're coming with us!"

Before Nurse Joy even had time to say anything, the transmission was cut off, and the screen went black. The Pokémon nurse and the four Pokémon with her immediately knew Professor Ironwood was in trouble, and they needed to hurry before it was too late. Wordlessly but moving quickly, she and the Pokemon rushed out of the corridor and back out to the receptionist desk where Ash, Misty, and Brock were.

"I need you three to go back to Professor Ironwood's lab! He's in trouble!" She cried out.

Ash stopped trying to push his large bump back into his head. "What?! What's going on?! Why is he in trouble?"

"I-I don't know!" Nurse Joy responded fearfully, "It sounded like someone forced their way into the lab, and I heard one of them say they were going to take Professor Ironwood with them."

Misty clenched her fist. "Not if we have anything to say about it."

"We're on our way right now!" Brock recalled his Sudowoodo. Without any more words, the trio of longtime friends headed out of the Pokémon Center and to Xavier's lab as fast as they could.
Magnezone looked to Yanmega and Gengar and stated, "(Looks like we might be late to the action. We have to go to the police station first.)"

Yanmega hung its head low. "(Aw man. I was hoping to dust off these wings of mine.)"

"(Let's make it quick. I don't wanna miss any more than I have to.)" Gengar replied, snickering sinisterly. The three Pokemon then floated out of the Pokémon Center with their next destination in mind. One bad thing after the other, sure, but it wouldn't be an adventure without some excitement.

Nurse Joy clasped her hands together, bowing her head. "May the gods watch over everyone."

All lab aides and assistants were placed back-first against the walls, hands raised high into the air. All three Team Hectic Grunts hand a contraption slipped onto their hand, keeping them aimed at everyone but Xavier so that they would not sound any alarms or reach for any Poke Balls. Everybody held their breaths, sweating and gulping nervously, both shocked and scared.

"The dark criminal syndicate hiding in Tenla's shadow and haunting its citizens… Team Hectic." Renee and Wilma thought as their bodies trembled, eyes shrinking as the initial surprise made way for mortal fear.

The third grunt approached Professor Ironwood, raising the gauntlet, an evil smirk plastered on his face. "Come clean, Ironwood. It will make everything easier."

Xavier glared daggers at the man as his body refused to move, cemented to the spot. Instead, he spoke with a slight snarl to his voice, "Team Hectic… so you lowly criminals are back. Why are you here?"

"It was only a matter of time, Ironwood. We're back and even badder than ever. Even more than what Tenlans think, and that's a lot." The Grunt answered, stopping a few feet from the Pokémon Professor. "To answer your second question, if Intel is correct, you study Pokérus. We need you, but that's really all I know. I'm sure our supervisor will fill you in."

Professor Ironwood simply refused to back down to these ruffians. Hoping nobody would catch him, his right hand slowly inched behind him. The back pocket on his lab coat was where he kept a Poke Ball. "And if I say no?" He replied cheekily, using such a tone so that the grunt would keep eye-to-eye contact with him.

A laser rang out, and the hearts of the lab aides and assistants skipped a beat. The blast may not have made contact with his hand, but the hot sparks licking it as the shot clashed with metal forced Professor Ironwood to move it. Massaging it, his eyes focused with growing hatred at the smirking grunt.

"Well, she said you're going to talk one way or another. So either do it intact and through a machine."
Brock (and by extension Ash and Dawn) only knows Aaron because they met in Pokemon Story: Sinnoh Journey (Chapter 1). Just a minor thing. Anyway, May's outfit is the same exact one from Pokemon Omega Ruby and Alpha Sapphire. Dawn's is completely original, though I did keep in mind a design befitting a remake (Sinnoh confirmed, Game Freak? Please?).

Team Hectic is inspired by the darker villains like Team Cipher, Origins!Team Rocket, and Hunter J. However, as I want to respect the lighter tone of the anime, I'll try my best to downplay their heinousness as much as possible while still getting the point across. Don't worry, this won't be "grimdark."
Altogether

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Pokemon is copyrighted to Satoshi Tajiri and Game Freak (characters, concept, and creatures). The content I claim ownership of includes everything involving the Tenla Region, its mythology and history, native Pokemon, NPCs such as Gym Leaders and Elite Four, and among other things. I also own the original characters that appear in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Altogether

"I've cracked cases, arrested many people, and traveled to many places but never in my career did I think I would have a case involving *birds!*"

A man rode down Route 2 as the engine of his black and chrome Suzuki GS500 motorcycle roared. The wheels tore through the ground, kicking up blades of glass and leaving a trail of dust. The rushing wind billowed his black jacket with cobalt blue accents and some of his black hair, but miraculously, his black hat remained firmly on his head. The rest of his clothing consisted of a black shirt, black pants that were cobalt blue from the knee down, four holsters on his belt, a waistpack, and black boots.

“If I wasn’t nearby visiting Marina, I probably wouldn’t have come.” He laughed as his steel blue eyes focused on the Zumi Town appearing over the horizon. He revved up his motorcycle and accelerated, the engine giving off a resonating roar. When he entered the city limits, he activated the brakes, the bike beginning to decelerate. Once it came to a stop, he placed one foot on the ground. He pulled out a two-way radio from its holster and talked into it, “Metacia here. I’m in Zumi Town. What’s the scoop? Over.”

A brief crack of static sounded before a voice was heard. “Detective Metacia. You might want to head on over to the port. Two trainers are currently engaging a rampant Noctowl, but they seem to be losing. Officer Jenny just gave word to direct the birds to the Pokémon Center. In addition, we are making sure the battle doesn’t get inside the terminal because it’s a safe zone. The people inside are starting to get restless and vocal, and we’re trying to make sure no chaos occurs here.”

“I’m on my way. Just make sure those citizens don’t get out of line or get hurt. That’s the worst case scenario,” Metacia responded, “Over and out.” He put the two-way radio back into its spot on his belt and revved his bike back to life. "Ride like the wind, Carolyn Jr."

“Sir!”

Before Metacia had a chance to ride off, he quickly stopped himself when two female voices called out to him. He looked to the side to see two girls running up to him with a Blaziken carrying an unconscious Pidgeot. “Uhh…” The detective droned, unsure of where to start.

Luckily, May was more than ready to vocalize her and Dawn’s concerns, “Sir! We’re trying to figure
out what to do with this Pidgeot. We can’t find any of the police officers.”

Metacia had to guess that these two were not natives since a resident would have known where the police station was. Granted, it was one of the buildings on the easternmost part of Zumi Town, so it was a little hidden. “Well, you’re in luck, ladies. I’m part of the law. First business first, though, I was called to the port ‘cause they need a little help over there with a Noctowl.”

“Then we’ll come with you!” Dawn suggested with a bright smile, “A little more help won’t hurt.”

“Yeah, but that Pidgeot though,” Metacia said uncertainly, gesturing to the unconscious Bird Pokemon, “It needs to go to the Pokémon Center. What if it wakes up?”

“(It’d be smart to stay asleep; otherwise, we’re having it for dinner tonight.)” May’s Blaziken replied equably.

Metacia took a deep breath, weighing his options. As much as he didn’t want to endanger pedestrians, the blue-haired girl was absolutely right. The more help, the better. At the same time, however, there was a serious problem, and a major contribution was in that Blaziken’s arms. It waking up en route to the port would spell all kinds of disaster. Yet, against his better nature, Metacia relented. “Hop on, then, ladies. Though, try to stay tight; fitting three people on my bike is a stretch.”

“No need to worry. Me and May are thin enough.” Dawn responded as she situated herself behind Metacia with May getting directly behind her. It wasn’t completely comfortable since three people were trying to fit themselves on a two-wheeled vehicle, but it would have to do, and the girls put faith in Metacia that he knew how to drive well.

May looked over to her Blaziken and asked, “Blaziken, can you keep up?”

“(Well, I’m not as fast as a motorcycle, but I got the legs to jump far enough to compensate.)” The Blaze Pokemon replied reassuringly. May smiled, pleased, as she wrapped her arms around Dawn, who in turn wrapped hers around Metacia.

“By the way, girls, the name’s Metacia.” The detective introduced himself as he revved up his bike again, the engine roaring powerfully, “Member of the Tenla Police Ops and Hierrdo City Gym Leader.”

“Good news. We’ve got Professor Ironwood under custody. Is our getaway ready?”

Antrenique grinned, delighted to hear that. “Excellent. Hurry and get out of there before news of Team Hectic’s return gets outside of the lab. The ship’s ready.” She ended transmission, her smirk degenerating into a frustrated scowl. Yes, she was glad that part of the mission was successful, but there was one obstacle that could potentially jeopardize the entire operation. “Have those lousy children eliminated that Noctowl already?!” She stomped over to where the surveillance camera image was.

“Nope.” Luis replied in the same tone as one casually watching television.

“I’m telling you, Antrenique,” Isaiah spoke, tossing up a Poke Ball up and down to pass the time, “Let me go out there. One attack from my Pokemon, and it’s out of the way.”
“We’re trying to clear people out of the way, not create chaos,” Antrenique argued. “We’re trying to make things go smoothly, not ruin it. Roseanne, Orville, and Landon want a swift and easy escape, and so do I.”

“Speaking of Pokemon, I wonder how our catches are doing.” Luis piped in curiously, walking to another screen and beginning to pull up another surveillance image.

“Rotting in their cages,” Isaiah answered, laughing a little. He stopped playing his Poke Ball as a thought crossed his mind. “Also, why do we have cameras in our own, personal vehicles? Nobody but us will be in them.”

What subsequently appeared on-screen made Isaiah wish he had not have spoken and Antrenique shake with ire: Jessie, James, and Meowth carrying nets with Poke Balls and currently making their escape after poaching the prison room. Arbok, Weezing, and Victreebel were following them.

Luis deadpanned. “Well, there’s your answer.”

“That’s it. Where’s my Grattler?” Isaiah snarled, stepping away from his two partners. To his surprise, Antrenqiue did not object whatsoever.

Meanwhile, Team Rocket skipped merrily out of the prison room and back outside to the bulwarks, cackling impishly. Not only did they pilfer a sizable number of Pokemon that was going straight back to Team Rocket headquarters, but they also saved and reunited with long-lost friends. As if they weren’t lucky enough, the ship they were on had docked, allowing Team Rocket the ability to escape onto land.

“If only stealing Pikachu was so easy!” James said giddily as he and his teammates leapt off the edge of the bulwarks and landed squarely on the dock.

“I smell a promotion~!” Jessie and Meowth sang.

“Hold it!”

Team Rocket froze in their tracks, slowly turning their heads to look at the owner of the voice. Isaiah was at the ledge of the boat aiming his weapon at the trio. He wasn’t going to say anything else. Once the three had stopped and put their attention on him, Isaiah raised his Grattler and fired lasers from the gauntlet, one shot for each of the three.

The shots never came close to their targets. Weezing summoned a green force-field around itself and its companions, blocking the lasers. Subsequently, Victreebel produced an orb of light green energy at the tip of its vine and flung it at the grunt. The attack struck Isaiah’s arm, knocking the Grattler clean off.

Isaiah cried out in pain, kneeling down as he gripped his hand and sucked in air sharply through his teeth. “Okay… Guess we do this the old-fashioned, traditional way…”

Meowth stuck his tongue out and pulled down the eyelid of his right eye, “Better luck next t—”

Unfortunately, the sound of laser shots was all that was needed to finally send the pedestrians in the terminal over the edge. Frantic screams were heard all across the port as people began moving against the orders of the police officers and officials trying to calm them down. Their human fight-or-
flight instincts had activated, prompting them to move without the acknowledgment of consequences concerning anyone other than themselves. People were knocked over, thrown into objects, and even trampled. The only good news was that no one was near enough to the docks to get knocked into the bay.

The situation had escalated badly to the point the officers couldn’t stop all the people from rushing out of the terminal and risking injury from the Noctowl. Novak, Antia, and their Pokemon immediately stopped fighting when they heard chaotic commotion and loud barks of orders. People were running out into the streets with reckless abandon. In their eyes, getting shot was a worse fate than being attacked by some Noctowl. Charging up energy in its feather horns, the Owl Pokemon set its sight on the panicked masses.

“Dark Pulse!”

Before Noctowl even had a chance to attack, a beam of black and purple circles came out of nowhere and struck it. Shrieking, the Owl Pokemon fell from the sky and landed on the ground with an audible thud, getting knocked out. Antia saw that and shouted over the calamity, “Who the heck did that?”

Her answer came in the form of a roaring engine as a motorcycle suddenly blazed past her and Novak, the tires screeching as the bike braked to a stop all of a sudden.

Metacia gaped in disbelief and watched as everything went completely wrong around him. “D-Did a bird cause all this?!”

May and Dawn almost fell off of Metacia's bike, swaying weakly as they tried to stand up and babbling babyishly all the while. Never before had they been on a ride so fast. Moments later, Blaziken landed beside them with a serious expression on its face.

“(Whatever the case, we must address it.)” Said a Pokemon as it floated to the ground by Metacia after he dismounted his motorcycle. It was a tall, cyber Pokemon who was comprised completely of silver metal. Its physical features included an oblong head, two glassy black eyes with glowing red pupils, arms composed of metallic plates with black spaces between them, hinges for elbows, and a somewhat cylindrical body with no legs.

“You’re right, Ebequina. Let’s close this case, shall we?” Metacia said as he looked at his partner and grinned.

Novak and Antia noticed the Pokemon with Metacia and took out their Pokedex to scan it.

“Ebequina: The Cybernetic Pokemon. The evolved form of Ferrostrial. Ebequina and its pre-evolved form are two of the known Pokemon to come from outer space. Though, both Pokemon are seemingly results of cyber technology. Ebequina is extremely intelligent and uses its powerful brain waves to manipulate the gravity around for means of movement.”

A police officer quickly approached Metacia. “Detective Metacia! We’re in trouble here! We can’t control the crowd and something even worse is going on inside the port!”

“Yeah. I can see that.” Metacia replied plainly. Then, deciding that the situation did not call for his quips, he spoke more seriously, “Well, fine. Let the people leave the port but make sure no one gets hurt! I’m going in to check out the problem! And take that Noctowl and Pidgeot with you while you’re at it!”
“Got it!” the officer ran off to do the mentioned tasks. Blaziken relinquished its custody of the Pidgeot to the accompanying Arcanine as another picked up the Noctowl. The two of them then run off, intending to take them to the Pokémon Center without any more delay.

Novak and Antia both approached Metacia after recalling their Pokemon with the latter asking, “Sir! What’s going on?”

“A bunch of things.” Metacia groaned as he glanced at the entrance to the terminal. Ebequina was already some paces ahead and turned back, wordlessly letting him know he needed to move now. The Gym Leader nodded back. However, before he was able to take a step, his Pokégear suddenly started ringing. “Oh, Giratina, what now?” He removed the item from its corresponding holster on his belt and answered it, “Talk to me, but it better be important because I’m trying to do something!”

“Mr. Metacia!” It was the Zumi Town Nurse Joy, “Please go to Professor Ironwood’s Laboratory! I think he’s being held captive!”

“What?! Oh come on!” Metacia bellowed, causing Novak and Antia to jump and snapping May and Dawn out of their dazed stupor on the ground. “Oh my Arceus, what is going on today?! Fine. Thanks for telling me.” He immediately hung up. Starting to pace, Metacia tried to think of a plan – he wouldn’t be able to go see about that situation when one was already occurring just feet in front of him. At his wit’s end, he turned to Novak and Antia and asked, “What are your names?”

Novak blinked in confusion. “Um, I’m Novak, and that’s my sister Antia.”

“Mr. Metacia, what’s going on?” May inquired, standing up.

The detective sighed exasperatedly. “Look, I told you to just call me Met—You know what, forget it. Fine. ‘Mr. Metacia.’ Whatever.” After getting that out of the way, he backed up so that nothing was between the twins and the two girls. “Novak and Antia, May and Dawn. May and Dawn, Novak and Antia. Now go to Professor Xavier Ironwood’s lab at the western part of Zumi Town. You know where the rural parts are? Yeah, he needs help. Bye!” Thinking he spent enough time dawdling, Metacia slipped away and hurried into the port with Ebequina following him.

“…well that was considerate of him.” Antia and Dawn said with blank expressions.

Professor Ironwood’s face was full of hate and defeat as Team Hectic Grunt Orville forced him out of the door. His hands were tied behind his back by a black cord as said grunt kept a firm, iron grip on him. Behind them were Rosanne and Landon, keeping their Grattlers aimed at the lab aides and assistants inside as their comrade escorted the professor out.

Renee had the same facial expression as Xavier as she watched them take the professor. She glanced at her fellow assistants around her. Wilma in particular was paralyzed with fear; these may have been simple foot soldiers, but they were foot soldiers of a sinister organization with terrifying higher-ups giving out the commands. Even so, they all but voiced their intention to use torture or whatever means to make Xavier talk about something. Renee feared that, if they managed to escape with the professor, it would be the last time anymore would see Xavier. Tenla couldn’t afford their Pokémon Professor disappearing. Steeling her nerves, Renee started to move her hand downward, trying to reach for a Poke Ball.
“Don’t move!” Roseanne shouted, ceasing her backwards walking and aiming her Grattler at Renee.

“Renee! Please don’t move.” Wilma whispered as she trembled, glancing worriedly at the redhead. This prompted a growl from Renee, but she nonetheless looked down in defeat as she reset her arm’s position.

“I think that’ll be all, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you and have a wonderful day.” Landon said as he and the other grunt finally stepped out of the lab’s exit.

“And don’t think about following us either. Not only will we fire on sight, Xavier will suffer punishment for your insolence as well,” Roseanne stated remorselessly. Orville was now outside with Xavier and began the slow walk down the trail toward their van.

“HYDRO PUMP!”

“THUNDERBOLT!”

Suddenly, two large spirals of water jetted by and knocked the gauntlets out of the grunts’ hands, sending them far away and forgotten. Meanwhile, a blast of electricity surged toward Orville. Though surprised, he managed to quickly throw himself out of the way with Xavier and barely avoid the resulting explosion.

“Who dares cross with Team Hectic?!” Roseanne roared, glaring to the direction of their attackers.

“We do!” Ash, Misty, and Brock all replied defiantly as Pikachu, Azumarill, and Swampert stood before them, ready to fight.

Landon scoffed, rolling his eyes behind his sunglasses. “What’s a bunch of kids doing here? This is grown folks business.”

“Business?! What are you people doing to Professor Ironwood?!” Brock questioned as his Swampert took a menacing step forward.

Orville forced Professor Ironwood to stand up as he pulled out his retractable stun baton, putting the weapon up to the man’s neck. “Children, just turn around before people start getting hurt. We have no qualms sending you back to your families in a box!” Orville’s shades lowered slightly to reveal the vehement glare behind them.

Misty gritted her teeth and snapped back, “Who do you people think you are?!"

“Team Hectic, little girl. Let us show you your place.” Roseanne said as she and Landon removed Poke Balls from their person and tossed them out. Orville used his free arm to do the same. Roseanne released a Houndour, Orville released a Murkrow, and Landon released a Cacturne. Pikachu, Azumarill and Swampert respectively faced their opponents.

Gouzatile snarled as wisps of fire flared out of its mouth. Before it jumped off Ash's arm to join the fray, Ash placed on a hand on its body to stop it. "Hold on, Gouzatile. Not yet.” He insisted. Gouzatile looked at Ash and opened its mouth to speak. "Just trust me." Ash said, more firmly. This stopped Gouzatile from speaking further. It seemed Ash had a spine to go with that compassion of his.
“Dark Pulse.”

“Night Shade.”

“Pin Missile.”

A black orb appeared in front of Houndour’s open mouth, howling as fired a beam of black and purple rings at Pikachu. Eyes glowing bright pink, Murkrow’s body turned pale purple and released multiple crimson rings at Azumarill. Finally, Cacturne fired multiple white glowing streams of pins from the dark green patches on its arms and legs at Swampert.

“Volt Tackle!”

“Aqua Tail!”

“Mud Shot!”

Rushing toward Houndour, Pikachu’s body was surrounded by golden electricity. Determined to strike his opponent, Pikachu forced himself to keep going even after it made with Houndour’s Dark Pulse. The beam of rings scattered as the electric mouse continued to press forward and finally tackle the Fire/Dark type. Elsewhere, Azumarill swung its tail as the blue ball launched a spiral of streaming water to knock the Night Shade off course. Lastly, Swampert opened its mouth and fired a stream of dark brown mud from its mouth at the oncoming Pin Missile, both moves clashing in midair and exploding on contact.

Roseanne smirked as Houndour skidded across the ground, shaking off the blow as Pikachu hunched from recoil damage. “Hmm. Making this fun for us, huh?”

Landon gritted his teeth, unable to derive enjoyment from the situation like his two partners. He had a feeling this would drag on – if they were still here when the police arrived, they were finished. After issuing another order for his Cacturne, he pressed on a button the side of his sunglasses.

“Luis, Antrenique, Isaiah, we need some help over here.”

“End of the line!”

Before Team Rocket had a chance to make a beeline for the exit of the terminal, the other trio of Team Hectic Grunts intercepted them. Team Rocket, Victreebel, Koffing, and Arbok were all surrounded by the three with Antrenqiue and Luis aiming their Grattlers at them.

“Drop the Poke Balls and leave.” Antrenique ordered as Isaiah tossed a Poke Ball up and down, ready to release whatever was in it.

“No way! We stole these fair and square! So back off!” Jessie retorted, glaring daggers.

Isaiah released a bored yawn. “Just shoot them already. Or let my Pokemon have them for dinner.”

“Please reconsider. We’re on official business after all.” Luis pleaded, hoping Team Rocket would comply so that no more issues would crop up.
“And we’re on official business too! Sending these puppies to the boss of Team Rocket!” James yelled back.

Isaiah arched a curious brow. “Team Rocket? Could’ve sworn you wannabe gangsters were dead and gone.”

“It matters not. You’re no threat to us!” Antrenique interjected, adjusting her Grattler as Team Rocket’s Pokémon stood in front of them protectively. Luis reluctantly did the same, seeing as there was no other choice. Just then, a blue light surrounded both gauntlets, and they were ripped off their arms and tossed away.

Antrenique’s eyes widened to the size of dinner plates as she looked at her now unarmed hand. “What the-?! What happened to my Grattler??”

“Haha! Your pistols pulled a Houdini!” Meowth mocked, pointing and laughing at them.

“Boy, oh, boy…This went from one of the strangest cases ever to a legitimately serious one in seconds flat…” All of the criminals looked to see Metacia walking up with Ebequina floating by him. Metacia’s eyes were as cold as steel as Ebequina’s flashed dangerously. “Long time no see, Team Hectic.” He greeted, his tone sharper than before.

“O-Oh man! It’s Hierrdo City Gym Leader and Tenla Police Ops member, Detective Metacia!” Luis cried out, backing away. What rotten luck for someone like him to be all the way down here.

“Well, well, well, this is our lucky day!” Isaiah smiled from ear-to-ear as he pulled out another Poke Ball. “Not every day I get to report the beat-down of a legal authority figure!”

“Luis, Antrenique, Isaiah, we need some backup.”

Antrenique received the message, pressed the button on the side of her shades, and responded, “Got it. We’re on our way.” She looked to Luis and gave him an order, “Luis, since you have the strongest Pokemon, we’re leaving Detective Metacia and Team Rocket to you. Isaiah, we have to head to the lab!”

Isaiah huffed as he threw up a Poke Ball. “This had better be good.” It popped open and whatever came out swooped down and snatched up both Isaiah and Antrenique without delay, taking off and heading off to their new destination.

“And this is where we make our getaway!” James shouted as he, Jessie, Meowth, and their Pokémon suddenly sprinted away.

Metacia looked at the fleeing trio. He didn’t like the fact he was going to waste his trump card on them, but seeing as they were carrying nets of Poke Balls, he had no choice. “Magneton. Excadrill.” Suddenly, a sizeable hole appeared in front of Team Rocket’s path as two more Steel-type Pokémon leapt out. Jessie, James, and Meowth shrieked in surprise as Magneton and Excadrill blocked their way, glaring at them.

“Great… Guess I have no choice!” Luis dug out three Poke Balls and tossed them all in the air, “Manectric, Dunsparce, and Corasive! Help me here! We’re in a jam!” All three Poke Balls popped open and released the Pokemon within their confines. Manectric snarled as electricity sparked on its yellow mane, and Dunsparce slammed its tail on the ground readily.
The third was a crustaceous Pokemon with blue and black skin, two lobster-like claws, four legs, and pure white eyes. Almost the entirety of its small body, save for the aforementioned descriptions, were concealed by the ash grey and dark rust brown spiral conch shell on it. Corasive lapped its claws, eagerly waiting to crush something with them.

“All right, fine, if it’s a battle you want, it’s a battle you’re gonna get!” Jessie declared, backing up with her companions so they were a reasonable distance away from their opponents. Metacia walked over to Magneton and Excadrill with Ebequina so that everyone was roughly in a triangular formation—the perfect setting for a three-way battle.

“My handcuffs are starting to get lonely. Let’s skip straight to the conviction, shall we?” Metacia quipped, smirking as pointed two fingers at his opponents, “Ebequina, Hammer Arm! Magneton, Electro Ball! Excadrill, X-Scissor!”

“Manectric, Flamethrower! Dunsparce, Headbutt! Corasive, Ominous Wind!”

“Victreebel, Energy Ball! Weezing, Sludge Bomb!”

“Arbok, Poison Sting!”

Dunsparce and Ebequina charged at each other, one’s arms and the other’s head glowing. Both Pokemon clashed once, only to break apart and continue attacking each other – Dunsparce fluttering around as Ebequina waited for the right chance to parry and strike.

Arbok slithered about, circling around Corasive and firing purple needles at. Scoffing, Corasive withdrew into its shell and started spinning, deflecting much of the Poison Sting whilst unleashing a powerful black and purple gale that Arbok used its speed to dodge.

Desperate to even the odds, Weezing targeted Metacia’s Magneton unleashed of a salvo of glowing purple sludge. The Magnet Pokemon simply laughed as the Sludge Bomb did nothing to it. “(I guess no one told you my kind is immune to Poison.)” It concentrated a sphere of golden electricity in front of its body and fired it. Unable to retaliate quickly enough, the Electro Ball hit its mark and caused an explosion.

Through the smoke, Manectric and Victreebel jumped out with the former firing red-orange flames from its mouth. The Flycatcher Pokemon quickly hopped over the flames and knocked Manectric away with a single Energy Ball. Capitalizing on the confusion, Excadrill appeared from underground and slashed Victreebel with glowing, metal claws. Cracking one of its eyes open, Manectric noticed the Subterrene Pokemon’s guard was wide open, immediately got to its feet, and blindsided it with Flamethrower.

After clashing another Headbutt with Hammer Arm, Ebequina sprang forth and tried to slam Dunsparce into the ground. “(You’re know. You’re rather predictable.” Dunsparce said, jumping back and causing the Steel/Dark-type to miss. Out of nowhere, Corasive emerged from behind the land snake and engulfed Ebequina in an Ominous Wind.

“(Curses!)” Ebequina cried out, shielding its eyes from the high, dark winds. The damage was minimal, but visibility was so poor, it had no idea where to move.

Dunsparce chuckled, glad to see their teamwork work. Then it saw Arbok approaching to fire another round of Poison Stings. “(I'm going to need you to slow your roll, partner.)” Dunsparce
hurtled over and rammed its skull into Arbok’s neck, sending the Poison type into nearby railing.

Weezing and Magneton engaged in a shootout, moving about and firing Sludge Bombs and Electro Balls at different angles. Weezing’s mind raced to figure out how to damage an enemy who was immune to its strongest attack. But Magneton, a more experienced fighter, wanted to keep this edge. The Magnet Pokemon dodged more Sludge Bombs and took refuge behind a directory sign. Impulsively, Weezing discharged more globs of poison from its mouth. The moment it did, the Electric/Steel type moved from behind the sign, getting it destroyed in the process, and fired one more Electro Ball, frying Weezing with powerful electricity.

Victreebel, Manectric, and Excadrill used the thick smoke from Weezing and Magneton’s battle to their advantage. Excadrill would dive into the ground, granting itself the element of surprise, and then blindside either Victreebel or Manectric with X-Scissor. The Flycatcher Pokemon had the most difficult time, being slower and less powerful than its two opponents. As Excadrill continued to score blows on it, Manectric hit it with a powerful Flamethrower. Tired of the abuse, Victreebel came up with something on the spot. It whipped out its vine and sent it down a fresh hole made by Excadrill, a snap being heard as it latched onto something. With a cry of effort, Victreebel pulled Excadrill out of the hole and threw it at Manectric, sending both Pokemon into a support pillar with great force.

Meanwhile, Corasive continued to whittle away at Ebequina’s energy with Ominous Wind. Dunsparce was on standby, awaiting its chance to strike. Bringing its hands together, Ebequina formed a dark ball. “(If there is one thing I learned from Metacia, you sometimes must make gambles to make plans work.)” The Steel/Dark-type slammed the Dark Pulse on the ground, the explosion tearing through the Ominous Wind. Corasive covered its eyes to block out the smoke. Spotting it, Ebequina fired another Dark Pulse and blasted the Graveyard Pokemon.

Once the smoke subsided, Dunsparce gasped, seeing its comrade done and the enemy standing tall. Gritting its teeth, Dunsparce scrambled toward Ebequina; however, the Cyber Pokemon simply turned its way and fired one more Dark Pulse, finally landing a decisive blow on the Land Snake Pokemon.

“Oh no! Manectric! Dunsparce! Corasive!” Luis cried out, watching his three Pokemon fall. If this weren’t an unexpected three-way battle, his Pokemon would have lasted much longer. The Team Hectic Grunt had no choice but to retreat for now. He recalled his three Pokemon and tried to make a break for it, but Ebequina appeared in his way, folding its arms. The creature exuded an aura of menace so potent it made Luis freeze up on the spot.

“You just chill right there, will ya?” Metacia said, glancing at Luis as he recalled his fallen Excadrill. He redirected his attention back to Victreebel as Magneton faced it. “I won’t take long.”

“C’mon, Victreebel! Take down that Magneton, and we’ll win!” James cheered after recalling Weezing. He pointed at the Magnet Pokemon and ordered, “Let’s use Vine Whip!” Releasing a battle cry, the Grass/Poison type lashed out its vine and wrapped it around an unfazed Magneton.

“Oh, I got you now!” Metacia grinned like a Cheshire cat. “Thunder Wave!” Magneton released blue bolts of electricity from the ends of the magnets on its body. The vine conducted them and reached Victreebel, the intense surge of electricity making it contort and holler in pain. “Electro Ball.” The Magnet Pokemon, once freed from the vine, summoned one last concentrated sphere of golden electricity and fired it.

The force of the Electro Ball sent an electrocuted Victreebel to Team Rocket, everyone screaming as Victreebel hit them. The shocking went on for a couple of seconds before an explosion occurred,
sending Team Rocket flying into the sky with the Poke Balls still in tow.

“Looks like team rocket’s blasting off again!” Their voices trailed off the farther they flew off. A twinkle in the sky appeared at the spot they disappeared from.

“That’s all, folks.” Metacia said plainly as he redirected his attention to Luis, beginning to walk over, “All right, Mr. Team Hectic Grunt. We’re gonna take a trip to the police station here in town and then probably Tenla Police Ops HQ. Woe is you, my friend, because we’re gonna make you tell us everything about Team Hectic. After all, the early bird gets the worm...well, Pokemon...or, in this case, criminal organiza—”

“Brilliant idea, detective!” Luis suddenly whipped out his arms and sent out small beads that he removed from his cuffs earlier. The beads produced a thick smokescreen that blinded Metacia, Ebequina, and Magneton.

“P-People still do this?!” Metacia coughed, using his hat to protect his eyes from the smoke. Seconds lingered until the smokescreen dissipated, revealing that Luis was gone. “Oh that’s right...it still works.” He deadpanned. With a sigh, he removed his two-way radio. Hopefully by now, the Zumi Town police calmed the citizens down.

“Guys, I found out something that changes the whole game.” Metacia inhaled sharply, trying to figure how to put this lightly. “Team Hectic is back.”

At the lab, the Team Hectic Grunts were on the ropes. Houndour, Murkrow, and Cacturne were all panting heavily as they stood side-by-side. Pikachu, Azumarill, and Swampert were significantly less tired, facing them defiantly. The grunts, however, were not panic-stricken at all, continuing to bark orders without hesitation. Even if their Pokemon were trounced, they had backup on the way. In addition, Orville still had Professor Ironwood in custody, preventing any of the lab aides and assistants watching from trying to save him lest his wellbeing be jeopardized.

“Now let Professor Ironwood go or else!” Ash demanded as Pikachu, Azumarill, and Swampert prepared to unleash more attacks. However, before any of that could happen, something struck the ground between the warring factions and caused a violent explosion, causing everyone to scream and shout in surprise.

“Oh, what now?!” Landon said irritably. A swift gust of wind swept across him and his comrades as a Fearow appeared before them, carrying Isaiah and Antrenique.

“You guys rang?” Isaiah bantered, grinning, impressed with himself.

“There’s more of you guys?!” Xavier shouted in disbelief, his brandeis blue eyes widening.

“Best believe it, professor,” Orville retorted, forcing him to face the trail. “Where’s Luis? We could use his Pokemon right about now.”

“Long story short, some rats managed to foil that part of the plan, and he’s trying to cover up our tracks and possibly rectify the situation,” Antrenique answered, glancing over at the smoke that lingered thanks to the power of Fearow’s Hyper Beam. Hopefully, that would occupy the brats enough so that they could make their sound getaway. “But, enough of that, we have the professor,
and that’s all we really need. Let’s go! And call Luis!”

In an ironic twist of fate, another attack struck hit the ground before Team Hectic. The explosion and flames forced them to hit the deck, trapping them between walls of smoke and foiling their escape yet again. Isaiah and Antrenique had fallen off of Fearow, hitting the ground with a strident grunt. Instinctively, the Normal/Flying type flapped its wings and produced wind strong enough to extinguish the flames and smoke.

“I don’t know what you guys are planning to do with Professor Ironwood, but you might as well can it.” The cool and calculating nonchalance emanating from the male and female voices was enough to put Team Hectic on edge. This was said as an Avany and a Transpy came forward.

“We’re not letting you guys have your way! Not while we’re around!” The fiery spunkiness of the two female voices matched the powerful flames that just seconds ago closed the door on them. Their impassioned declaration let them know they were in for a world of trouble as a Blaziken and a Piplup stepped forth.

Around this time, the smoke on the other side finally subsided. The Team Hectic Grunts were now surrounded by two separate groups of equally determined trainers as well as Pokemon reflecting their will.

Two groups of teenagers, converging altogether by fate.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT (7/20/16): So I decided to outright erase all mentions of firearms and rifles from this fic henceforth. Instead, I replaced them with devices called “Grattlers,” Team Hectic-issued gauntlets that shoot decidedly less deadly lasers. More fantastic, less mature, more fitting for the Pokemon universe. The stun batons stay though (they were shown in Pokemon Origins by Team Rocket).
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Use Your Head

“Spoken like a true uppity brat.” Landon growled as he, Orville, and Roseanne faced Ash, Brock, and Misty while Isaiah and Antrenique were back-to-back with them and staring down the newest participants to the battle.

“Looks like we joined the party just in time,” Antia said, punching a fist into an open palm.

“That wouldn’t have been possible if it weren’t for those guys behind them,” Dawn said, leaning to the side so that she could see the people previously fighting Team Hectic by themselves. She waved her hand to get their attention as she called out, “Thanks, guys! We’re here to—” Her tone changed when the addressed looked at her, matching her expression of shock, “Ash?! Brock?!"

“Dawn?!” The two males exclaimed in disbelief. There was yet another old friend here in Tenla.

May heard Dawn but was unable to see beyond their opponents. “What? Ash and Brock are here?!”

“Focus! We’ve got work to do!” Misty, Antia, and Novak shouted. If they wanted to have a reunion, they could wait until they took care of the business at hand. Case in point, Isaiah and Antrenique were sending out their Pokemon.

“Crawsen, go!”

“Idoller, wipe ‘em out!”

The two Poke Balls they sent out released two Tenla-native Pokemon creatures. Isaiah’s was a sandy brown, crustaceous Pokemon with an elongated dome-shaped design. What could be seen from underneath its smooth smell was two black eyes with white sclera, thin stalk-like limbs, and a uropod. Antrenique’s was a small, metallic, draconic creature composed of a tapering conical chrysalis with a helical ridge decorating it. Coming out of the opening of the chrysalis, its head was streamlined and featured narrow, crimson eyes. Right beneath its head was a single metallic claw. Seeing them, Antia curiously took out her Pokedex and scanned them.

“Crawsen: The Sand-Dwelling Pokemon. Crawsen make their dwellings in sandy benches, rarely coming out of their holes unless to search for food.”

“Idoller: The Absentminded Pokemon. Idoller are able to wander wherever they want without fear.
of attacking because their metallic bodies do not take much damage.”

“Sandstorm!” Isaiah and Landon commanded. The eyes of Crawsen and Cacturne flashing briefly, a twister of sand erupted from the ground. Everyone besides Swampert, Crawsen, Cacturne, and Idoller braced themselves against the pelting sand and rock, but even then, Houndour, Murkrow, and Fearow stayed tough. The young heroes either used their arms or headwear to prevent the sand from completely blocking their lines of sight.

“Cacturne, use Giga Drain on Swampert.” Landon ordered, opting to take out the only opponent that could potentially ruin their strategy with Sandstorm. Cacturne rushed for the Mud Fish Pokemon, barely visible thanks to its Sand Veil ability, as the dark patches on its arm glowed a bright green. Then, multiple tendrils came out and wrapped around Swampert’s arms. Screaming as the attack drained its opponent’s energy, Cacturne cackled. “(Oh, yes, music to my ears.)”

“Oh, no! Swampert!” Brock cried out, knowing Giga Drain was depleting Swampert’s strength at an incredible rate due to the move being very effective.

“Pikachu! Use Thunderbolt on Cacturne!” Ash commanded.

“Stay out of that, child. Shadow Ball!” Roseanne shouted.

Pikachu endured the Sandstorm as electricity crackled in its red cheeks. Houndour sprinted forth and parked itself in front of the Mouse Pokemon as an orb of black and purple energy formed in front of its mouth, firing the Shadow Ball. Pikachu cried out as the Ghost-type attack hit, causing Ash to grit his teeth in frustration.

“Azumarill, Aqua Tail! Back up Pikachu!” Misty ordered.

“That works both ways. Murkrow, Sucker Punch.”

Before Azumarill had a chance to conjure its move, Murkrow flew straight to it and drove its sharp beak into the Aqua Mouse Pokemon’s stomach. Sucker Punch sent Azumarill tumbling towards Misty. Once it stopped, it clutched its stomach, face contorted with pain.

“Azumarill! NO!” Misty cried out, concern washing over her like a Surf.

Muskrow and Orville chuckled in satisfaction. “One down.”

Ash gritted his teeth and balled his fists, encouraged to make a move while Murkrow and its trainer were busy relishing in their inflated egos. “Iron Tail!” Tail glowing and then turning into iron, Pikachu sprinted to the Darkness Pokemon. Before Murkrow could react, Pikachu swung its tail, sending the Dark/Flying type straight into the ground with a hard thud.

Orville sneered as Ash commented, “One down.”

Meanwhile, Swampert fell to one knee as Cacturne continued to use Giga Drain, the Grass/Dark type cackling as it did so. Sweat fell down Brock’s face in beads, trying to figure out a way to save his Swampert fast. Then, it hit him: even with Sand Veil, Cacturne was giving away its location; he just needed to follow the tendrils back to the source. “Swampert! Use Mud Shot! Follow the direction of the Cacturne’s attack!” The Mud Fish Pokemon forced its eyes and lifted its head, firing a stream of dark brown mud from its mouth.
Cacturne immediately ceased its snickering when it noticed the Mud Shot coming straight for it. The attack landed squarely in its face, blinding it and forcing it to stop using Giga Drain. At the same time, Crawsen was driven straight into the Scarecrow Pokemon’s back from a combination attack of Piplup’s Hydro Pump and Transpy’s Water Gun. The Sandstorm subsided now that its summoners were taken care of.

“Fearow, use Sky Attack!”

“Idoller, Metal Claw!”

Gaining some altitude, Fearow then fell straight down as a shining white aura enveloped its entire body. Idoller meanwhile slithered forth as its sole claw gained a similar sheen. Fearow headed to Blaziken while Idoller targeted Avany.

“Blaze Kick!”

“Jump and use Bullet Seed!”

Blaziken crouched down slightly before taking a massive leap toward the falling, Sky Attack-induced Fearow. In midair, the Blaze Pokemon swung its body so its right foot was aimed at Fearow, the limb bursting into flames. The two attacks collided, resulting in an explosion as the two Pokemon backed away from the smoke unscathed. Meanwhile, Idoller lunged at Avany and swiped its glowing claw, only for the Grass type to repeatedly avoid it. Then, Avany flipped over another Metal Claw as it opened its beak, letting loose a series of fast-moving seeds. However, this proved to be only a minor nuisance as Idoller endured the attack, crisply turned around, and continued trying to slash at the Grass-type starter.

Meanwhile, Rosanne’s Houndour now faced Pikachu and Swampert by itself, standing in-between the two Pokemon. Houndour exchanged glares between them, growling as it did so. Pikachu’s red cheeks sparked with electricity as Swampert cracked its knuckles readily.

“Let’s make this quick and save Professor Ironwood,” Brock said, “Swampert, Focus Punch!”

“Pikachu! Iron Tail!”

Swampert clenched its right fist as Pikachu’s tail glowing tail transformed into pure iron. Roseanne frowned, trying to figure out which of the two was the bigger threat and what move in her Houndour’s arsenal was capable of taking them both down. She hated to admit, but she and her comrades were in a jam as Pikachu and Swampert lunged forward.

“Garchomp! Dual Chop!”

Gliding through the air at fast speeds, a Garchomp flew over Ash, Misty, and Brock’s heads and to the Pikachu and Swampert. The Mach Pokemon dove into them, hitting them with one each of its glowing claws. The two Pokemon hollered in pain as they hit the ground with great force and skidded backwards.

“What the?!?” Ash, Misty, and Brock exclaimed, their hearts almost sinking from the suddenness of Garchomp’s appearance and brutal attack.

As the Dragon/Ground type landed beside Roseanne, Luis got off of it with a bright smile. “Am I late?”
“Where have you been?!” Orville demanded, ignoring the groan of pain that came from Xavier due to unnecessary movement on his already constricted arms.

“That’s a yes…” Luis muttered, his proud and happy mood gone.

Ash and Brock gritted their as the latter recalled Swamper and sent out Sudowoodo. Ash quickly removed his Pikachu from the battle and released his Rockler. Misty decided to get back into the game now that a bigger threat was here, sending out her Transpy. Garchomp faced its three opponents and roared. Roseanne smirked and turned around as Houndour went out to the other part of the battle, knowing that Luis’s Garchomp could handle those three.

The battle raged on as the young heroes continued holding their own against Team Hectic. Back inside, the aides and assistants watched worriedly, keeping themselves near the edge of the door so that they’d stay out of sight. Many of them decided that getting involved would prompt Orville to seriously injure Professor Ironwood.

Renee watched Houndour, Idoller, Crawsen, and Fearow fight Piplup, Novak’s Transpy, Blaziken, and Avany on even terms. She glanced over to where Garchomp overpowered Sudowoodo, Misty’s Transpy, and Rockler and clenched her fists. There was no where they would be able to defeat that menace of a Pokemon. Not at their current level. The redhead gazed over to where Orville had Xavier, still keeping the stun baton to his neck. Xavier had a Pokemon that could handle that Garchomp. But Ash and company were too preoccupied to free Professor Ironwood, and everyone else was too afraid to do something, so she had to act.

Renee reached into her lab coat pocket, pulled out a Poke Ball, and pressed the button on the front to activate it. Wilma gasped and grabbed her arm. “Renee! What are you doing?!”

Renee snatched it away from her. “Turning this battle in our favor, that’s what.” She reached up and pressed a button near the door, manually causing the glass entrance to open up. “Mothim, free the professor with Acrobatics!” She commanded, throwing the Poke Ball out of the door. It released Mothim, who glided straight toward Orville and Xavier top speed. Orville noticed the Moth Pokemon coming at him and quickly ducked to dodge, only for it to come straight back and slam into the arm that carried the stun baton, moving so fast it seemed to leave behind two afterimages. Orville groaned in pain as he staggered backwards and dropped his weapon, clutching his injured arm.

Xavier kicked away the stun baton while massaging his neck and wrists. “Finally…”

“Way to go, Mothim!” Renee shouted happily as she removed himself from her hiding spot and stepped outside as Mothim returned to her.

“I can’t believe that was crazy enough to work,” Wilma said as she and others gawked in disbelief.

“The professor’s free, guys!” Renee proclaimed with a smirk, catching everyone’s attention, “There’s no need to hold back anymore!”

“Orville, you had one job.” Isaiah and Antrenique snarled, glaring at the grunt from the corner of their eyes.

Professor Ironwood adjusted his glasses, causing them to shine in the sun as he reached behind him and took out a Poke Ball. “Alright, I think it’s time for a little payback.” He said eerily calmly as he threw it up. It opened up and let loose a massive amount of formless light. Subsequently, the light
started to take shape and solidify, becoming a large, airborne entity.

The light dispersing, Aerodactyl screeched and flapped its wings, glowering down at the enemies.

“Aerodactyl, go get that Garchomp. Use Steel Wing.” Professor Ironwood ordered, gesturing to the Mach Pokemon. Aerodactyl nodded obediently and dashed for Garchomp as its wings glowed a metal-gray color. Garchomp knocked away Sudowoodo and Rockler yet again and then felt a brisk gale of wind. Looking to the side curiously, it suddenly saw Aerodactyl approach and slam its hardened wings right in its face. The force of Aerodactyl’s Steel Wing was strong enough to send Garchomp flying clear across the battleground, heading straight into Luis as the two hit and skidded across the ground.

“Ouch.” Dawn cringed, seeing the brutality of the move.

“That’s Professor Ironwood for you. Taught us everything we know,” Antia stated proudly.

As much as Antrenique hated to admit it, the moment Xavier released his Aerodactyl and took down Luis and his Garchomp they failed the mission. Too many unforeseen wrenches were thrown into the plan: Team Rocket getting aboard their ship somehow and stealing the Poke Balls, the birds being captured and subdued, and these kids getting in the way. She nodded cues to her fellow grunts, and they regretfully nodded back. They all removed small, silvery beads from inside their trench coats. "You people were lucky this time, but you won't be next time." Antrenqiue declared as they all threw down the beads.

A copious amount of black smoke suddenly enveloped the area, prompting everyone to cover their eyes and cough to expel the smoke from their lungs.

“A-Aerodactyl!” Professor Ironwood spoke between violent coughs. “U-Use Whirlwind!”

Aerodactyl quickly flapped its wings, producing a powerful gust of wind that thinned out the smoke, giving everyone the ability to breathe and see again. However, Team Hectic was long gone, using the window of time as their chance to escape without a trace left.

“I can’t believe that cheap trick still works!” Antia shouted, frantically looking around for the grunts but to no avail.

“And they got away! Those no-good creeps!” Dawn said irritably.

Professor Ironwood sighed as he recalled his Aerodactyl. It was disheartening to know Team Hectic was afoot and that he barely escaped their clutches. Thank his lucky stars that Ash and company, as well as the police officers in town, were around to take care of them. Major crises were averted today. Then, he heard the roar of an approaching engine. Xavier and everyone else turned around to see a motorcycle coming up.

“Yo, Xavier!” It was Metacia with his Ebequina riding passenger. He activated the brakes as his fast-moving bike came to a screeching halt. Behind him were Ian, Aaron, and Jacob. The latter two were riding on Aaron’s Skarmory while Ian used his on Drifblim respectively. Everyone dismounted their respective ride when they arrived on the scene.

“Nice of you to arrive late,” Xavier commented dryly, the likes of Ash and Novak muttering in agreement.
“We’re late?! Aw come on!” Ian pulled at hair, disappointed that his efforts to arrive as quickly as possible were in vain. Drifblim sighed and slumped over, sad it couldn’t participate in battle.

The engine of Metacia’s motorcycle rumbled in a different pitch as he shifted gears. Metacia then stroked the handlebars, shushing it like a baby. “It’s okay, Carolyn Jr. You did your best. Don’t cry, girl.”

Shaking his head, Aaron thanked and recalled his Skarmory. Of course, the first thing he noticed were the many familiar faces approaching him and his group. “Well, this is certainly unexpected.”

“So Brock was right! You are here!” Ash ran over to Aaron. “Long time no see!”

“Indeed,” Aaron replied with a small smile.

“Well, I suppose introductions are in order since I don’t know even half of you guys,” Novak pointed out matter-of-factly.

The group of heroes took the time to exchange their names and hometowns to breed some familiarity between each other. Ash, Misty, and Brock were a longtime group of friends, May knew them from a past adventure, Dawn was introduced to Misty, May explained she knew Aaron from the Wallace Cup, and Aaron told them Ian and Jacob were past companions of his with the latter being a student just getting free time. They also let each other know of their role in thwarting Team Hectic’s plan in Zumi Town.

“Well, at any rate, I’m glad you guys were here to stop the birds and Team Hectic. On their behalf, the people of Zumi Town are grateful,” Xavier announced kindly, even bowing to show his respects.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Misty said bashfully, waving her hand dismissively.

“Well, since you’re okay and all, Xavier, I’d better go and see if I can chase down those guys,” Metacia said as he revved his motorbike back to life, his Ebequina getting back on.

“Hold on, Mr. Metacia!” Ash ran up to the detective. He then spoke with courage burning in his eyes and a smirk on his face. “If May and Dawn are right, I wanna challenge you to a Gym Battle!”

“You got at least five Gym Badges from Tenla?” Metacia asked, arching his brow. Ash’s enthusiasm disappeared as he shook his head. “Then, no can do, Ash. I’m out of your league right now, pal.” The black-haired man looked over to Professor Ironwood. “Xavier, give my challengers my Pokégear number.” He then glanced at Ash, Novak, Antia, and Aaron since they had voiced their occupations as trainers. “When you guys get near Hierrdo City, gimme a call and then we can have our match. Deal?”

“Deal!”

“Train hard until then! Later!” Metacia said as he blazed away, going down the road that led to the backcountry portions of Zumi Town where the Renee told him Team Hectic was trying to go.

“Well, time to jet. We’re done here,” Ian said conclusively, yawning as he turned around. It was time to move on to better and brighter things now that the Team Hectic fiasco in Zumi Town was finished.

“Well, I see you’re as inconsiderate as ever, Ian,” Dawn said with a blank expression, her Piplup
matching it. The least he could do was show a bit more courtesy in his goodbye since he was not going to stay for a bit longer like most new acquaintances or old friends would.

Ian turned around and stared vacantly at the blue-haired coordinator. “Yeah, sure. Just like that white hand grasping your shoulder.” A grin appeared on his face when he could practically see the goosebumps appear on Dawn’s skin as she impulsively swatted at her right shoulder. His grin arched into a devilish smirk when Dawn realized he was just messing with her and glared at him.

“Well, anyway…” Aaron cleared his throat, hoping to change the awkward mood. He looked at Xavier and reminded him, “I believe the birds are still at the Pokémon Center, Professor Ironwood.”

“Ah, right, I still needed to find out what was wrong with them.” The bespectacled professor stated. He looked at Wilma and Renee and told them, “You two go on to the Pokémon Center. I’ll catch up in a minute.”

Wilma nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Try not to find Tenla too boring, mister fifth region.” Renee jested, jabbing a finger into Ash’s chest. She was referring to their earlier discussion when he and Misty first came into the lab pertaining to his reasons for being in Tenla. This made Ash chuckle awkwardly as Renee and Wilma went on their way as instructed.

“So this isn’t your first time around,” Novak said tonelessly, crossing his arms.

“It isn’t for the majority of us,” May explained.

“It’s just some have traveled just a bit more than others,” Jacob stated, folding his hands behind his back as he shifted some of his weight onto one leg.

A light bulb flashed on inside Antia’s head, accompanied by a sudden spike in interest. If Ash and this other guy were apparently as skilled as the previous conservation implied, they would serve as the perfect preview opponents for Tenla. “In that case, you two, my brother and I challenge you!” She declared, pointing at them dramatically.

“I decline,” Aaron replied flatly, yawning. This prompted Antia to fall over onto his face, her limbs in a twisted mass above her. Aaron felt as if he expended enough energy today and went through enough action. Like Ian, he was ready to leave.

Ash smirked as he shook his head, not understanding how Aaron could so nonchalantly deny a battle. “Don’t mind the prude. I’m ready for a challenge any time, any day!”

“Good. Then that means I’ll take you on,” Novak announced austerely.

“Ugh, fine…” Antia groaned, standing up as she exchanged intense gazes between Aaron and Ash. “I’ll get one of you guys later.”

Ash and Novak stood away from each other at a distance approximate to that of an official Pokémon League battlefield. Ash was full of resolve and readiness, hunched over with one foot in front of the other to emphasize his bottled-up excitement. Novak remained straight and tall with his hands in his pockets; cool, calculating, and patient. Misty, Brock, May, Dawn, Aaron, Ian, Jacob, and Antia were off to the side, watching together in silence. Professor Ironwood was stationed on the side opposite to the group of spectators, taking up the role of referee.
"This will be a simple one-on-battle between Ash of Pallet Town and Novak of Zumi Town. A winner will be declared when he renders the other's Pokemon unable to continue battling." Xavier gave each trainer a nod to let them know they could send out their Pokemon.

He removed his Poke Ball from his bag and threw it out. "Shall we, Transpy?" The Translucent Pokemon was released onto the field, the Water type humming as it floated in its spot.

"Pikachu won't be able to fight at full strength since it fought against Team Hectic." Ash muttered under his breath. It was a good thing he encountered and caught Rockler or else this battle would've been a bad idea. As he reached to get Rockler's Poke Ball, he suddenly felt weight shift on his arm. "Huh?"

Before he knew it, Gouzatile had jumped off Ash's arm and landed on the battlefield, facing Transpy. "(I am your opponent.)" It declared confidently as Transpy narrowed its eyes.

Ash blinked in surprise. "Gouzatile?"

"(I decided to try this out.)" Gouzatile stated, keeping its focus on the Water type, "(If this doesn’t work out, I can always leave.)"

Ash smiled. It seemed he was able to wrench open Gouzatile's closed heart enough so that it would accept him. It was a start, and Ash was glad that Gouzatile was ready to fight by his side. With a knowing smile, he looked to Professor Ironwood as the older man tossed him Gouzatile's Poke Ball, finalizing their relationship as trainer and Pokemon.

"Then I'll choose you! Gouzatile!" The Salamander Pokemon in front of him, hissing readily as traces of fire exited its mouth. "Now don't think type advantages will net you a victory, Novak."

"And why not? They're called type advantages for a reason, you know." Novak replied, arching a curious brow.

Ian crossed his arms as he exchanged neutrals between the two trainers. "If I were Ash, I would have stuck with Pikachu. I mean, why forgo using your strongest?"

"Well, Ash needs to train his weaker Pokemon still, Ian," Brock answered as he glanced between Transpy and Gouzatile, "Though, you may still have a point. As both of them said, type is involved in this match, and it's against Ash."

"No need to worry! I'm sure Ash has this!" Dawn said optimistically.

"Begin."

"Gouzatile! Use Leer!" Ash ordered. The Fire type starter narrowed its eyes, staring its fellow Starter Pokemon dead in the eyes. Transpy shivered, using one of its fins to block out the sight. "Good. We lowered its Defense."

"I wonder...Does that mean Gouzatile is physically inclined?" Novak thought. He waved his arms as he uttered a command, "Transpy, Water Gun!" The Translucent Pokemon recovered and fired a fast jet of water from its mouth.
"Dodge and use Ember!" Ash commanded. Gouzatile sidestepped the Water Gun, avoiding it. Before it had a chance to fire its attack, Transpy continued to launch Water Guns, not giving it the chance. However, the Salamander Pokemon remained adamant, dodging all the jets of water that threatened to land a connection as it got closer to the Water type. Gouzatile jumped high into the air after dodging yet another Water Gun and finally unleashed Ember, sending down an outward shower of red-orange sparks from its mouth. Transpy squeaked in distress as the Fire-type move showered down on it. "Alright! We got a hit!" Ash shouted, pumping his fist.

"See! I told you!" Dawn exclaimed excitedly.

"Well, Ash is Ash. He and his Pokemon do go against the odds," Misty commented, laughing a little.

"Now use Scratch while it's distracted!" Ash commanded. Gouzatile landed on the ground and lunged at Transpy, furiously swiping its claws at the Water type and landing several successive strikes. Each one prompted upset cries from the Translucent Pokemon. Novak watched on as he frowned, cursing at how his initial plan of action might not work due to Ash and his Gouzatile's unrelenting straightforwardness.

"One more Ember!"

"Back up."

Gouzatile once again unleashed its Fire type move; however, Transpy was able to react quickly enough avoid. The Water type panted a little bit, parts of its skin and fin singed and smudged from Embers and Scratches. The Salamander Pokemon smirked superiorly and blew off to the side, liking how the battle was progressing so far. It felt good to show this Transpy it was just as capable as it was despite people opting for it as a starter.

May pumped a fist. "I think Ash has a good chance of winning if he keeps this up!"

"So you think." Antia disagreed, her arms resting in the small of her back.

Throughout it all, Brock, Ian, and Aaron stayed quiet as they all shifted their gazes to Novak. The focused intensity inside his eyes meant he was not ready to surrender and had something in mind. The girls, sans Antia, may be optimistic about Ash's success, but there was something about Novak that prevented the boys from sharing the same sentiments.

"Fine. Let's do this then. Water Sport." Novak ordered. Transpy summoned a blue ball in front of its mouth, and a fountain of water subsequently sprayed out into the air from it. The water thoroughly dowsed the battlefield with water, making it give off a light blue glow, and dampened both Transpy and Gouzatile, much to the latter's chagrin.

Ash frowned, wondering what the point of such a move was. Nonetheless, he had to continue pressing forward. "Ember!" Gouzatile opened its mouth and launched a small stream of red-orange sparks again. However, as the Ember advanced, it weakened considerably and, by the time it reached Transpy, it was nothing more than a few bright cinders. In fact, it was so weak that Transpy barely felt anything, tilting its head quizzically as if it was a way of conveying 'That's all?' Ash’s eyes shrunk in shock. "W-What?! What happened?!!"

"What do you mean 'what happened'? Don't know what Water Sport does?" Novak asked condescendingly, for he expected someone as supposedly experienced as Ash to know the mechanics of this simple move. Ash gritted, not appreciating the insult but nonetheless shook his
head. Novak scoffed silently, opting to not say anything further and deciding to just continue the battle.

"Water Sport reduces base power of Fire-type moves by 67% on both sides in battle," Brock explained. Such a move confirmed his, Aaron's, and Ian's previous suspicions.

"Combine that with Transpy's natural resistance to Fire type moves, and there's no wonder why Ember did so little." Jacob stated.

"Me and my bro may be rookie trainers, but that doesn't mean we think like rookies," Antia proclaimed with a smirk as she rocked back and forth on her feet. As she spoke, Ash ordered Gouzatile to use Scratch only for Transpy to use the slick and watery ground to swim and glide about at fast speeds, avoiding each and every Scratch and frustrating Ash and Gouzatile with each miss. "We've studied under Professor Ironwood for a year. We know as much as we need to know about Pokémon from the professor himself. And my brother Novak may sometimes overcomplicate things, but you can't deny he's got some brains." Antia watched proudly as the tables turned radially Novak's Transpy fired Bubble attacks left and right with Ash's Gouzatile barely managing to dodge them. Her smirk widened when one Bubble actually hit. "He likes to step back and look at the bigger picture and go from there. Why did you think he suddenly started shutting down Ash and Gouzatile?"

"So he's an analyst," Aaron remarked, "Those types of Pokémon battlers examine things critically so as to bring out the essential elements and accordingly manipulate them to reach a clear goal or end in mind."

"Oh, man, but there's only so much Gouzatile can do though!" May said, nervously watching her friend and his Gouzatile struggle against Novak and Transpy.

"Well that just sucks for him," Antia said nonchalantly, "'Course, I don't really prefer analyzing. I like being flexible and adapting to situations."

"That would make you an experientialist. Experience is knowledge to you guys," Brock expounded, responding to Antia's style of battle with information she would hopefully keep for future reference. However, hearing that about Nova and Antia made him wonder about their success in the future. Sure, their studies increased their own skills, but that did nothing for their eventual Pokémon partners. Citing a metaphor, they were simply baseball players who never used a bat.

"Gouzatile! Use Leer!" Ash commanded, pointing to Transpy after it stopped moving. Gouzatile narrowed its eyes viciously, its frustration fueling the efficacy of its intense gaze.

"Enough of that. Bubble," Novak enjoined. The Translucent quickly sprayed a foam of bubbles from its mouth before it made eye contact with Gouzatile's Leer. The Salamander Pokemon's eyes widened as the foam of bubbles hit it dead in the face, blinding it and causing damage. "Let's put an end to this, shall we?" Novak smirked, "Water Gun." Transpy fired a jet of spiraling water, putting the rest of its energy into this move. By the time Gouzatile shook the foam off of its face, Water Gun hit its mark. The Water-type attack dragged Gouzatile across the ground with enough force to leave a crevice in the ground before Transpy ceased. The Fire type wasn't moving it; it was down for the count.

"Gouzatile isn't unable to battle. Transpy is the winner, and the victory goes to Novak."

"Hope he likes swallowing that bitter pill." Ian commented, snickering as he watched Ash run over
to check on the welfare of his Gouzatile.

"Oh well… at least Ash tried. He'll get better." Misty said consolingly.

"Excellent, Transpy. Come back." Novak held up a Poke Ball and recalled the Translucent Pokemon back into it, putting the device away into his bag. He felt a sense of pride well up in him; he had just bested someone who travelled to and competed in four regions prior to Tenla. It seemed that one-year apprenticeship under Professor Ironwood did wonders. Satisfied, Novak decided it was time to go but had to say one last thing. “Ketchum.” He called out, crossing his arms, "Hit the books, Ash. If you don't, I will automatically always be a step ahead of you.” He turned around and started to walk off, holding up to two fingers in a salutatory manner, “Dos vidaniya.”

Ash gritted his teeth as he stood up with Gouzatile in his arms. He never appreciated it when someone talked down to him. There was nothing wrong with his battling style, and his numerous victories and achievements attested to that. Just then, Antia suddenly popped into his line of slight, granting him little to or no personal space. "You better improve!” She exclaimed, almost causing a startled Ash to fall back, “Cuz next time it's my turn, and I don't wanna be disappointed!” She then quickly skipped away, heading off to catch up with her departing twin, “Do svidaniya~”

Ash was later joined by his friends with Brock remarking good-naturedly, “Well, they seem like quite the characters, huh?”

“Yet they’re dedicated,” Xavier said as he too walked over. He left his statement at that, for he wanted to see how far Novak and Antia would go with their preparation and knowledge. With that done, it was time to move onto other pressing matters. “Listen, everyone, I suggest heading to the Pokémon Center to get Gouzatile healed up. While you’re at it, that’s where you will register if you want to participate in the Tenla League and any Contests.” He explained as he turned his back to them, heading back into his lab but not before giving the trainers one last piece of advice.

“Be careful on your journey and use your best judgment out there. If you need to make a difficult decision, and you let someone else decide for you, you will regret it, no matter how it turns out.”
The Journey Begins

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This chapter was originally apart of the next one, but I decided it look better by itself, standing alone as a transitional chapter.

The Journey Begins

“This emergency Tenla Government meeting has now come to order.”

The lights abovehead flickered on one-by-one with heavy claps; although, they did very little to light up the dim conference room. The walls were painted black, complementing the blackwood floor and shimmering in the dull light from the lamps hanging from the ceiling. One wall was comprised of large, heavily tinted windows, preventing the sunset's canvas of orange, yellow, and red from eliminating some of the shadowiness inside the meeting room.

In the middle was a large, black table styled like a horseshoe: a near-perfect oval save for the indentation at the topmost end. It accommodated fourteen stuffed conference chairs, all of which seated adult men and woman garbed in similar business suits. Occupying the indentation was a large, blackwood podium reminiscent of a judge’s.

Seated there was a large, imposing, and fair-skinned man of around fifty-one years of age, sporting a square shaped face, very pronounced facial features, and short black hair. He was garnished with a white, double-breasted suit sporting black trim and edges with matching pants, a black belt, and black boots. Interestingly, the left sleeve of his suit featured the imprints of intertwining, orange-brown vines, matching the color of the eyes that grimly examined his subordinates. By his side were his ever-faithful Pyroar and Manectric.

“My fellow ministers,” he spoke with a deep drawl, “I call this meeting bearing unfortunate news, coming straight from the Officer Jenny stationed in Zumi Town.” He leaned back in his seat as he crossed his arms, letting loose a heavy sigh of irritation, “It appears Team Hectic is active once again.”

Low murmuring resonated throughout the conference room. All regions seemingly had their own criminal syndicate trying to undermine them, but the ministers of the Tenla Government loathed the fact that theirs, Team Hectic, was part of Tenla’s history that they wished was kept buried. A few were concerned, some were pensive, and there were one or two ministers expressing irritation like the boss himself.

“Head Minister Kizuzaki,” one of the male ministers said, calming down some of the commotion, “What do you propose the government do about this?”
Before Kizuzaki could speak, another minister interjected, “However, it is inadvisable to repeat our orders from five years ago. Such a drastic measure amounted to little to nothing.” Evidently, it was time for discussion and compromise as a few other ministers added in their own input.

“We cannot pull punches against that legion of lowlifes and criminals. It is our duty as ministers of the Tenla Government to eradicate those fiends.”

“It is also our duty to protect the citizens and maintain popular opinion. Tenlans did not particularly react well after everything was said and done.”

“They’re also scared of their own shadows knowing that Team Hectic is back to do whatever they want.”

“The fact of the matter is that we must take some sort of action.”

“Perhaps we should enlist the help of the police forces of other regions?”

“And get them involved? Oh, I can only imagine the backlash of such procedures… We’re better off appealing to the International Police.”

Two soft but authoritative growls were heard, silencing further dialogue between the ministers. Pyroar and Manectric were responsible for that, but they ceased when Kizuzaki caressed their heads tenderly. Evidently, the Head Minister was ready to give out his verdict.

“Truly it would bring me no more pleasure than to stamp out Team Hectic once and for all,” He said, standing up straight as he crossed his arms, “However, we cannot be careless. We are unaware of how they will conduct themselves henceforth. So, it would behoove us to watch them carefully. At the same time, we should have our forces prepped and ready when Team Hectic operatives do surface. Catch them in the act, and we could learn what their ulterior motives are.”

“And what of our citizens?” A minister asked critically.

“For the time being, it is best that they aren’t made privy of Team Hectic. The last thing we need to deal with is a regional public frenzy.” Kizuzaki explained. The ministers were seemingly pleased with the justification, for no other questions were asked. One-by-one, the lights were shut off, darkness consuming the conference room yet again.

“Then, this meeting is adjourned.”

After bidding farewell to Aaron, Ian, Jacob, and Professor Ironwood, Ash and company made their final trip to the Zumi Town Pokémon Center. Gouzatile was nursed back to health in no time. During the wait, Ash, Dawn, and May were registered by Nurse Joy, permitting them entry into the Tenla League and Tenla Contest Halls respectively. When that was done, the group found themselves in the park. Cleanup had long been underway, fixing up and removing most of the damaged objects in the park to the point people were allowed there again. Though, most of the day’s activity was stunted due to the twilight slowly giving way for dusk.

Ash and company had released all of the Pokemon they currently had with them. Transpy,
Swampert, and Azumarill were relaxing in the fountain; Pikachu, Rockler, Piplup were playing tag; and Blaziken and Gouzatile were off to the side, minding their own business and thinking to themselves. The humans were with each other, sitting together using a bench that was also near the fountain. They were killing time since the day was ending, seeing no use leaving Zumi Town like Aaron and his posse questionably did. Their defense was that they would catch up on their sleep when they reached Morwenna City, claiming that they pulled off late-night travelling before.

“Aw, man, May! You came so close this time!” Ash exclaimed. They were discussing about May’s performance in the Johto Region. Apparently, she had procured the runner-up spot.

“Yeah… Though, I figured Lisia would beat me since she was the one who eliminated Solidad.” May sheepishly admitted, rubbing the back of her head, "Doesn't help that she's already a Contest Idol. This was just the cherry on top for her."

“Don’t feel bad, May. Zoey beat me in the Grand Festival, so I guess the both of us were a bit outta luck.” Dawn said amicably. However, the two coordinators had a mutual understanding that improvement was a necessity. That was why they were in Tenla now.

“How’s Max doing?” Brock inquired, looking at May again.

“Still helping out at the Petalburg Gym.” May answered, smiling proudly, “Though, you won’t believe this. He owns some Pokemon now. Like the Ralts we found on our way to Sootopolis City. Then, Alex from Rinshin Town gave him the Shroomish he befriended in that abandoned mansion.”

“Man, before I know it, Max will be battling me.” Ash said awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. It was not ‘awkward’ in the sense it was uncomfortable, but ‘awkward’ in that it was funny. The enthusiastic boy that loved Pokemon during his Hoenn adventures would be a trainer like him.

“Hey, Misty?” Dawn piped up inquisitively, “You’re the Cerulean City Gym Leader, right? What’s it like?”

“Work. And a lot of it.” Misty groused, resting her chin in her hand as she propped her arm, “First, there are the challengers. Then, there’s maintenance, which is extra hard since my gym uses Water Pokemon.”

“I can imagine the backaches from cleaning up a pool full of Water Pokemon.” May said sympathetically.

“You don’t know the half of it…” Misty sighed as her spine thumped in remainder of such endeavors.

As the humans continued to converse, Pikachu, Piplup, and Rockler took a brief break from their game of tag to engage in a talk of their own. Rockler perched itself on the stony rim of the fountain as it gazed down to the two Pokemon, “(If I may inquire, what are the various idiosyncrasies and characteristics of this ensemble?)”

“(Do you have to talk like that?)” Piplup asked distastefully, throwing a deadpan look at the Strength Pokemon.

“(I apologize. It is a habit of mine that I have no control over.)” Rockler replied shamelessly, rubbing the back of its head with its wing.
"(Don’t mind Piplup, Rockler.)" Pikachu reassured, ignoring the look at the Water type was throwing his way, "(Well… it’s never a dull moment here. That’s for sure. There’s always something new between meeting new people, battles, Team Rocket somehow locating us no matter where we are.)"

"(Beg your pardon?)" Rockler questioned, wanting more clarification on who Team Rocket was.

"(Don’t worry. If my hunch is correct, you’ll find out later.)" Pikachu answered.

"(Anyway.)" Piplup piped in, "(Since you come from Tenla, what's it like?)"

"(Ah, yes. A brief overview of our fair region…)" Rockler placed a wing under its beak, imitating someone cupping his or her chin as it recalled from experience, "(Well, for one, the weather pattern is erratic. Most places are fairly normal. Then, there are various locations that have a sort of perpetual phenomena; a few areas are always cold, same with some being rainy. So it would behoove the lot of us to prepare adequately.)"

"(Are you serious?)" It wasn’t just Pikachu and Piplup that said that. The Water Pokemon relaxing in the fountain heard that as well.

"(Don't like it, turn back around.)" Gouzatile asserted, not moving from his spot on top of a mailbox.

Rockler shot a dull look to the Fire type, "(There is no need to be brusque, Gouzatile.)"

Around this time, the functional streetlights turned on, and the sun crept ever so slightly beneath the horizon. Brock took note of this and spoke up, "Hey, guys, we had better go back to the Pokémon Center. It's getting dark out, and we need our rest for tomorrow."

Everyone nodded in agreement and stood up, recalling all of their Pokemon into their Poke Balls. Pikachu positioned himself on Ash's shoulder while Misty and Dawn kept Transpy and Piplup in their arms. "Well, the journey officially begins tomorrow," Ash said excitedly. Even though it was understood, he still needed confirmation. He looked at all of his past traveling companions, united into one big group, "Right, guys?"

"You bet!" Dawn said with a wink.

"Wouldn't miss it!" May held up a 'V-for-victory' sign.

"Time to see what a new region brings!" Misty stated happily as she held out her hand. Everyone gathered around and placed their hands on Misty's, forming a circle of friendship.

“To fighting lots of battles and meeting lots of people!” Brock added in as Pikachu and Piplup extended their short, stubby arms to the focal point of the circle, all hands together now.

“Good friends, together!” Ash grinned.

“TENLA, HERE WE COME!” Everyone shouted, throwing their hands into the air. A pact was made then and there under the budding stars and dying sun.
For what seemed hours, Team Rocket had been flying through the air and only recently did they finally land on the ground. The impact was unpleasant, and a few sessions with a chiropractor might be needed, but that was beside the point. Even with the setbacks, the three found solace in the fact that they successfully pilfered the bags of Poke Balls from Team Hectic.

“All right, now before we forget, let’s call the boss and let him know about our success.” Jessie suggested to her two male partners, who curtly nodded. That was the whole reason why they performed the theft; so that their boss would be impressed.

They set the bags near them as Meowth removed a rectangular device from his person and pressed one of the two grey buttons on it. Almost instantly, Giovanni, the boss of Team Rocket and former Gym Leader of Viridian City, appeared on the screen. He frowned, not immediately recognizing the trio. Nonetheless, he addressed them, “What could you possibly want? I’m in the middle of something.”

“G-Greetings, boss, sir!” Jessie greeted uneasily. She cleared her throat to regain her composure before continuing, “This is Jessie, James, and Meowth reporting to inform you that we have some Pokemon for you.” She and her male companions moved aside briefly to showcase the bags with the Poke Balls bulging out from the surface. Giovanni nodded tersely but said nothing else. In fact, his expression did not change. While Pokemon were invaluable to their services, he had operatives doing so almost weekly.

"But that's not at all!" James added in, sensing their boss's displeasure. This was a tidbit of information they could not neglect to tell. "We stole them from people who called themselves Team Hectic, so they are indeed worthy."

"What?!" Giovanni bellowed out of nowhere. Such an uncharacteristic response almost made Jessie, James, and Meowth jump out of their skins. "Does that mean you three are in the Tenla Region?!"

"Uh, y-yes sir?" They replied cautiously.

"Tell me everything you know. What was going with Team Hectic?" Giovanni ordered, his interest piqued.

Jessie, James, and Meowth took the time to explain everything that happened on their side of Zumi Town, putting in their own assumptions where appropriate. The scowl that was on Giovanni’s face gradually disappeared. He was pleased to hear that three of his subordinates assisted in putting down an operation of Team Hectic while taking away their spoils.

"Excellent," Giovanni remarked once the debriefing was finished, "We've no one to monitor the Tenla Region, so good job. Now listen up. Since you three are the first to report of Team Rocket’s presence in Tenla, it is imperative that you notify me of any activity in that region that I should be aware of, especially if Team Hectic is responsible. Do I make myself clear?"

“Crystal clear, sir!” Jessie, James, and Meowth replied simultaneously while saluting.

“Excellent,” He replied, satisfied to know that business was being put in motion, “Giovanni out.” With that, the boss of Team Rocket hung up.

“This is like a dream come true!” Meowth said elatedly, “Now that we’re the first ones on the scene in Tenla, we have ourselves on opportunity to become big shots!”
Jessie, James, and Meowth got up and pranced around in a celebratory manner, cheering at the glimpse of light at the end of their dark tunnel. This was the beginning of something they wanted for the longest. But they had to stay diligent; since it seemed trouble always found the twerps, they would continue to tail them until they got more leads on Team Hectic. For now, they had to wait for someone to pick up these Poke Balls. However, in the midst of their merriment, something escaped all three of them.

What did Giovanni want with Tenla? Better yet, why was he so interested in Team Hectic?
Setting the Planning Field

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Setting the Planning Field

Morning graced Zumi Town with its bright and sunny presence. As soon as it did, Ash and company got dressed, packed up, and headed out. Nurse Joy informed them that they should arrive in Morwenna City within the day because the walk there was relatively short. The only obstacle was Morwenna Forest, but there was a straight path cutting through it unless they decided to explore the forest to train or catch some of the Pokemon there.

Currently, the group walked through a plain. The ground was flat, and it stretched as far as the eye could see. It had been awhile since the gang had left Zumi Town for Morwenna City, and they had covered a considerable amount of distance. In the meantime, they decided to resume their conversation from the park in Zumi Town.

"You're a doctor now, Brock?!" May and Misty exclaimed, gaping at their oldest friend.

The breeder in question rubbed the back of his head. "Well, not really. I'm studying to become one in Pewter City."

Ash decided to expound further on the subject, seeing as both girls deserved the right to know. "It all started when me, Brock, and Dawn were on our way back to Twinleaf Town after the Lily of the Valley Conference. Some Pokemon got poisoned by a Tentacruel, and Brock cured them all. Nurse Joy suggested he become a Pokémon Doctor after everything was said and done, and he took the offer later on."

Misty smiled at him. "I'm so glad to hear your career is getting off to a good start, Brock."

"It's funny how things happen with time," May commented, folding her hands behind her back as she looked to the sky. Everyone did too, admiring it as they reminisced on how much they had grown and went through pass the years. To think, they were only still teenagers with much more of life ahead of them. It was going feel even weirder later down the road when would inevitably do this again. Now that they looked at it, the sky was beautiful today.

Minus the streams of energy suddenly blazing over the horizon.

Ash rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating. "Did you guys see that?"
"I think so…" Dawn replied unsurely. She exchanged glances between Pipigup and Pikachu, wanting to get a second opinion for members of a different species. "Pikachu, Pipigup, what about you two?"

It happened again.

"(Yep,)" the two Pokemon said, feeling that their input was now irrelevant.

Ash started running. "C'mon, let's go check it out!"

As everybody hustled, something appeared over the horizon. It was a mass of treetops whose perfectly green flora seemed to glow in the sunlight. The area was as wide as the eyes could see. Soon, Ash and company entered this forest, encountering a variety of foliage, vines, and moss. The plant life was diverse in type, ranging from normal deciduous or coniferous trees to flowering stumps and shrubs. To top it all off, nature set the forest up so that the sunrays would hit parts of it just right, highlighting the beauty of it all.

Farther down the trail, there was a circular clearing connected to the path. In the middle of it was a grassy patch of land that housed a large grayish-green rock covered in thick moss. Here was where the streams of energy were coming from. Right in front of it, a Doyubi and Leafeon butted heads, growling like wild animals, while a Minccino and Gloom laid on the ground coated in ice. Tending to them was a fifteen-year-old girl with magenta hair and sunshine yellow eyes. She wore an apricot blouse with light rose-colored accents and designs, a knee-length rose skirt, and matching shoes.

Leafeon pushed forward, brown eyes boring into black. "(I am getting sick and tired of that thing misbehaving every time Yoshino lets it out!)" Who knew coming here just to evolve and train would lead to something like this, it thought. "(He needs to be released!)")"

Doyubi pushed back, ready to continue if it meant his viewpoint would prevail. "(You of all Pokemon should know that’s not how we do things here! Give it time.)"

"(How much time?!)

"(Not enough!)

Approaching cautiously, the gang entered the scene. Dawn then asked, "We saw something. Is everything fine?"

All the fighting temporarily ceased as the girl and her Pokemon looked at the newcomers. The magenta-haired trainer took a moment to examine the people and think about what was heard. "Oh, uh… You saw that?"

Leafeon gave Doyubi a sideways glance. "(Gee. I wonder what was the cause.)"

The corner of Doyubi’s mouth twitched, trying to suppress a sneer. "(Let’s act nice in front of the strangers. Can we do that much?)"

Pikachu’s ears drooped, disliking the sight of two comrades arguing. "(I see this is a nice, happy family.)"

The first thing Brock noticed, other than Yoshino’s beauty, was the Minccino and Gloom in their condition. Judging from the slightest redness in her eyes, something happened to make her sad or stressed out. "Let me see.” Brock rushed over to Minccino and Gloom, examining them carefully.
Labored breathing, lowered temperatures – the work of a dangerous Ice-type. Brock looked at her. “Do you mind if I help?”

She shook her head. “If you can.”

Brock smiled, released Croagunk and Chansey, and got to work. First, Croagunk shattered and removed the ice. Brock then treated them with Yache Berries while Chansey used Softboil to make Minccino and Gloom healthy. Everyone marveled at how quickly Brock attended to the injured Pokemon. In no time flat, Yoshino’s Minccino and Gloom were nursed back to normal, up on their feet.

"Oh thank goodness." Yoshino breathed a sigh of relief, smiling when Minccino and Gloom walked up to receive head pats. "Thanks for coming to our aid."

"You’re very welcome." Brock went over to the woman, kneeling down to caress one of her hands in both of his. Gloom whined at the discontinued head-patting. "We, especially me, will never hesitate to help out a person in need. Dear me, what is the name of our lovely damsel in distress?"

"It's Yoshino," she replied. Though, her tone dropped a little, showing that she did not like being called a damsel in distress.

Sensing its trainer's uneasiness, Yoshino's Doyubi sprang into action, leaping at Brock. It drove its teeth and claws right into Brock's arm with a loud chomp. "Yeeeeeowwwchhh!" The doctor-to-be jumped so badly, he shot himself about ten feet into the air before landing on his head with a loud thud. Transpy, Dawn, and Ash found it extremely difficult not to burst out laughing while Piplup was already rolling around on the ground guffawing without mercy.

Pikachu and Leafeon flinched slightly at the sound. "(That had to hurt."

May watched Doyubi jump into Yoshino's arm, yipping affectionately when she petted it after a reprimand. "Y-yikes..."

"Er, sorry about that." Yoshino bowed apologetically. "Doyubi's... kind of protective."

"A Doyubi, huh?" Ash's first instinct was to remove his Pokédex and scan the creature he had never seen before.

"Doyubi: The Twin-Tailed Pokemon. Doyubi's appearance is addictively beautiful. It has sharp teeth that can tear apart iron and is not afraid to use them when hunting prey."

"Putting all that beside us," Misty spoke up, thinking the situation was getting off-topic. And weirder. The redhead eyed Yoshino inquiringly. "What exactly was going on?"

Immediately, Yoshino developed an alibi inside her head. Thankful she was for their thoughtfulness, the truth was a private matter. "Everything was normal when my Pokemon and I were out here training. I evolved my Eevee using the Moss Rock. Then, this Pokemon came out of nowhere acting aggressive. Gloom and Minccino got caught in the crossfire, but I managed to catch and placate it." She offered a confident smile of reassurance. "No biggie."

Leafeon rolled its eyes, muttering under its breath, "(Say that to my—)"

Doyubi slapped Leafeon upside its head with one of its tail. "(Watch your mouth.)"
The Grass-type, already on edge from the prior encounter, whipped around to glare at the Twin-Tailed Pokemon. The mere act triggered the fellow canine, who returned the gesture. Tilting its head at the sight, Transpy swam out of the Misty’s arms and landed near the two. “(Now, now, you two. No need to be hostile, ignorant boobs with no sense of common decency.)”

Pikachu’s jaw dropped at the audacious comment, Doyubi and Leafeon slowly turning to face Transpy as everyone else gawked, unsure of what to do. Smiling innocently, Transpy kept going, “(Why must you resort to violence? A fair maiden like myself really despises savages. Be more like me! I am a relaxed soul. I probably know how to stay calm more than you two barbarians. Don't we already fight enough? I don't understand the appeal.)”

“(Shots fired,)” Minccino declared.

Doyubi gave Transpy and her smiling mug a sustained glare before looking over to Leafeon. “(Truce?)”

Leafeon nodded. “(Truce.)”

A titter rippled from the Water-type. “(A truce? Goodie! You guys can actually compromise. Now let’s all hold hands or appendages and——)” Two loud thwacks sounded, silencing Transpy, who now lay on the ground with two large bumps protruding from her head. Smirking, satisfied with themselves and no longer hostile to one another, Doyubi and Leafeon pranced over to the rest of Yoshino’s Pokemon, done making a scene.

Piplup took deep, calming breaths, feeling his chest well with impulses of laughter, so he could talk coherently. “(Well, the moral of this story is ‘when you have two sides feuding, give them a common enemy to beat up instead each of other.’)”

Pikachu hung his head in shame. “(That's a terrible message.)”

After Misty picked up her Transpy, Yoshino rushed in front of her, got down on her knees, and repeatedly bowed. “I’m terribly, terribly sorry! This whole day has been one stroke of bad luck for me and now it’s rubbed off on you! Please accept my one thousand apologies!” She straightened up and clasped her hands together prayerfully. “Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry——”

“No, no, no!” Misty placed a hand on Yoshino’s, stopping her. She couldn’t believe she was actually going to do it. “It’s fine, it’s fine! She had it coming anyway.”

Yoshino stood on her feet again, a hand behind her head, embarrassed and feeling awkward. “O-Okay. I’m really sorry. Perhaps we should part ways. I have a Pokemon Contest to prepare for tomorrow. Please excuse me.”

May’s interest was piqued. “Wait. You’re a Coordinator?”

“Where is it being held?” Dawn asked immediately after, gaining a desire to get started collecting Ribbons.

Glad to be on a more lighthearted subject, Yoshino looked at the two girls. “Why, yes, I am. It’s happening in my hometown of Morwenna City. You didn’t know?”

“We just came here because Ash here wanted to challenge the Gym Leader,” Brock explained, a
thought crossing his mind afterwards, “On that note, I don’t think we’ve told you our names.”

Everyone took turns introducing themselves. Once she identified them, Yoshino bowed in a ladylike fashion to show her respects. “Nice to meet everyone.” She was then struck with an idea, one that would kill two birds in one stone. “I need to repay my debt. Payment for your services are my services. I come from Morwenna City, so stick with me and you’ll get around just fine.”

“Oh wow! You’d that for us, Yoshino?” An ecstatic Ash asked.

She responded with a confirmatory nod. “Of course.” The magenta-haired coordinator returned all of her Pokemon to her Poke Balls. “No hard feelings here.”

Now that everything had been settled in Morwenna Forest, Ash and company were able to clear the rest of the trail. Soon, dirt was replaced with concrete, and the number of trees decreased. The next thing they encountered was a large ornate sign painted blue and silver. Everyone except Yoshino read it.

*Welcome to Morwenna City*

*The city that grows inward instead of outward*

A few more steps, and the group found themselves at the top of a flight of steps. Thanks to their hilltop position, they were rewarded with a large, panoramic view of Morwenna City. The centralized cityscape revolved around a giant city park. With the exceptions of the roads, the ground within the city was composed of a special-looking concrete, colored silver and light brown, meshed together to form diamond patterns. There were many buildings, but none of them were that tall. The sole exception was the large Contest Hall in westernmost outskirts of Morwenna City. Finally, and most importantly, there was an enormous lake resting over to the east.

Ash noticed every single part of the city. "Wow…" He wondered how Morwenna City appeared from an inside perspective, walking through the streets and seeing what was there to offer, "You live in a beautiful city."

"Why thank you, Ash." As a resident, such a comment filled Yoshino with pride. She led everyone down the steps. "But Morwenna City isn't famous for its appearance, but rather, its aquatic involvement."

Those two words instantly made Misty's interest skyrocket, being a water enthusiast and all, but it was Dawn that ultimately asked Yoshino, "What do you mean by that?"

The Morwenna City resident explained further, "That lake you guys can still see. That's the city's famous Morwenna Lake. Marina religiously uses it for entertainment using her Water Pokemon, holding special shows every week."

May blinked owlishly. "Marina?"

"She would be the city's Gym Leader," Yoshino answered.

"Well, that was easy," Ash remarked. With Yoshino as their tour guide for Morwenna City, things really would be easier – case in point, Ash already knew the name of the person he was going to inevitably challenge.

"First things first, we should head to the Pokémon Center," Brock suggested, "We should get settled
in. With both a Gym and a Contest to go to, we don’t know how long we’ll be here.” When everyone agreed, the breeder and doctor turned to Yoshino. “Where would the Pokémon Center be?”

“It’s near the Contest Hall.”

At this point, the group walked along the street, both people and Pokemon all around them. “Cool,” Dawn remarked, getting mentally ready for the campaign ahead, “That’ll give me and May a chance to scout out the competition.”

“Not to rain on your parade…” Misty spoke carefully, noticing a slight problem in the procedures, "But, Dawn and May, are you both going to enter the contest? Won’t you two get in each other’s way? I mean, what about future contests when things get down to the wire?”

The two girls stopped dead in the works, realizing what Misty meant. "….Oh."

"Yeah, you two should rotate turns,” Brock recommended, ”That way, you guys could bide your time appropriately. After all, no sense in the both of you entering when only one can win."

"Yeah, leave those kinda stakes for the Grand Festival,” Ash added in, smirking competitively. That’d keep things exciting.

Dawn and May nodded in agreement, thinking that was best. They didn’t want the pressure of rivalry impeding on their friendship. Just then, the Twinleaf Town resident got an idea. "Oh! May, I know the perfect way to rotate our turns!" When the brunette looked at her questioningly, Dawn presented her the Poketch on her wrist. "I have a Coin Toss app on my Poketch. Let’s use that.

"Okay!" May beamed and then said preemptively, "I call heads!"

"Tails for me then." Dawn glided her finger across the interactive touch-screen interface of her Poketch until she reached the proper application. "Here we go." She tapped the screen, prompting the coin to flip in the air several times before landing on heads. "Aww, you're up, May."

May jumped in the air. "All right!"

Yoshino eyed the brunette from the corner of her eyes. “So that’s my target, eh?” While May will be just one out of a many competitors, Yoshino intended to learn what she could – how she carried herself, her style, her kind of Pokemon. It’d give her an edge over a potential obstacle.

That decided, it was time for everyone to head to the Pokémon Center. Yoshino still leading the way, the group took in the sights; they were in no hurry. The road they were on now was hugged by various, stylized buildings with people going in and out of them and walking casually down the sidewalks. Soon, they reached a stone archway where intricate metal writing was on the arc, giving travelers the name of the street and denoting the entrance to the park.

“Everyone, welcome to Morwenna Central Park.”

Chapter End Notes
This is a seriously and heavily edited version of what I used to have. The final version you just read doesn’t come close to the amount of content it was supposed to have (both in N&A and the original Great Adventure). It was supposed to have a small two-parter about quelling a feud between two different Pokemon factions housed in Morwenna Forest, but I kept getting hit with writer’s block trying to finish it with my new style of writing. So, rather than waste time, I abridged it. You honestly missed nothing, everything I wanted to show you got, and even better, we get to move on to Morwenna City.
The Aquatic Acrobat: Marina

Chapter Notes

If the last two chapters were too short or boring, hopefully this one will be a change of pace. Longer one with some action. And more exposition. I mean, hey, Tenla’s gotta get fleshed out somehow, you know!

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The Aquatic Acrobat: Marina

“Everyone, welcome to Morwenna Central Park.”

Despite the city’s hustle and bustle, the park was quiet and pure thanks to its wideness and vegetation. The city itself was shut off by space with colorful flowers and grass. These plants were always in order and clipped well. It was very shady with its many tall trees, and most of the benches around were occupied. People used the park for various purposes. Children had their playground, and adults used many sites for doing exercises. A few vendors also set up shop in a couple places. Their walkways made of the same concrete as in the city proper.

May took note of the people enjoying themselves. “Wow. Look at all these people.”

“It’s only expected,” Yoshino explained as they kept walking, “The park is connected to all five major roads in the city. We just came in through Waterspout Avenue. Maelstrom Road is where we’re going. It’ll take us to the Pokemon Center and the Contest Hall.”

The group reached the center of the park and there stood the main attraction. A giant fountain encircled by sculptures of famous Water Pokemon, each shooting a jet of water into a clear pool that fell into a second one, the sounds of water hitting more a soothing melody.

May marveled the sight, instinctively searching her bag for a camera. “This is so beautiful.”

“Morwenna City is pretty big on water,” Yoshino said, “There’s this fountain, the aquarium on Brinicle Street, the lake, and Marina specializing in Water-types.” She cupped her cheek and sighed, thinking to herself, “Which means heavy rain equals floods.”

“I’m jealous,” Misty said. Cerulean City, despite also having a Water-type Gym, was only known for the Sensational Sisters and their water shows. She then spotted a sign near the fountain, a directory. Walking up to it, she saw that, from the sky, Morwenna Central Park looked like a Poke Ball, and they were in the center. “Wow, that’s pretty clever.”

“Come on, Misty!” Ash called out from afar, catching the redhead’s attention, “We’re leaving!”
“Coming!”

Maelstrom Road led to the suburban part of Morwenna City. Soon, the group finally reached the Pokémon Center, which was only two miles away from the Contest Hall. "And here we are," Yoshino announced as everyone walked through the automatic bidirectional doors, stretching her arms over her head. The group approached the counter and waited for Nurse Joy to appear from the back. Once she did, the pink-haired woman was quick to say, "Oh my. So many here at once. How can I help you?"

Before anyone else, Brock stepped up, cleared his throat, answered her, "Firstly, we would like to turn in our Pokemon for checkups. Secondly, I must inform you that you're looking quite be-"

He felt a tap on his leg. He froze up, hearing slow croaks. It was his Croagunk. "(Get back on track.)"

Brock regained his composure and ignored the amused snickers of his friends and the confused look on Nurse Joy's face. "Uh, sorry about that. What I mean to say is we had a situation across in Morwenna Forest, and the Pokemon of Yoshino here need to be checked out. On that note, we'd like a routine checkup of ours too."

Everyone else turned in their Pokemon – save for Pikachu, who wanted to stay around. “I can certainly do that.” Two Chansey brought out a stretcher, and Yoshino placed her Gloom and Minccino on it. They were healthy thanks to Brock, but it never hurt to get an official checkup for the expert herself. The others lounged around in the lobby, having nothing else to do until they were done. Brock stayed near the counter as Nurse Joy prepped the two. “You know, Nurse Joy,” he spoke, “in case you need me to tell what state I found them in, I sure can come with you.” That wasn’t at all necessary. Internally, he was praying she’d say yes so he could have a chance to be alone with a Nurse Joy.

"GUNK!"

Collapsing, Brock's body contorted as he released a drone of pain from a completely unexpected Poison Jab. Croagunk had a feeling that his trainer's reverie was related to his usual flirtatiousness, so he opted to do something for good measure.

"I swear, Croagunk must have a sixth sense," Dawn remarked as the Poison/Fighting type dragged him away.

Pouting, Misty slumped along the arm of the couch, watching. “Aw man, first Max, now a Croagunk?”

Restless, Ash approached Yoshino and asked, "Hey, Yoshino? Could you show me the city's gym?"

"I certainly can."

Leaving everyone and their Pokemon behind, Ash and Yoshino left the Pokémon Center, retracing their steps back to Morwenna Central Park. Then, they took Brinicle Street. It had a few residences, but it was mostly distinguished by its extensive marketplace. It was brimming with tourists and residents, looking to purchase a variety of merchandise from stores and stands.
Ash eyed a few of them, thinking how a mall was the only thing missing. He laughed to himself. "The girls would sure love to stop by here before we leave."

Yoshino stopped, poked Ash to get his attention, and pointed forward. "There's the gym up ahead."

Ash looked ahead. Brinicle Street stopped at a dead end where the Morwenna City Aquarium stood. He did a double take before looking curiously at the girl. "I don’t get it."

Yoshino chuckled sheepishly. "Marina integrated her Gym into the city's aquarium. BUT! There's an easy access entrance for challengers in the back."

Ash sighed in relief; there were so many people going through the front gate that he thought he’d have to wait forever just to challenge the Gym Leader. Though, he had to admit, the aquarium was quite the sight. Its blue metal-and-glass exterior, along with a strategically placed spire, made it resemble a giant ark. Placed around the exterior was a series of dark blue walls and plates that looked like a wave. The design evoked a majestic ark triumphantly breaking through a mighty wave.

After navigating through the sea of people, Ash and Yoshino reached the back of the aquarium. Sure enough, Ash recognized Pokémon Gym symbol topping an arch amid some of the crystalline architecture. The two walked through the tunnel lit by the custom lights. However, the door shortly beyond it was closed, and it did not open even as Ash and Yoshino approached it.

Ash noticed something plastered onto the door. "Hey, look, there's a note."

Challengers,
I am terribly sorry, but the gym is closed after 4:00 PM today due to the scheduled show tonight.
Any challengers I received after the aforesaid time will be denied.
Terribly sorry for any inconvenience,
Morwenna City Gym Leader, Marina

Ash whipped around to the Pokemon Coordinator, panicking. "Yoshino! What time is it?!"

A quick check, and she replied with a slightly confused tone, "4:41. Why?"

Ash banged his head against the door as Yoshino’s eyes bugged out from the suddenness of the action. "I missed her."

"Y-You missed her?"

Ash removed his face from the door, gesturing to the note, speaking in a whiny tone of voice, "She won't accept any challenges beyond 4:00 PM because of some show!"

"What?" Yoshino sighed exasperatedly, raking her hand through her hair. "You mean she moved her show from yesterday to today? What’s that all about?" Ash looked at her curiously, and she returned the look. "What? Don't you remember when I said Marina usually has shows every week?"

Ash paused for a second to think. Just a second. "Not really."

Yoshino laughed sheepishly at his response. "Well, it's ok. That means she's probably at Morwenna Lake practicing. Looks like we have more walking to do."

"I don't mind!" Ash replied brightly, "Part of what makes travelling so fun is seeing cool places like
Yoshino felt her sense of pride swell up a little since he was referring to her city. "Well, I'm glad to hear you say that. Alright, to head to Morwenna Lake, we must go back and take Electric Sea Boulevard."

And so they did. Electric Sea Boulevard was the busiest and most developed area of Morwenna City. Initially, it consisted of a single but wide, multi-lane thoroughfare. Then, it expanded into three the farther the two went. Yoshino said that both of them eventually curved northward to the city's exit, and one of them to led to a bridge. The one they were currently taking featured a navigable aqueduct as the median.

Soon, they finally arrived at Morwenna Lake, standing at the railing topping the embankment before the shore. Ash marveled at the beauty of the. Not a single ounce of pollution was seen, allowing its amazing blue waters to shine radiantly in the sun. A nice sandy beach finished it all off, which was rather barren since nobody else was around.

The rattling of a chain brought Ash back to earth. He saw Yoshino stepping over the gate, deliberately ignoring the sign. He tensed up. “It says the beach is closed.”

Once over, Yoshino smiled innocently and gestured Ash to follow her. “I know.”

She knew something he didn’t. Rather than stand around and look suspicious, Ash quickly caught up to her. Over yonder, a large stage stood in the water with rows upon rows of seats facing it. Ash squinted his eyes, spotting workers doing maintenance to get the area prepped and ready for the show tonight. “Would she be over there?” he asked.

Yoshino cupped her chin and peered the vicinity. There was no telling where Marina was. “Maaaaybe…”

"Gastrodon, keep using Water Pulse."

Pikachu, who had been casually resting on Ash's shoulder the whole time, lifted his head as his ears twitched, discerning a familiar voice. Instinctively, the yellow mouse jumped off Ash's shoulder and bounded away.

"Pikachu?" Ash felt the sudden decrease in weight on his left shoulder and saw the Electric-type heading in the direction of the stage. Both he and Yoshino quickly followed after, wondering what caught his attention. Soon, they encountered the scene of a Gastrodon lobbying azure spheres of water at a rather interesting specimen. It had a deep brown, trunk-like body with roots acting as legs. In the middle was a half-lidded gold eye. On top of its head was a green, shaggy shrub with a sole twig sticking out like a lightning rod. The creature scurried and sidestepped as quickly as its tiny legs allowed.

"Whoa. What's that?" Ash took out his Pokédex and scanned the specimen.

"Elmicity: The Perennial Pokemon. Elmicity levitates on electromagnetic waves that negate the Earth’s gravity. Because it is also a plant, it sometimes has to manipulate the gravity so that it can release its roots to acquire nutrients and water."

"Well, well, well, look who it is," remarked a stoic voice. Ash and Yoshino looked to see a purple-haired boy walking up to them, causing Gastrodon and Elmicity to cease their sparring match. His
outfit consisted of an unzipped, short-sleeved black jacket with silver hems and a silver hood, a blaze orange T-shirt beneath it, matching slacks, and black and silver travelling shoes.

As if Ash wouldn’t remember his most recent rival. "Paul! W-What are you doing here?!"

Paul raised an eyebrow, rather humored by the fellow trainer's question. "Isn't it obvious? Training to challenge the Gym so I can compete in the conference."

"Paul too," Ash thought reflectively. So, now, he was faced with Gary, Aaron, Nova, Antia, and Paul as competition in this one region. However, this only motivated him more. He would need to try even harder to surpass these people. "For Marina, right?" Ash glanced at Elmicity who was dully staring off to the side.

"That's correct," Paul replied, shoving his hands into the pockets of his pants, "As soon as Marina finishes her practice, we are going to have our battle right quick so she can make the show. Lucky for me, I arrived before she put up her note."

"What?!" Ash’s outburst made Yoshino and Pikachu jump.

"I take it you didn't," Paul said, his expression never changing. Though, Ash could see a twinkle of amusement and triumph in his onyx eyes.

"Well, at least you’re doing it right," Yoshino commented, looking at Paul's Gastrodon and, presumably, his Elmicity. "Marina uses Water types, so getting a Grass and Electric type like Elmicity ready is the way to go. Especially pitting it against a strong one like Gastrodon."

"That was the idea. As soon as I heard about that, I trained my Elmicity little by little," Paul stated. Ash couldn't help but smile. He remembered when Paul callously put his former Chimchar against his crew of powerhouses without a care in the world and when he would release Pokemon that didn't meet his harsh standards. To hear he was humanely training a new addition to his team, but still in his characteristic way, made Ash glad their animosity was gone. He then noticed Paul staring expressionlessly at Yoshino.

She caught that look. "W-What's wrong?"

"What 's wrong? Who are you? If I may ask."

Yoshino felt embarrassed for yammering to a stranger without properly introducing herself. Flustered, she replied, "I-I'm sorry! T-totally inappropriate of me! I'm Yoshino. Nice to meet you!"

"Paul." Looking beyond them, Paul saw a giant entity rising from the lake, releasing a wailing cry as the water splashed loudly around it. It was a Wailord, one of the largest Pokemon alive. Paul smirked slightly, itching for some action. "Here she comes."

"Really?" Ash looked curiously at the Float Whale Pokemon in the distance, watching it as it neared the shoreline.

Meanwhile, Pikachu decided to make small talk with Paul's newest Pokemon. "(Soooo, how did Paul catch you?)" He asked.

Elmicity yawned despite the lack of a visible mouth. "(I let him.)"
"(That easily?) Pikachu asked in disbelief as his ears and tails dropped.

"(I had nothing better to do. Sue me.)" The Perennial Pokemon replied in a laidback tone.

Wailord turned to the side and stopped, and the figure standing atop it slid down its smooth, slippery body. When the person landed on the sand, Paul spoke up, "I assume you are ready for our battle, Marina."

Coming toward the group was a fifteen-year-old woman with long steel blue hair done up in a ponytail and purple eyes. She was wearing a black and blue, one-piece wetsuit. "That is correct, Paul. Thanks for being so patient with me."

"(I just realized she’s either the second or third Marina I’ve met.)" Pikachu said, but no one paid attention to him.

"Marina!" Catching the Gym Leader's attention, Ash flashed her a confident, winner-class smirk as he held up a clenched fist. "I know you're busy for the rest of the day, so first thing tomorrow, I, Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town, wanna have a Gym Battle with you!"

"Oh wow, I had no idea I was so popular." Marina chuckled, placing a hand on her cheek. "I've gotten several challenges in the past two days, and everyone around Morwenna City has been asking me what I'll be doing this week."

"Such is your busy life, huh, sis?" Yoshino asked with a teasing smirk, crossing her arms.

"Don't you have a Pokémon Contest to get ready for?" Marina asked back, deadpanning.

"What." Paul said blankly.

Ash, on the other hand, was much more articulate than his rival. He furiously exchanged glances and points of his finger between the two apparent siblings. "W-W-Wait! You two are sisters!?"

Ash, Paul Yoshino, and Marina all returned to the Morwenna City Gym. The battlefield was surrounded by a blue and white, tile floor. Overhead was a translucent dome, suggesting an aquarium exhibit was stationed right above the gym itself. Marina and Paul stood on opposite sides of the battlefield, an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Pillars were scattered about in the plentiful water, and their flat tops provided the platforms for land-based fighters. Yoshino was standing on a
judge's podium off to the side. Behind this were two sets of bleachers, divided by an entrance to the aquarium. Ash and Pikachu were sitting in some of the seats.

"This is an official Pokémon Gym Battle between the challenger Paul Shinji and the Gym Leader Marina," Yoshino orated, perfectly reciting the standard rules – this being one of the many times she refereed for her sister, "One side can only win if all three of their opponent's Pokémon are defeated. Only the challenger is allowed to make substitutions."

Paul released Elmicity by his side. “I want you to pay close attention to how we battle. You’ll get your chance soon enough.”

“(Sure, whatever you say, man.)”

Kicking off her flip-flops, preferring to go barefoot, Marina interrupted her sister, not unkindly, "Paul, I forgot to ask you this. How many Gym Badges do you have?"

"This will be my first Tenla Region gym challenge," Paul replied. Before anything else could be said or done, he added in, "However, I have competed in the Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, and Sinnoh league conferences and have brought along a few of my veteran Pokémon. So, don’t let my lack of badges deter your selections."

"Very well then," Marina responded with an excited smirk. It wasn’t every often she got a chance to battle an experienced trainer. Her usual opponents were novices coming from Zumi Town, so she had to stick to her weaker array of Pokémon. “Although, instead of a three-on-three, I’m afraid we’ll keep it to a two-on-two, okay?”

Paul raised an eyebrow. “Tight schedule, right?”

“Yep.”

“Marina!” Yoshino screeched, stomping her foot. Marina looked at her, wondering why she was throwing a fit. “This is an official Gym Battle. That means three-on-three!”

“My gym, my rules.” Marina giggled at Yoshino’s pout. "Call it, sis!"

"Begin!"

Paul removed a Poké Ball from his pocket. “Two-on-two changes very little.” He threw it out. "Drapion, standby for battle!" It released the Ogre Scorpion Pokémon onto the nearest platform. Drapion snarled fiercely as it snapped its claws, raring to go for a fight. Ash actually started to sweat seeing Paul’s Drapion. This single Pokémon systematically defeated half of his team during the Lily of the Valley Conference, so he was curious to see how Marina would handle it as well as what Paul planned to do.

"Alrighty! Come on out!" Marina threw out her Poké Ball, and it sent out the Water/Dragon-type Pokémon, Kingdra.

"Oh, man, a Kingdra," Ash said, watching the Dragon Pokémon stay motionless in the pool, "Haven't battled one of those in a while."

"Start it off, Marina," Paul requested.
"As you wish. Kingdra, Dragon Breath!" Marina commanded. Kingdra inhaled a large amount of air and then exhaled a beam of green flames from the tip of its nose.

"Abate it with Pin Missile!" Paul ordered, taking note that Kingdra's Dragon Breath wasn't as fast as he anticipated. Drapion's claws glowed white and shot out white pins at the oncoming attack. The Pin Missile tore it apart little-by-little until nothing was left. Paul narrowed his eyes, feeling as if Marina's Kingdra was underperforming. Was that attack purposely weak? He glanced at Marina and, at this point, he noticed something.

Kingdra was nowhere to be found.

By the time Paul figured it out, Marina initiated her plan of action. "Hydro Pump." From underwater, a stream of spiraling water came out and blasted Drapion, who writhed in pain. "Oh, and Dragon Breath again for good measure." Before the Poison/Dark type could recover, another stream of green flames exited the water and struck it, this time from an entirely different location.

Now Paul understood her game: use the depths of the pool to her advantage. "Her Kingdra is going to stay in the water until she commands otherwise. So I need to drive it out." He wanted to use Toxic Spikes to make the pool unsafe for entry, but that would be done without knowing what other moves Marina's Kingdra had in tow, or the caliber of her remaining battler. Marina was a Gym Leader, not a regular trainer. By virtue of her position, she was well-versed in a number of strategies.

Marina chuckled, almost sinisterly. "How are you going to hit what you can't see?" Paul did not respond, for his eyes were glued to the pool, eyeing for the slightest movement. Drapion was doing the same, growling all the while. It wanted blood. "Dragon Dance!" Suddenly, a red and black glow appeared in a section of the pool.

Both Paul and Drapion jumped to conclusions, seeing that as a chance to strike Kingdra while it was giving away its location. "Cross Poison!" The Ogre Scorpion Pokemon crossed its arms and generated a glowing purple X, throwing it arms to its side to launch it.

"Twister," Marina commanded. The glow disappeared as Cross Poison exploded against the surface. Small waves rocking back and forth with increasing intensity, Drapion crouched down to maintain its balance. Soon, a swirling depression in the water formed around the pillar Drapion was on, forming a miniature maelstrom. While Dragon Dance did not increase Twister's power, the Kingdra was smart enough to apply the increased speed to produce a stronger one through centrifugal force.

Soon, a water tornado arose from the middle of the depression, trapping Drapion from all sides. The water tornado carried the powerless scorpion into the air and then slammed it onto another platform with great force, water splashing everywhere with the faintest bone-cracking sound.

Ash cringed "That sound like it hurt."

All the while, Paul watched everything take place with a neutral expression, figuring out what to do next while Marina and her Kingdra showed off. "Dragon Dance, Twister, Hydro Pump, and Dragon Breath... Good."

The attack disappearing, the pool settled down and the battleground returned to normal. Kingdra's head popped out from underwater to inspect the damages it caused. If it had a mouth, it'd be smirking as it watched at the soaked and lurching Ogre Scorpion Pokemon.

"Drapion, stand and use Toxic Spikes," Paul commanded. Forcing itself to stand up, Drapion opened
its mouth and spat out a dark purple orb into the air. After it popped, streams of purple smoke fell and sunk into the swimming pool. The water flashed purple briefly before Kingdra shot up to the surface, crying out in pain as its body flailed, eyes screwed shut as it tried to suppress the pain. Surrounded by purple static and purple waves, the malignant aura infected Kingdra's body with deadly poison, gradually sapping away its strength as long it remained in the pool.

"Oh, that's classy," Marina remarked with a slight deadpan stare. To that, Paul only grinned. Such a response meant that his strategy worked perfectly. The moment he learned the Morwenna Gym used Water type Pokemon, he knew he had to wrest control of water away from its Gym Leader. Drapion was the perfect countermeasure.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much Marina could do. Kingdra was a marine creature. It was confined to the very waters that was causing it excruciating pain. Marina's throat went dry as she clenched her fists, watching hopelessly as her Kingdra finally fell back into the pool with a loud splash. Its prone body resurfaced seconds later.

"Kingdra is unable to battle. Drapion wins this round."

"Geez. Even a Gym Leader couldn't do much about it," Ash mused. That Drapion was a scary Pokemon in hands of a skilled and cunning trainer like Paul.

Marina recalled her fallen Kingdra back into its Poke Ball. With how quickly it was defeated, the Water-type trainer felt a low blow to her pride. Not only that but, at some point or another, she used all of her Pokemon in her performances. Spending all those hours training and practicing meant Marina had established a close, personal bond with all her Pokemon. One that she felt was being attacked with how Paul and his Drapion handled her and her Kingdra.

"Okay then. I'll give you that," Marina said aloud. She had to keep her professionalism however. It was bad practice for Gym Leaders to let personal feelings subvert their roles – something that the Tenla Government and, by extension, the Pokémon Association, informed her the day she was hired. "But don't think you're getting it easy, Paul."

Another Poke Ball was lobbed out into the battlefield, releasing a Tentacruel into the poisoned pool. Stretching its many tentacles, the sea creature its eyes and released a low hum of satisfaction as the Toxic Spikes tried and failed to do its job. "Tentaaaaa…." Poison was nothing more than a mere delicacy.

Pawn frowned. “Great…” The appearance of Tentacruel threw a wrench in Paul's plan. Just like that, reclaimed control of her territory, meaning Paul and his Pokemon were back to square one for the rest of the battle. "I'll keep Drapion out," Paul announced. If Drapion wasn't going to last long, he figured he might as well use it to scout out Tentacruel's moves.

"Begin!"

"You go, Marina."

"Rain Dance," Marina calmly commanded, casually flicking a strand of her hair that got out of place.

Paul regretted letting Marina go first.

Eyes flashing blue, Tentacruel lifted all of its tentacles out of the pool. Light blue energy balls formed at each tip and discharged lightning to the ceiling, using mystical arts to generate dark storm clouds
even inside a building. With a small rumble of thunder, it started raining over the battlefield.

"Ahh, beautiful rain." Marina sighed contently, stretching her arms out to the side as she reared her head back. She was immersing herself in this. "Mother Nature's best product."

Paul gritted his teeth and barked out a command, "Poison Jab!" He replaced Drapion's Poison Fang with Poison Jab to take advantage of the versatility of its limbs. One set of Drapion's claws was cloaked in a purplish-pink glow, and it launched its entire arm forward.

"Dive into the pool to dodge!" Tentacruel immediately dove into the depths of the water as Drapion's Poison Jab hit the surface, causing a loud splash. "Now use Ice Beam!" The minute Drapion retracted its arm, Tentacruel reemerged behind the platform it stood upon. Raising its front appendage, it discharged a light blue beam. By the time Drapion rotated its head to look behind, the beam hit its leg. Ice coating its leg in thick sheets, the Ogre Darner Pokemon roared in pain, trying to keep itself steady.

"Cross Poison! Hurry!" While Tentacruel was visible, he needed to get some sort of damage on it. Using its species' characteristic ability to freely rotate its limbs, Drapion faced Tentacruel as it crossed its arms. Throwing its arms to the side, the Cross Poison was launched as an X-shaped projectile and scored a direct hit to the Jellyfish Pokemon's head.

Tentacruel chuckled. "(That tickled.)"

"Bring it into the water! Then use Giga Drain!"

Tentacruel leapt out of the water with surprising quickness and tackled Drapion. Its scores of tentacles wrapping around every part of the opposing Pokemon's body, Tentacruel used all of its strength to bring Drapion into the pool as commanded. A brief green glow flashed underwater, and the surface above the spot stirred. The situation was reversed – Paul stood there at a loss for words while Marina smiled victoriously. The bubbling stopped. Seconds later, Drapion was tossed out and onto a platform, drained of all its strength. Tentacruel emerged right after.

"Drapion is unable to battle! Tentacruel is the winner!"

Down to one last fighter, Paul recalled Drapion. "I didn't account for a Pokemon like Tentacruel." It was immune to Toxic Spikes, so Marina was able to use the terrain to her advantage with impunity. It had Rain Dish as its Ability and that, coupled with Giga Drain, meant Tentacruel could stay healthy. Paul's hand hovered over Gastrodon's Poke Ball. He wanted to even the playing field by using a reliable Water-type of his own, but since Tentacruel knew Giga Drain, he was reluctant. "Electivire isn't an option because he's still recovering from battling Heather. As long as that Tentacruel can roam freely, it's dangerous."

As long as it could roam freely…

Paul's eyes widened slightly in realization. "That's it!" He grabbed the Poke Ball he was hesitating to pick with renewed vigor. "Gastrodon, standby for battle!"

As Gastrodon was released onto a platform, Ash formed fists in his laps. "I get using Ground-type moves on a Poison type, but she just used Giga Drain. What is he thinking?"

"Would you like to go first this time?" Marina asked, tossing a teasing grin at the purple-haired boy.
Paul’s expression never faltered even though he could tell she was mocking him. “I will. Gastrodon, Muddy Water!”

Gastrodon jumped up and formed a circle of mud in front of its body. Like a sprinkler system, streams of muds shot out at Tentacruel and other areas of the pool. Predictably, the Jellyfish Pokemon swam through the water to avoid getting hit. Glancing up, Tentacruel noticed the surface getting murkier and murkier, making it hard to locate Gastrodon. Its eyes narrowed. “(Why that snot-nosed little…)

Forced to resurface, Tentacruel was met with an Ice Beam to the face, driving it into the nearest pillar. Paul wanted to keep up the pressure and end the fight as soon as possible. “Body Slam!” Gastrodon leapt high into the air, releasing a war cry as it descended to Tentacruel.

“Oh, no you don’t! Tentacruel, Protect!”

Tentacruel formed a forcefield around its body, intercepting Gastrodon. Keeping up the pressure, the slug tried its best not to be blown away by the Protect, awaiting Paul’s next command. Knowing Protect was extremely unreliable with consecutive use, Paul barked out an order, “Water Pulse!”

Gastrodon lifted its head and fired a water sphere into the sky. Marina’s eyes widened. “Tentacruel, forget it and move!” It was unable to comply since Protect was still blocking Body Slam. Both Tentacruel and Marina could only watch as Water Pulse collided into the forcefield, causing it to shatter, as the sphere exploded right in Tentacruel’s face.

Gastrodon fell into the muddy pool, feeling right at home, while Tentacruel staggered onto a platform, tentacles soaked with mud. Marina frowned, her hair drooping with wetness as Rain Dance finally subsided. “Oh, my poor pool needs to be cleaned out.”

Paul smirked. “Then I guess I shouldn’t keep you waiting too long.” He raised a fist, victorious, as he gave out his final command, “Muddy Water!”

Raising the front of its body like a stallion, Gastrodon summoned a wave from the muddied pool water. By the time Tentacruel regained its composure, it was staring a giant Muddy Water attack dead in the face. When it touched down, Marina, Ash, and Pikachu cringed at the thunderous impact. When the figurative dust settled, Tentacruel floated there, swirls in its eyes.

“Tentacruel is unable to battle!” Yoshino raised her left arm and pointed it at Paul. “Victory goes to the challenger Paul!”

Paul smiled. “Excellent. That makes two.” He recalled his Gastrodon and then Elmicity in the hopes it learned something today.

A little disappointed in herself, Marina nonetheless held her head high as she recalled Tentacruel and met Paul near the judge’s podium. “You’re pretty good, Paul,” she said with an earnest smile, “It was honor getting my butt kicked by you.” She started laughing, but he didn’t do the same. Stopping, she quickly brought something out. It was shaped like a swirling whirlpool. “Here. The Marine Badge. You deserve it.”

Paul accepted it and bowed. “Thank you for your time, Marina.”

“Paul!” Ash hurried over to one of his many rivals. “You keep at it, okay? Sooner or later, we gotta have a rematch.”
The Veilstone City resident stared at the boy like he was stupid. “As if I intend to get any weaker.” He glanced at the entrance to the aquarium. “I think I’m going to see what kind of Water types exist in Tenla. This is where we part.” Bidding them goodbye, Paul entered the door and began walking through the translucent tunnel.

His walking eventually slowed to a stop. Paul looked over his shoulder back at the Gym. After he lost to Ash, he did his best to stay calm and collected. But, inside, a fire burned like none other, a desire to reclaim his lost pride. Having learned his lesson, Paul intended to win a different way. “Of course I’m going to keep at it. I won’t lose to you again.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will cover both Marina’s water show and her Gym Battle with Ash.
Water We Waiting For?

Nightfall had finally befallen Morwenna City. This meant the water show held at the lake was close to starting. Everyone – residents and visitors – purchased a ticket to come see the show. Chatter resonated among the people in the stands taking their seat or killing time doing something else.

Led by Yoshino, Ash and his team of old friends hitched a ride on one of the maintenance boats. To gain backstage access, Yoshino showed a VIP Pass and let security know the people with her were special guests. There, they found Marina sitting atop a speaker, casually kicking her legs, as a light grey and dark blue, marlin-Pokemon circled around her in the air.

“Marina,” Yoshino called out as she and her posse approached her, getting her and her Pokemon’s attention, “Here I thought you’d be getting last-minute prep. Instead you’re just relaxing."

“Well, duh.” Marina warped her face into that of a dummy’s, annoying her sister. “I don’t cram for anything.” The Gym Leader then noticed the unfamiliar faces with her and Ash. “So, who are the strangers?”

“These are the friends I came to Tenla with,” Ash answered, beginning introductions, “She’s Dawn. That’s May. Here’s Misty—”

“Misty?” Marina tapped her own noggin, trying to jog her memories of the name. Then, her face lit up. “Oh! Are you the ‘brat’ in the ‘Sensational Sisters and one brat?’”

Misty suddenly released a heavenward growl, pulling at her own hair. Transpy circled around her while she vented her frustration. “I’m gonna kill those three when I get home!” Marina laughed raucously while the others did so sheepishly. As they did, Marina’s marlin Pokemon swam over to her side. Ash noticed it and proceeded to take out his Pokedex.

“Tralin: The Swordfish Pokemon. The evolved form of Transpy. Tralin has a 16-inch pin-like nose that can easily stab into iron and chip diamond. They are very agile swimmers and, when together in a school, oceans illuminate in a rainbow color.”

“You know, I don’t get how Transpy and Tralin can just float around like that,” Ash said, observing the two, “They aren’t Flying-types or anything like that.”
“The Transpy line can swim through any fluid,” Marina explained, tracing the long nose of her Tralin, “Yes, the air is considered a fluid.”

Chuckling, Transpy returned to the nestle of Misty’s arms. “(He doesn’t read a lot of books, huh?)”

Pikachu shot a blank glare at the mouthy fish. “(Quit talking about Ash like that…)” A brief pause. “(And, no, I don’t think Ash has ever read a book.)”

The minute Marina looked at Brock, he slid over to her side, taking her hand. “I let my friends introduce themselves so I could save the best for last.” He failed to notice her sucking in her lips, struggling to keep her amusement at his cheesiness at bay. “I am Brock of Pewter City. Truly, it is an honor to be in your presence.”

“GUNK!”

Brock fell over stiff as a board, followed by Misty dragging him away by the ear. “Please don’t mind him,” Misty said.

A titter rippled across the backstage. Lurching over, great booming laughter rolled from Marina’s mouth. “A-Are you serious right now?!?” She keeled over, rolling on the ground while kicking her legs, unable to stop laughing.

Yoshino shook her head with a blank expression on her face. “I believe he does to anyone with a pretty face. That happened to me earlier today.”

Marina managed to control herself, standing back up while wiping tears from her eyes. “O-Oh, did he?” There was something about Marina’s smile that made Yoshino’s skin crawl. Innocent yet devious. “Why’d he flirt with you then?”

All in attendance quieted down when the stage lights dimmed. They stared at the brown curtains enshrouding the stage, waiting for the entertainer to reveal herself at any moment. Meanwhile, the water of Morwenna Lake shone like a molten mirror. It had lost its turquoise to the night, but in the moonlight, the ripples twisted; as if the sea below them was shivering to lose the rays.

In the water between the shoreline and the stage, the more ripples appeared. Murmuring from the crowd followed until the surface folded in on itself—a whirlpool. From the gaping depths, a multicolored tower of swirls water erupted. At its height, the peak burst like a bubble, revealing Marina in a handstand on her Tralin’s nose, the marlin perfectly balanced. Marina did a backflip, whereupon a Pelipper flew out from the back of the stage setup to catch her. The curtains parted. As the Pelipper dropped her off on-stage, Tralin dispersed the water formation. The drops fell as if snatched by gravity to the saline below, each one swiftly haloed by ever-growing rings, distorting its flat surface.

Applause followed, mostly by first-timers. “Good evening, visitors and citizens of Morwenna City!” Marina spoke into the mic extending from her ear-clip, voice amplified by the speakers. Tralin circled around Marina before settling beside her. “It’s that time again! So let’s not waste any more time and get to what you came here for!”
Slow, classical orchestra began to play. Schools of Finneon and Lumineon poked their heads out of the water, one by one in a row, and summoned Aqua Rings. Seels followed up, jumping into each ring while performing a series of acrobatic jumps in tune with the music. When the last Seel went, Tralin shot out of the water and cleared each ring in a single bound, every one glowing as it passed.

The Pelipper returned with a flock, swooping down and using Stockpile to snatch each multicolored Aqua Ring into its mouth. They flew into the night sky and, for each crescendo, used Spit Up to make the sea of darkness light up with hues of green, blue, red, and yellow like fireworks.

Meanwhile, Marina was both a conductor and dancer. Each wave of her arm and move of her body was a cue for the Water Pokemon. The Gym Leader did a spin as she neared the end of the stage. Walking forward, a Golduck suddenly appeared out of the water and fired a Water Gun. A nearby Slowpoke used Psychic, making the result arch solid enough for her to step on it. She continued her dance, other Golduck and Slowpoke coming out to create a stair of arches.

At the highest one, Marina held her hands high above her head. The group of Slowpoke then used Psychic to make that arch shoot up, sending Marina into the air. In that brief second, the Slowpoke made all arches intersect, Tralin darted out of the water to position itself in at the peak, and the Pelipper formed a ring of Mist. Marina landed in a handstand on Tralin, the same pose she entered the show in. “Tralin, my dear, Flash.”

The Swordfish Pokemon’s body expelled multicolored luminescence, making the whole setup look like a fountain in the middle of an aurora. The audience marveled at the sight, the round of murmurs being compliments and comments.

Marina and her team of Pokemon held the position for a couple more seconds. Then the group of Slowpoke acted again, pushing her toward the stage. Performing a series of spin in midair, she landed in a crouch right as music’s climax ended. With a wide smile, Marina stood up with her arms out.

She received a standing ovation, the clapping and whistling loud enough to be heard all over Morwenna City.

The next morning, Ash woke up early enough to meet Marina for his Gym Battle. He stood at one end of the battlefield, mulling over his accumulated knowledge of Marina. “Water-type specialist. Uses the pool to her advantage. And her Pokemon work like pros.” Ash glanced at the bleachers where Brock, May, Misty, and Dawn sat, shouting good luck and everything. Piplup even dressed like a cheerleader like he did in Sinnoh. Ash smiled at the warm and fuzzy feeling in his chest. “All my good friends together again. I can’t lose this time. I’m taking this all the way.”

He felt a tap on his neck. It was Pikachu’s tail. “What’s the matter, buddy?” When Pikachu pointed at a darkened spot in the middle of the pool, Ash squinted his eyes, trying to get a better look. “Did Marina clean the—”

Something exploded out of the pool, forcing Ash to step away to avoiding getting splashed on. Up ahead, he saw Marina landing on her hands at her end of the battlefield, seamlessly flipping over on her sandaled feet. “Sorry, Ash!” She called out as Tralin settled by her, “I like my entrances grand!”
Ash tipped his hat. “It’s all good!”

Yoshino shortly entered the Gym through the back of the door. “Why does this woman not hire a ref and keep asking me? I could be using this time to prepare for the Pokemon Contest.” She came to a stop when she noticed a dual-sided, large-screen television hanging over the battlefield. “Sister. What is that and when did you have time to install it?”

Marina looked at her sister, tilting her head. “Why, it’s a Versus Screen, Yoshi. It’s only the latest technology as generally provided by the Pokemon Association. It’ll liven up Gym Battles and help out refs during them! Anything to give this repetitive job a little pizzazz.” A brief pause. “And I used my paycheck to have the guys in the aquarium put it up.”

“All right, whatever.” Yoshino walked around and took her spot on the judge’s podium. She cleared her throat. “This is an official Pokémon Gym Battle between the challenger Ask Ketchum and the Gym Leader Marina. A winner will be declared when all three of their opponent's Pokemon are defeated. Only the challenger is allowed to make substitutions.”

Marina slipped out of her sandals while she retrieved a Poke Ball. “Sorry, Ash. Even with experience, all you have is three Pokemon, two you just got. I’m afraid you don’t get to play with the big ones. Finneon, you’re up!” She threw out her Poke Ball and summoned the Wing Fish Pokemon to the playing field. The small fish chimed out a note as it floated on the pool’s surface.

“Bummer.” As Pikachu jumped down to his feet, Ash shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, well, a battle is a battle.” He was tempted to send out Pikachu, but one look at Marina’s Tralin made him think otherwise. “I got to save Pikachu. Rockler and Gouzatile will have to do their best.” He snatched his chosen Poke Ball from his person and threw it out. “Rockler, I choose you!”

Rockler was released, and he roosted on the nearest platform. “(Ah, yes. My first Gym Battle under the command of Master Ketchum.)” The regional bird flapped his wings and took flight, staring down Finneon. “(Let us have a fair fight, yes?)”

Brock reclined in his seat, arms crossed as he examined the two fighters. “Looking at realistically, Ash may have a harder time than we battled.”

Crossing her legs, May turned her head to him. “Why do you say that?”

“Two of three of Ash’s Pokemon are weak to Water, and all it takes is the right one to beat Pikachu,” Brock explained, remembering when Ash and Pikachu failed to beat his Rock/Ground-types and their struggle against Roxanne in Hoenn. A grin then carved its way on his face. “But, then again, if this is Ash we’re talking about, he’ll rise to the occasion.”

Yoshino raised both arms. “Begin!”

“Time to kick things off right!” With passion lacing his voice, Ash threw out his fist. “Rockler, Quick Attack!”

“(Have at thee!)” With another wingbeat, Rockler dashed at Finneon with enough speed to leave behind a white blur.

“Gust!” Reacting just as fast, Finneon swerved around in the water, its tailfins releasing blast of wind. Rocket met it head-on. Grunting with effort, the Rock/Flying bird pushed past the Gust and rammed into Finneon, the small fish crying out. Marina’s eyes widened. “It just powered through?!”
Ash laughed, doing a fist-pump. “That’s showing ‘em, Rockler!”

Dawn watched Rockler go back into the air, undaunted by his trainer’s praise. “That’s a strong bird for its size.”

Marina pursed her lips together, thinking of her next plan of attack. “Guess we’ll have to counter power with speed.” She snapped her fingers to gain her Finneon’s attention. “Rain Dance!”

Shaking off the lingering pain, Finneon’s eyes glowed. With a low hum, echoing like a foghorn in the foggy night, black clouds formed right over the pool. Rain began to fall. Rockler shivered at the cold touch of the droplets, flapping his wings faster. “(Oh, dear. This is unpleasant.)”

Ash’s hair drooped to the point he had to part his damp bangs. He looked at Marina smiling and waving at him from across. “Dang it, Marina. I didn’t plan to get soaked.”

Hearing a zipper, he noticed Yoshino and his friends holding up umbrellas or wearing raincoats. “Aw come on, guys! You didn’t get one for me?”

Misty gave him a dull look as May chuckled sheepishly. “Not our fault you didn’t think ahead,” the redhead said.

“Focus on the battle, Ash!” Marina shouted, “Surf!” A tidal wave burst out of the pool, Finneon riding atop it. It was large enough to cast a shadow.

Both Ash and Rockler shared the same shocked expressions at the sheer size, but the former quickly brought himself back to reality. “Get out of the way, Rockler!” The instant the Strength Pokémon turned to dash away, the wave came crashing down with enough force to shake the whole gym a little. He tensed up, but then he relaxed his shoulders upon seeing Rockler on a platform, forcing himself to move. The bird stretched out his wings and ascended with a powerful flap.

Ash smirked. “Not out of this yet. Wing Attack!”

Rockler glided at Finneon, wings glowing bright enough to illuminate the stormy battlefield. He moved in to attack, but Finneon swam to the side, almost leaving a blur. Surprised but keeping his mind on the task, Rockler pursued. Finneon continued to strafe at amazing speeds.

May noticed, as the strong bird tried but failed to land a blow, his attacks became slower and more frenzied. “Rockler's just going to wear itself out doing that!”

“Rain Dance and Swift Swim,” Misty spoke up. She knew good and well about the famous combination, “Finnieon is just too fast right now. Ash better tell Rockler to do something else.”

Deeming Rockler to be sufficiently weakened, Marina barked out her next command. “Surf!” After dodging yet another Wing Attack, Finneon summoned one more wave.

“Gotta think fast!” Ash pointed at the fish Pokémon riding the Surf on top. “Rockler, Rock Throw! Hurry!” Ash watched his Pokemon create a glowing rock and will it to his target. The rock struck Finneon, knocking it off. The impact itself forced a break in the oncoming wave. "Now! Wing Attack!"

Rockler flew right through the hole before it collapsed on itself, finally landing a Wing Attack on the shrieking Wing Fish Pokémon. Finneon crash landed on the nearest platform with a hard thud as
Rockler circled the battlefield to slow down his momentum. Finneon twitched a few times, trying to will itself back into the water. That took the last bit of its strength.

"Finneon is unable to battle!" As the Rain Dance finally subsided, Yoshino held up the hand associated with Ash. "Rockler is the winner!"

Ash pumped a fist. "Great job, Rockler!"

The bird in question landed on a platform, coughing and trying to shake off excess water on its body. "(Thank the heavens that condemned rain went away.)"

"One down, two more to go," May declared with a smile, Piplup piping in cheers beside her.

Marine recalled her fallen Finneon, whispering her gratitude afterwards. "All right, I see how it is." Feeling a tinge of anticipation, Marina grinned wider as she took out her next Poke Ball. "Let's kick things up a notch, Ash, huh? Go, Barboach!" Throwing it out, a Barboach was released in the center of the pool. Marina suppressed a giggle at the sight of Ash's grin disappearing and Pikachu's ears drooping. The Versus Screen updated.

Dawn chewed on her bottom lip. "Like you said, Brock, the right one. Ash needs to beat that Barboach fast."

"Begin!"

“All right, Rockler,”—at Ash’s beck and call, the bird Pokemon took flight again—“Let's use Quick Attack!”

“Dodge and use Water Gun!”

Barboach retreated into the water as Rockler skimmed over the surface. The Water/Ground-type emerged immediately after and fired a stream of water from its mouth. Screeching in pain as it hit, Rockler fell directly into the pool. Pikachu and Ash gasped in horror.

Marina smiled a sinisterly sweet one. "Go in after it." Her Barboach leaped over the platform and headed deeper into the pool. It saw Rockler sinking and flailing for dear life. Once he spotted it, Rockler tried to swim away, but its wings were not adjusted to this kind of situation. Barboach sped over and rammed into Rockler’s back once again. For extra measure, the Mud Fish Pokemon used Water Gun, the force of the attack sending the bird into the ceiling. Barboach resurfaced just in time to see Rockler peel off the ceiling and land on the waiting platform with a thud.

"Rockler is unable to battle! Barboach is the winner!"

"All right!" Marina celebrated her Pokemon’s success with several, enthusiastic claps. "Great job, Barboach!"

“Return, Rockler.” Ash recalled his fallen Pokemon into his Poke Ball. The boy then planned his next move. Barboach was a problem, and he never switched Rockler out because he was immune to one of its types. Now, his only advantage was gone. Pikachu was his ace-in-the-hole, so he wanted to save him until he no longer could, but Ash yearned for a win. A chance to start his Tenla campaign off strong. “I have to put my faith in Gouzatile.” With renewed determination, Ash grabbed his chosen Poke Ball and threw it out. “Gouzatile, I choose you!”
The red salamander was released on a platform right in front of Rockler. Ash then asked, “Okay, Gouzatile, this is going to be a tough one. Can you handle it?”

Gouzatile smirked at its trainer and then locked gazes with a focused Barboach. “(I’m not afraid to get wet and wild. My fire may not burn you deep, but it’ll sap you of your strength.)” The Fire type narrowed its eyes, fire brewing inside its mouth. “(Your defeat need not come all at once.)”

Jealous, Piplup scoffed, waving his fin dismissively at his fellow Starter Pokemon. “(Look at him trying to sound cool.)”

Gouzatile shot a glare at the Water-type. “(Hey. Shut up and keep cheerleading, punk.)”

“Begin!”

“Barboach, Mud Bomb!” Hearing its master’s command, the Water/Ground type summoned a ball of mud and fired it.

“Dodge and use Ember!”

“(Too slow.)” Gouzatile swiftly jumped to another platform to avoid the Mud Bomb. Producing fire yet again, the salamander released a spray of fire at Barboach.

“Underwater now!” Marina shouted. Reacting just as fast, Barboach dived, the Ember skimming the surface. Steam hissed out. Gouzatile put himself on high alert, looking around constantly to locate his foe. “Water Gun!” As soon as the move was called, Gouzatile heard a splash behind him. He immediately strafed the oncoming Water Gun and rushed Barboach, who made an inarticulate sound of surprise.

Ash grinned at Gouzatile’s quick-wittedness. “Nice one! Use Bite!”

Matching Ash’s expression, Gouzatile opened wide and bit Barboach around the neck area. The Mud Fish Pokemon released a droning wail, flailing, as the Fire type pulled it out of the water, keeping his jaws shut tight. Marina cried out for Barboach to hang on, to power back. Empowered by her words, Barboach used its tail fin to push back against Gouzatile. A tug-of-water followed, Gouzatile trying to keep Barboach on dry land while the latter tried to escape. Meanwhile, the trainers watched their Pokemon struggle, unsure of what other command to use. Marina anxiously shuffled in her spot, Ash gripped the railing around his stand tighter, and Brock and the others were on the edge of their seats.

Just then, the lightbulb went off in Marina’s head. “Barboach, use Water Gun to shoot yourself away!”

Angling its head to the platform, Barboach fired, propelling both it and Gouzatile in the opposite direction. Surprised, Gouzatile let go before he and Barboach hit the water.

As his friends shot out of their seats, Ash gasped at the sight, peering over the edge of his stand’s railing. “Oh, no, not again! Gouzatile! Gouzatile! Save yourself!”

“(Now’s your chance, Barboach!” Marina called out loudly enough so her Pokemon could hear underwater. “Water Pulse!”

Underwater, Gouzatile gripped onto the pillar for dear life. His vision grew hazy, strength sucked
away by his natural enemy. Seeing something from the corner of his eyes, he spotted Barboach producing a ball of water. His fight-or-flight instincts kicked in. He dug his claws into the stone. 

“(This is nothing. I won’t let it stop me! I will prove myself!)” In a sudden burst of speed, Gouzatile scurried up the pillar, dodging the Water Pulse. “(Air! Air! Oxygen! Dry land!)”

“(Hold still!)” Barboach demanded, shooting out more Water Pulses. Gouzatile circled around the pillar several times to avoid them. Noticing the Fire type getting closer to the surface, Barboach shouted out to Marina, “(He’s coming out! What should I do?)”

Sensing the end coming, Marina enacted her plan. “Use Mud Sport. Then make sure it stays under until it faints! Keep up the pressure!”

“(Roger that.)” Barboach immediately sped over, its tailfin waving erratically and making mud streams rise in droves.

“Don’t let them!” Ash ordered, “Slash!”

Gouzatile’s eyes contracted. “(Now or never.)” Every last vestige of his strength went his claws. Glowing, they grew longer and, once Barboach got close enough, he jumped off the pillar and slashed it several times, getting higher with each hit.

Both Pokemon burst out of the surface as Gouzatile delivered a final Slash attack. Barboach flopped onto a platform with a thud while Gouzatile landed elsewhere. His legs wobbly, he collapsed immediately, but not before giving Ash a fleeting look, unable to comprehend his shouts of concern. “(Did I… make you proud?)”

Yoshino threw both of her arms up. “Both Pokemon are unable to battle!”

The tension that built up in Ash the past few minutes melted into nothing. He leaned against the railing, his body unwinding. The most stressful part had passed. He fished out his Poke Ball and recalled Gouzatile. “The first thing I’m doing after this is getting you checked out.”

All of Ash’s companions slumped in their seats in relief. Dawn pushed some of her hair behind her ear, saying, “That was risky. Real risky.”

A few chuckles escaped Misty as she glanced at the Twinleaf Town coordinator. “If that’s the case, sounds to me Ash and Gouzatile are a perfect match.”

May leaned forward, hands on her knees, as she studied the current state of the battlegrounds. A thin layer of brown, like airborne dirt, surrounded it from Barboach’s Mud Sport. ‘Pikachu’s next for sure, but what’s Marina going to use?’ She eyed Tralin remaining motionless by its trainer’s side. “Is she going to surprise us or use what I think she is?”

Ash kneeled down and placed a hand on Pikachu’s head. “Pikachu, I’m counting on you. Don’t let Rockler’s and Gouzatile’s hard work go to waste.” He smiled when the electric mouse nodded, features growing taut with seriousness. “You’re up, Pikachu!” He watched his longtime friend jump, springboard off the railing, and land on a platform.

Marina cracked another one of her faux innocent smiles. A glint in her eyes spoke a tale of someone raring to go, to end this. “If that’s who you’re going with, then it’s obvious who my choice is.”

On cue, Marina’s Tralin darted forth, its nose pin-like nose scraping the railing with enough power to
make sparks. “(Beauty born from new experiences is always such a joy.)” It drove itself into the water, swimming laps at high speeds, causing Pikachu to shield his eyes from the crests’ mist. “(Will this be a grand memory, or will this turn ugly fast?)” Tralin exploded out of the water in front of Pikachu, the two Pokemon making eye contact. Tralin angled its pin, the lights outlining its edge. Pikachu turned his head away from the glint. With a small grin, Tralin yelled out, “(Prove yourself to me!)”

“Begin!”

“Start off strong and hit first,” Ash declared, punching the air, “Thunderbolt!” At his call, Pikachu released a surge of electricity. Normally copious in amount, Ash noticed it was drastically thinner. It looked like a simple Thundershock instead. “What?!”

Tralin easily evaded the weakened Thunderbolt. A few triumphant titters rippled from the Morwenna Gym Leader. “Just as I predicted! Pikachu was your crux, so I knew Barboach was the perfect counter. Either directly or as support.”

“What’s she talking about?” Dawn questioned, glancing between the battlefield and her friends. “Why is Pikachu’s attack weak?”

“Because of Mud Sport,” May answered, “It weakens Electric attacks. I think Juan from Sootopolis City used that same tactic when Ash battled him.”

“Aqua Jet!” At the snap of her fingers, Tralin cloaked itself in water and rushed Pikachu.

Ash gritted his teeth. “We’ll take you head-on! Quick Attack!”

Pikachu shooting off of the platform he stood on, both Pokemon clashed in midair. After a small struggle, Tralin was pushed backwards as Pikachu somersaulted to another platform. Ash smirked, feeling his competitive fire burn hotter than ever. “I still remember the quicker one hits. Tucker showed me that.” Keeping up the pressure, he barked out, “Iron Tail!”

Seeing the Electric type’s tail turn solid, Marina gestured to the pool. “Underwater now!”

Tralin ducked under a swing of Pikachu’s tail as it headed into the pool.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Ash mimicked the Gym Leader’s action. “Water conducts electricity. Thunderbolt!”

“Flash!”

Before Pikachu released the electricity stored in his cheeks, the entire pool lit up in multiple colors, a rainbow under the sea. The intense light blinded Ash, Pikachu, and everyone in the Gym, forcing them to stop and cover their eyes. Even though she did it too, Marina continued her onslaught. “Aerial Ace!”

Flash subsided in time for everybody to see Tralin blindsiding Pikachu with its glowing pin, all over the electric rodent like a swarm of locusts.

As he watched, Ash’s nerves were frayed to the quick. In his building anxiety, he constructed elaborate rationalizations for why everything would turn out alright, but still the nagging voice in the back of his mind spoke of nothing but doom ahead. “Pikachu! Hang in there!” His shouts were in
direct opposition to his growing dread. Just then, he noticed the cloud of mud and dirt growing thinner and thinner, reigniting his optimism completely. His famous grin returned. “Almost there! Iron Tail!”

Taking another Aerial Ace, Pikachu fulfilled his trainer’s command and parried Tralin’s next strike with his own tail. The follow-up was even harder, throwing Tralin off-center. Pikachu finally landed an Iron Tail that sent Tralin flying back.

Marina looked at her ace as it caught itself in the air. “Tralin, you OK?” Receiving a confirmatory nod, the blue-haired girl pointed at the platforms surrounding Pikachu. “Let’s limit its movements even more. Ice Beam.”

A blue ball appeared at the end of Tralin’s pin. Taking aim, Tralin released a beam of energy. All the platforms Marina specified were caked in clusters of sharp icicles.

Pikachu’s skin crawled at the sight. “(No way I’m touching any of that.)”

“Can’t run, can’t hide!” Marina declared. Eyes wide and grin wider, in one adrenaline-fueled warrior-yell, she bellowed, “Aqua Jet!”

Motivated by her intensity, Tralin summoned raging water around itself, looking like a small ship caught in a whirlpool. Feeling this was the best Aqua Jet it’s ever done, the Swordfish Pokemon swam through the air, fast as a speeding bullet.

The two were so caught in the moment, neither realized Mud Sport vanished.

“Volt Tackle!”

Pikachu’s taunting smirk brought Marina to reality. Too little, too late—the electric mouse rammed itself into Tralin, shocking it like flies caught in a bug zapper. Tralin began to fall out of the air with Pikachu on top.

As soon as they hit the water, Ash tipped his hat. “Thunderbolt.”

The pool lit up again, this time yellow like the morning sun. The ice shattered, and the water fizzled like soda. Seconds later, things died down. Pikachu hopped out of the water, coughing and gasping for air. Tralin too emerged, belly-up and groaning in pain.

Yoshino raised her hand. “Tralin is unable to battle. Pikachu is the winner. The victory goes to the challenger, Ash Ketchum of Pallet Town!”

“I did it!” With jubilation came fists in the air. Ash’s shot nerves were now electrified, awake, soaring to new heights of emotion. He hurried off the stand in time to accept Pikachu into his arms. “Good job, buddy! That’s our first Tenla win!”

Brock and the others too erupted like an auditory volcano. Quiet and anxious before the announcement, now deafening, rising to a crescendo and then falling to a trickle as they themselves surged out of the bleachers to congratulate the boy who brought them together.

Misty playfully shoved him. “Good going, Ash!”

May took off his hat to ruffle his dark hair. “Looking like a champion in the making right now.”
Brock followed up by hooking his arm around Ash's neck, Dawn laughing all the while. “Not so little now, huh, pal?”

Unsettled eyes glanced unceremoniously around and tried to pinpoint who was lavishing Ash with praise at different times. “You guys! Stooooop.” A few hearty chuckles escaped him when all of his friends finally gave him room to breathe and move. “I owe it to you guys. I’m taking this all the way. I promise.”

“All right, all right.” Walking over with Yoshino, Marina grabbed everyone’s attention. She carried a Poke Ball in one hand, presumably Tralin’s, and a case in the other. “Let me talk to my challenger.” She flashed a toothy grin. “Thanks for showing me a good time, Ash. Sure, I hate that I lost, but it’s part of the job, I guess. Keep at it. I see some untapped potential in your Pokemon. They can get better.”

A brief, understanding nod preluded his response. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I intend to make it happen.”

“Good. You’ve earned this then. The Marine Badge.” Opening the case, she removed a small badge. Colored varying shades of blue, the surface twisted inward to resemble a swirling maelstrom. She placed it in Ash’s waiting hand.

Ash examined his newly earned Marina Badge, smiling at himself in his reflection. “My first step to the Tenla League.”

Chapter End Notes

We’re almost done with Morwenna City, guys. The Pokemon Contest for sure is the next thing. Give me one or two more chapters and we can move on with this journey.
Stress Relief

The next day, the attention of Ash and company shifted to the Pokemon Contest. It was May’s turn to take the spotlight. Right now, the gang was walking through Red Tide Lane, having been invited to the home of Yoshino and Marina. Gone was the hustle and bustle of Morwenna City here. Nothing but peace, quiet, and nature in these suburbs full of different kinds of homes. They eventually arrived at the house of interest, a light blue and white domicile on a hill, surrounded by a tall gate.

Misty approached the front gate and pressed the button on the receiver near the lock. "Marina, it's us. Are you there?"

Her response was an explosion of sound that made everyone reel backwards out of shock. They then heard the voices of Marina and Yoshino alongside their Pokemon's cries amid the chaos. It was as if a stampede was going on, and they were caught in the middle of it. It sounded like things were getting knocked over and people knocked into. Yoshino's voice was about as loud, barking out orders like a drill sergeant. Comparatively, Marina seemed desperate, pleading even.

"W-What is going on?" It was nothing like May had ever heard before.

Misty repeatedly pressed the button, hoping the buzz would eventually catch the sisters' attention. "Hey, you two! Do you need help? Talk to us!"

The response was immediate, simultaneous. "One second!"

Glass shattered right before communication shut off.

The group of teenagers stood there dumbfounded and looking all over the place, including each other, in a vain attempt at finding answers. Figuring they would get something soon, they waited. It wouldn't take long until the gates creaked to life, parting to grant entrance.

"It's safe to come in now," Marina said over the intercom.

As his group of friends started down the concrete path, Brock mused, "Sounds like she's back to her normal self."
A quick scoff escaping her, Dawn examined the lush, manicured yard—the unencumbered green grass was king here. "I think she's trying to make sure we don't worry."

By the time Ash and friends reached the front porch, Marina and Yoshino were already there. As if hexed by petrification, they immediately stopped, faces frozen in disbelief. Yoshino’s pajamas were torn in multiple spots, web-like silk replacing most of the fabric. Her face burned a bright scarlet, steam rolling out of her ears, fingers balling into fists and relaxing constantly. Smiling sheepishly at them, Marina brushed off thick wads of silk from her own hair. Besides her usual wetsuit, the Gym Leader wore a dark blue coat with gold buttons, the sleeves long enough to overlap her hands, as well as dark blue ankle boots.

Ash consciously avoided eye contact with the fuming Yoshino. "D-Did we come at a bad time?"

Despite herself, Yoshino growled like a feral animal. "You have no idea."

May weighed her options. Enter the house and risk getting her head bitten off by Yoshino or go back to the Pokemon Center to train with her head intact. "Should we come back then?"

“No, no, no!” Marina interjected, waving her arms and causing the sleeves to flap around. “It's OK if you don't mind the mess.”

“Come on in,” Yoshino said, much calmer now, “We'll explain ourselves inside.”

The sisters walked back in, Yoshino holding the door open for her guests. Inside, brown wood and white furnishing were the theme. Unfortunately, silk and broken glass ruined most of it. Thankfully, Marina's and Yoshino's Pokemon were swiftly cleaning up. By the time they made it to the couches, Doyubi and Tralin had made the area presentable. Yoshino had went upstairs to put on her normal outfit.

“So, uh,” As he broke through the awkward silence, Ash and Pikachu watched Yoshino’s Minccino dust off the fan. “What exactly happened?”

“You guys know what an Arctick is?” Marina asked.

“No, but I can check.” Ash took out his Pokedex. Before it spoke, an image popped up on the screen. It was a white, segmented insect with a light blue underside, a gear-like object around its neck, and black beady eyes.

“Arctick: The Frozen Pokemon. Arctick lives in pits of snow and feed off the vegetation nearby.”

Dawn craned her neck to get a better look at the specimen. “Aww, it’s so cute.”

Skin crawling as she imagined its stubby legs running across her body, Misty averted her eyes, lips forming a sneer. “Suuuure, keep telling yourself that.”

Yoshino suddenly slammed her first on the armrest. “Yeah, well, it certainly doesn’t act cute!” Noticing everybody looking at her, she calmed down, trying to regain control of her emotions in front of houseguests. “My Arctick is a problem. She thinks life is a game, is hyper all the time for no clear reason, and messes around so much it causes collateral damage. I can hardly keep the thing contained and it ruins all my practice time! So, I keep Arctick in her Poke Ball to keep it at bay.” Yoshino slumped in her seat. “But, even then, that’s not foolproof. Today proves it.”
"Then why did you keep it?" Dawn asked as she petted her Piplup's head.

Yoshino’s Leafeon, who came over and sat by her feet, scoffed, grabbing the attention of Pikachu. "(I wonder the same exact thing.)"

"Because Yoshino is a sweetie who believes in the goodness of all living things’ heart," Marina said, swinging her leg over the armrest, one arm already hanging over the top. She playfully stuck her tongue out when a lightly blushing Yoshino glanced her way.

"While I can understand trying to protect yourself and others," Brock spoke, shifting into breeder mode as he crossed his arms, "That isn’t the solution to your problems. Just putting Arctick away does no good. When did this start? Have you tried connecting emotionally with her?"

Yoshino crossed her legs and rested her hands in her lap, thinking as she talked. "About around the time I captured her, which wasn’t too long ago. Not much opportunity to connect when you get a String Shot to the face for your troubles."

May watched Yoshino sigh and rub the temples of her forehead. "Poor girl is having a hard time."

She glimpsed Marina, who had taken over discussing the problem. It was uncanny how those two were sisters—Marina was chill, peppy, and nonchalant while Yoshino was more driven and focused. That’d explain their two entirely different attitudes at the moment. Since Max was like Yoshino, May knew she needed a distraction. "Well, let’s forget about it for right now," she spoke up, standing, "Say, Yoshino, how about we go practice for the Pokemon Contest?"

Leafeon immediately hopped on to all fours. "(Finally someone speaks my language.)" The Grass type nudged Yoshino’s leg, encouraging her to have the same enthusiasm. "(Come on, Yoshi. Life goes on. We can play therapist when we finish our rehearsal.)"

Nodding, Yoshino stood as well. "All right. That’s something I can get behind."

"Goodie! A change of pace!" Marina hopped out of the sofa and pranced away. "I’ll make some tea! Yoshi, show ‘em to the backyard!"

The backyard of the sister’s household was the same, well-kempt sight as the front. It also featured a patio and a pool. The trainers let out their Pokemon to enjoy the fresh air. Gouzatile and Rockler took spots on top of the patio’s roof to enjoy the sun. Misty’s and Marina’s Pokemon along with Brock’s Swampert lazed around in the pool. Pikachu and Piplup played tag. Marina served tea to everyone seated under the patio as they chatted and watched May and Yoshino practice. The only thing that stood out was the Poke Ball on the patio table containing Arctick.

"Gloom, let’s use Sludge Bomb," Yoshino commanded. The center of the flower on Gloom’s head glowing purple, it fired a series of orbs into the air. "Now use Petal Dance." Gloom then began to twirl around in her spot as a storm of pink petals flew into the air. Both moves collided midair, sparks and sprinkles showering down afterward.

"Not bad. Let me show you something cool." May pointed to the sky, putting Blaziken and Wartortle on alert. "Fire Spin! Aqua Tail!"

Blaziken reared its head back and fired a spiral of flames into the air. Wartortle followed up by swinging his tail and sending out a stream of water. The two moves fused into a water and fire whirlwind surrounded by sparks, neither extinguishing the other, a perfect harmony between polar opposite.
“A little tactical fusion of fire and water,” May declared.

Yoshino couldn’t help but marvel at the sight. “Wow, that’s pretty good.”

When no one paid attention, the Poke Ball on the table popped open and released Yoshino’s Arctick from its confines. It immediately took note of May and Yoshino working on their contest combinations. It cooed, beady eyes shining like a child in a candy store and began slinking over. The first to notice her presence, Leafeon’s forehead met the middle of its paw. "(Oh, you've got to be kidding me.)"

Blaziken looked down at the Grass type quizzically. "(What's wrong?)"

Leafeon turned to the direction of the Frozen Pokemon. "(The menace has been freed from its cage.)"

The Blaze Pokemon saw Arctick moving along at her own pace, minding her own business. "(Menace? Are you sure about that?)"

A well-aimed String Shot and a piercing shriek answered Blaziken’s question. Before anyone knew it, May and Yoshino were tied in a bundle of cold silk. "(Get her, get her, get her!)" Doyubi roared as it and the rest of Yoshino’s Pokemon sprang into the action. Arctick ran off in the opposite direction, heading towards the pool. One leap and an Ice Beam later, every Pokemon in the pool was encased in ice.

“Guys!” Humans shot off of their seat to help May and Yoshino while the remaining Pokemon tried to free their frozen friends.

Doyubi lost track of the misbehaver. "(Where’d she go?!)

Just then, a red tail wrapped around her mouth and a talon slammed down on her tail. "(We got her!)

Blaziken managed to unthaw the frozen pool victims while Wartortle used Water Gun to weather away some of the ice. Ash, Misty, Brock, Marina, and Dawn used all their strength to pull apart May and Yoshino and helped clean them off.

“Oops. Got something in your hair, sis.” Marina reached up to get one final strand of silk out of her sister’s hair.

Yoshino stopped her, bangs casting a shadow over her eyes. “I’m going inside. I need to be left alone.” Deaf to the world around her, she ran inside the house, abandoning her friends, family, and Pokemon.

Marina flinched, watching her older twin brush past her. “Y-Yoshino?” When she heard the screen doors slam, she flinched, yet she also ran after her.

The sight of its trainer running, potentially in tears, was the breaking point of Leafeon’s patience. At
that moment, the Grass-type was blinded by a five-course serving of rage that tasted bitter yet
surprisingly satisfying. Leafeon went into a mad dash, but Doyubi and Minccino were faster. They
intercepted Leafeon, Doyubi grabbing its hind legs with its tails and Minccino holding Leafeon’s
head. “(NO! It has to go! I refuse to be under the same ownership as that thing!)”

Gouzatile snapped his head up to glare at Leafeon. “(Whoa, whoa, don’t call your own kind a thing.
That’s not cool.)”

Rockler glanced at Arctic, who hung her head while making a low hum, hurt. It was behavior was
uncalled for, but it couldn’t help but wonder about its sense of right and wrong.

Brock had the same questions running around in his mind. He was a former Gym Leader, a breeder,
and a doctor-to-be. He had assumed too many responsibilities to let something like this slide. He was
going to remedy this situation no matter what. “I’ll handle this,” he declared, “You guys go inside
and see about Yoshino. The less people around Arctick, the better.”

Nobody questioned Brock’s request. He was a man who loved Pokemon, and when he was serious,
he walked the walk. All of them nodding soundlessly, they recalled their Pokemon and headed inside
after the sisters, bringing their Pokemon with them. Once they left, Swampert and Croagunk walked
to his side, awaiting orders. Brock watched Arctick, who slinked around like a lost child trying to
figure out what to do. Yet, it never once stopped moving, speeding up and slowing down in regular
intervals. “Almost reminds me of Dawn’s Pachirisu.”

“Swampart, get my bag,” he ordered. Swampert nodded and trudged over to the patio, retrieving and
returning it. Brock fished through it and took out a set of Cheri Berries in a ziplock bag. “Yoohoo,
Arctic.” He kneeled down and rolled a Cheri Berry in her direction. The Frozen Pokemon caught
the scent of it and shot over, scooping the berry into her mouth.

Brock held up another one.

Arctic sprinted.

Yet Croagunk was faster, getting in Arctic’s path with a Poison Jab prepared. “(Be nice.)”

Arctic titled her head, her mind computing the meaning about the words at a below-average pace.
“(N-Nice…?)”

Croagunk did a lazy nod. “(Yeah. Common decency and all that.)”

A hard stare from Arctick followed, but with how unfocused it was, she seemed to be staring off into
space rather than at Croagunk. “(De-cen-cy?)”

The Poison/Fighting-type recognized the signs. Squatting closer to the ground, he glanced at his
trainer over his shoulder. “(Hey, Brock. Believe it or not, I think this Arctick is just a baby.)”

Brock’s eyebrows rose. “Just a baby?” Brain working again, he cupped his chin. “Hmm.
Excitability, lack of self-control, and a less than basic understanding of right and wrong.” He
snapped his fingers, finding his answer. “That explains it. She doesn’t know any better. And they did
say this is a recent thing. Looks Yoshino caught a baby Pokemon and didn’t know it.”

Swampert, wanting to test out that theory, clenched its fist and activated Focus Punch. It headed over
to Arctick, guard up, and like it expected, Arctic fired an Ice Beam its way. Swampert punched the
beam of icy energy, allowing its arm to be encased in ice.

Brock deduced something else from that. “And she gets triggered seeing battles, mainly contest combinations. She wants to be apart of them but can’t express it in less destructive ways.”

He flicked another Cheri Berry to Arctick, and she caught it with her mouth. “Okay, Arctic, you want more of these?” He held up the Cheri Berries and received enthusiastic nods. He then hid them, frowning to show authority. “As long as you do as I say, you will.”

Marina’s heart skipped two beats when she heard a cabinet or closet being punched hard. She was weighing whether she should take another peek in the room or flee, but she decided to do the former option. Just barely, she saw Yoshino’s back facing her and the door. She had punched a wardrobe and was slightly shaking, but if it was stress or anger, she wasn’t sure. She was tempted to walk in, but she stopped herself when she heard Yoshino speak.

“Why... Why can’t things be so easy for me?” Her teeth were gnashed together, and her eyes narrowed, face tight with frustration. “What does that carefree fool Marina have that I don’t? It’s not fair! And why won’t that stupid Arctick listen to me?! What do I lack?!” After wasting time standing there venting, Yoshino relaxed and straightened up. “Oh, forget it. With or without them, a Pokemon Contest is around the corner. It’s a pain, but winning is all that matters. We’re going to get ready even if it kills me.”

Marina looked away, unable to stare at the scene any longer, and she forced herself to leave. “Sis, you never once thought being a Coordinator was a chore like that.”

She hated to admit it, but it was best if everybody left her alone until the Contest.

Even the audience’s murmuring was energetic. They were hungry for excitement after a day of toil. They jostled for the best position, cheering and speculating like anyone who watched sanctioned competition. So many myriads of faces—like patterns on a quilt—here to support participants or to enjoy a good reprieve. Then the spotlights flashed on as the main lights dimmed. It took both personal willpower and shushing from strangers to keep the crowd from exploding then and there, all without the first contestant coming on-stage.

The spotlights were on the master of ceremonies herself. She wore a greenish-blue gown made of soft, satiny fabric, long and loose. A semicircular, high collar made of silk-like materials headed the ankle-length robe. Boots, gloves, and stockings of similar color completed her look. Walking as lightly as an acrobat, she wore her orange hair short, but two longer bangs framed her face.

The cord between two fingers of her slim hand, the MC brought the microphone to her lips. “Greetings, one and all.” Her voice was serene like a spring meadow, pacifying even this kind of crowd. “It is such an honor to be presiding over the festivities. I am your host, Irian. Today, a number of Pokemon Coordinators have come to test their mettle against one another under the watchful eyes of our renowned panel of judges.” Turning her head and stretching her arm out behind
her, she cued sets of spotlights to shine over the three judges’ podiums. “Please give a warm round of applause for Mr. Sukizo, Mr. Contesta, and Morwenna City Nurse Joy.”

The three waved and smiled, acknowledging the cheering crowd. In that moment when Irian stopped talking, Dawn made a comment for her friends to hear. “You know, if you look closer, she kind of looks like Marian from Sinnoh.”

Brock cupped his chin and examined the MC. Dawn's observation, save for the pig tails, was rather spot-on. “Huh. You’re right. I must meet her personally after this is over.”

“Don’t get any bright ideas, wise guy.” Having leaned over to whisper in his ear, her favorite spot to grab, Misty had laced her voice with an edge. When she heard Brock shudder, she smiled innocently and sat normally. "These sure do love Pokemon Contests, don’t they?"

"If you only knew, Misty,” Ash replied, "I know you haven't really seen Pokemon Contests before. Just wait, it gets better as we go on."

“—But enough preamble, let it begin!” Irian moved out of the entranceway’s path as the bright red curtains parted. “Our first star will now shine: May from Hoenn’s Petalburg City.”

May rushed out, the layered skirt of her ankle-length, white ball gown swaying slightly. The dress was strapless and with an embellished bodice. Around her waist was a golden satin sash. A slit ran up the side, giving her bare legs freedom to move and showing her golden gladiator sandals. “OK, Venasaur, take the stage!”

Throwing out a Poke Ball, it opened up and allowed Venasaur to land mid-stage with a thud, the Capsule Seal surrounding her in a storm of rose petals. May raised her hand and said her first command, “Petal Dance!”

Standing on her hind legs, Venasaur slammed her front ones on the floor, summoning an upstream of glowing pink petals. The pink and the red intertwined and spilled across the darker air like blotted vivid inks. Each petal danced in the wind before colliding, sending ripple after ripple of mist.

“A palette of red, the color of love given shape,” Irian said as May let her audience digest just the beginning of her performance. “An ambrosial mist to get the blood pumping. We mortals ache for more!” Her voice was even and measured, a far cry from usual MCs whose every sentence was at maximum volume. Yet, every word uttered, from syllable to delivery, sounded it came from hours of practice until perfection was reached. Irian's rhetoric and speech patterns were more than enough to keep the crowd engaged.

“Venasaur, Petal Blizzard!” The giant flower on Venasaur's back glowed an even brighter shade of pink. With a roar, she unleashed a large storm of glowing pink and red petals. May herself took a couple steps back to avoid getting caught in it. “Now stir it up with Vine Whip!”

Venasaur stretched out two vines to their limit. She waved them around in the sky right in the middle of Petal Blizzard. Manipulating the petals to her will, Venasaur began forming a small twister of petals and reddish-pink light. Hearing May tell her to change up her motions, Venasaur twirled her vines, making the Petal Blizzard follow a double helix pattern.

“A chef, a painter, you think of it, Venasaur is imitating their art, using its skilled vines to create DNA before our eyes,” Irian said, observing how the intense red making the shape contrasted with the lighter hues of its outline.
Venasaur pulled her vines away, splitting apart her creation and sending out same waves of red and pink energy like at the start. As audience members cheered and whistled a curtseying May, Irian said with a smile, “A wondrous performance capped off by a magnificent callback like an author rewarding their readers for indulging in their tale. The tone has henceforth been set!”

“Way to go, May!” Ash shouted, cupping either of his mouth to amplify his voice.

Arctick grew jittery again and jumped off of Brock’s shoulder. Before it could scurry away, Croagunk blocked her path, a Poison Jab at the ready. “Ah, ah, ah!” Brock held up a Cheri Berry, noticing the Ice/Bug type freeze up at the sight. “You can’t have any more unless you behave. That’s the deal.” The breeder watched her hang her head. He smiled to himself—Arctick now associated good behavior with a reward. “Good girl.” He reached down, picked Arctick up, and put her back where she was. “So far, so good.”

“And out comes our next contestant, a familiar face to people around here. It is Yoshino of Morwenna City.”

Yoshino walked out with an air of calmness. To reflect that, she wore a shrine maiden outfit, which consisted of a long red skirt, a white haori, white socks, and sandals. The sleeves of her haori were separate from the collar, leaving her upper arms and shoulders bare. By the time she reached the boundary of the battlefield, she removed a Poke Ball from her sleeve. “Minccino, out.”

With a causal flick of the wrist, Yoshino released her chosen Pokemon onto the stage. She gestured to the lights above them. “Rain Dance!”

Eyes glowing blue like the sea in sunlight, Minccino summoned a stratus of dark clouds, dimming the lights. Doing a backflip, the Chinchilla Pokemon landed in Yoshino’s waiting arms and, with a helpful throw up, Minccino jumped high enough to disappear into the weeping clouds.

“Thunderbolt!”

The air grew heavy and the humidity pressed down. The scent of rain was dark and heady. A stillness fell over the Contest Hall and, in the silence, rumbled a low crackle of thunder. Lightning then cut crazy zig-zags into the black sky, surprising and even exciting some of the crowd, each of them painting a previously unseen path whiter than the snow as they travelled to the stage.

Yoshino paid close attention to the clouds and spotted a shadow falling. Gravity retook control of her Minccino. “Dazzling Gleam!”

The marathon of lightning strikes was interrupted by a flash of light, one not too bright to blind everyone but not too weak to overpower the storm. The soft, pink undertones were soothing, comforting, and warm. Then, all of a sudden, the fierce storm returned with a vengeance. Yoshino repeated the process of casting Thunderbolt, using Dazzling Gleam to hide Minccino falling, and catapulting it back to the sky.

“A picture that paints the cruelty of nature,” Irian orated, “A brief glimmer of light from the heavens themselves swallowed by the domineering darkness, destroying hope itself.”

Noticing the rain clouds beginning to clear, Yoshino wrapped up her performance. “Minccino, close it out with Hyper Voice!”
Suddenly, Minccino screamed, the lightning and rain bending to its will before exploding. All was clear again as residual static fluttered across the air like visible wind, Minccino landing on the ground in front of Yoshino. As the storm of applause boomed, the two bowed.

“Dark and gloomy, bright and hopeful,” Yoshino said, “A carefully used dichotomy told the tale eloquently. Bravo, Yoshino!”

Grinning to herself, Yoshino turned and exited with Minccino, passing by the next contestant. Despite the setbacks, her performance went off exactly as planned. Then, she consciously forced a frown on her face. “This isn’t over yet. I mustn’t rest.”

Her mind was a tunnel, everything blocked off by dark walls except the end where victory lied.

The semifinals of the Battle Stage had wrapped up. May sat in the dressing room to gather her bearings after that close call in the last match. Around her, contestants eliminated in the round put their casual clothes back on. In the mirror, she saw Yoshino passing by, appearing deep in thought. “Hey, Yoshino!” May got up and approached her, who acknowledged May with an unfocused gaze. May held out her hand with a bright smile. “You did fantastic. I’m honored to be your opponent in the final round.”

“Yeah, me too,” Yoshino replied. The handshake was short and just like her voice: halfhearted. She bowed. “Excuse me. I have to do some last-minute preparations.”

Yoshino made her exit, disappearing behind the door. Confused, May crossed her arms and cocked her hip. “Huh. Usually people are more excited to be in a final round.” She then heard rushing footsteps and looked to see Marina swerving to avoid other people. She then stopped and searched the premises. May guessed her reason for being here. “Hey, Marina!” She walked over. “You just missed Yoshino. She said she’s doing last—”

Like a man proposing to her wife, Marina suddenly clasped May’s hand with both of hers, getting on one knee. “May, whatever you do, please show Yoshi a good time!”

For a split second, May’s emotions suspended, the surprise protecting her until it shattered like glass. She sputtered out monosyllabic nonsense, unable to comprehend the Gym Leader’s sudden request. She even failed to notice passersby giving them odd looks. “M-Marina?”

Completely oblivious to her own lack of tact, Marina stood up, chewing on her bottom lip. At that moment, May grew concerned. “I… I think Big Sis may have lost her passion,” Marina explained, twiddling her thumbs, “Being a Pokemon Coordinator used to be a dream come true to her. And I think I’m to blame for that.”

“What do you mean?”

Marina gestured for her to come outside where there were less people. Once the two girls stood alone around a corner, Marina confided, “Gym Leaders are pretty much celebrities in their hometowns. No matter what, Yoshino doesn’t get the attention she deserves from the public like I do. Then she sees how well I get along with my Pokemon and how easily I do with Pokemon that aren’t even mine like the aquarium’s Pokemon. Her relationship with Arctick complicates things. So she’s doing things for
the sake of it now, not because she loves it.” She cast her gaze onto the ground and her eyes
darkened. She glanced back up at May. “It hurts me, you know.” Her voice sounded more pained
than anything.

Now it was May’s turn to hold her hand. May reassured her with a smile. “Don’t worry, Marina. My
dad’s Petalburg City Gym Leader. Norman? So I can relate with Yoshino. I’ll do my best to give her
a battle she’ll love. I promise.”

Marina’s expression regained its usual cheer. She captured the Coordinator in a tight hug, hoisting
her off the ground. “Thank you, thank you so much!”

May turned blue in the face. “Can’t. Breathe.”

Irian stood in the center of the stage, the spotlight squarely on her. “Ladies and gentlemen, thank you
for your time and patience and thank all the contestants for their efforts. Now, we have reached the
climax, the final round, where these two artists have separated themselves from the masses, raring to
decide the true champion.”

The master of ceremonies stood back for the true stars to shine. The stage lit up, showing May and
Yoshino across from each other. May brimmed with determination—a big smile and balled fists,
carrying the weight of Marina’s request on her shoulders. Yoshino stood relaxed with narrowed eyes
and pursed lips.

“Ladies, are you ready?”

“Ready!”

“Then let us close the book on this chapter.” Irian held up a hand. “Send out your warriors!”

May clutched her Poke Ball. “This is for the ribbon and a friend in need.” With a twirl, she hurled it
out. “Wartortle, take the stage!”

Yoshino followed up. “Doyubi, you’re up.”

The two Pokemon were released. Wartortle pumped both fists, sticking out its chest. Doyubi dug his
paws into the floor, a predator ready to pounce.

“Five minutes on the clock. Commence!”

“Yoshino, let’s give it our all, okay?” Receiving a mere, curt nod from her, much to her own
disappointment, May shifted into Coordinator mode. “Wartortle, Aqua Tail.” Wartortle stood on one
hand, tail glowing and shooting out whips of water in continuous circles. A fountain by any other
name, just as beautiful and capturing. Yoshino’s points went from 100 to 90 percent.

Yoshino narrowed her eyes. “I see my sister inspired you.” A widening smile from the brunette gave
the magenta-haired girl her answer. “I’ll do you one better. Doyubi, Tail Wave!”

At her command, Doyubi slammed its glowing tails together, summoning a stream of misty energy.
Pivoting, it sent out the energy in spirals and destroyed Wartortle’s impromptu fountain. Leftover mist and water bubbles coated the stage. May’s points dropped from full to 90, tying the contest up.

Ash leaned forward, reaching into his pocket. “Tail Wave? Never heard of that move before.” He took out his Pokedex and looked it up.

“Tail Wave: Special. A damage-dealing Normal-type move. No secondary effect. Tail Wave hits all opposing Pokémon in Double Battles. In a Triple Battle, Tail Wave will only hit opposing adjacent Pokémon.”

“Let’s put the odds in our favor!” Yoshino shouted, “Tailwind!”

Doyubi slammed its tails together hard enough for the shockwave to cause a sudden burst of wind. May and Wartortle shielded their eyes from the rushing gale. The brunette cracked one eye open and yelled over it, “Rapid Spin! Approach Doyubi head-on!”

Wartortle tucked his head and limbs into his shell, span rapidly, and shot himself at the Twin-Tailed Pokemon.

Yoshino cracked a grin. “Doyubi, walk all over it.”

The minute Doyubi moved, the wind pushed it forward, closing the distance at a much faster rate than Wartortle. With the same speed, it jumped up, dodging Rapid Spin, and drove its paws onto Wartortle’s shell. The Water type flipped over, exposing its underbelly. Doyubi leapt and did it again, hitting Wartortle in the stomach. With a sustained cry of pain, the blue turtle rolled over and clutched its gut.

“Aided by the swift wind, Doyubi demonstrates both speed and power to shed first blood,” Irian commented as May’s points dropped to 80.

May gritted her teeth. “So that’s your game, huh?” She immediately devised a counterattack. "Wartortle, Ice Beam on the floor!" Motivated, Wartortle hopped up and fired a cold beam of energy at the floor. Within seconds, most of the battlefield was covered in a thick sheet of ice. Doyubi then slipped up, falling on its side with a whine.

Yoshino gasped, holding out a hand in concern. "Doyubi!" She hurriedly regained her composure, glimpsing her opponent. “Shutting down my Tailwind strategy like that.”

May nodded, pleased with herself. "It was a well-played move, Yoshi, but not good enough. Now let’s try that Rapid Spin again."

Smirking, Wartortle repeated the attack and rammed himself into Doyubi, forcing the doglike creature to slide across the ice. Wartortle kept this up, attacking and letting Doyubi slide helplessly, for ten seconds until Tailwind finally stopped. Her advantage being turned into a disadvantage reduced Yoshino’s points from 90 to 70.

May studied Yoshino’s expression and frowned. “Still can’t tell if I’m getting to her.”

In the stands, Arctick crawled up Brock’s neck and rested atop his head, marveling the show. Brock chuckled, knowing what they meant. “Fun, huh? You want to go out there, right?” He watched as the Bug/Ice-type jumped down to the floor and expressed her enthusiasm with several rapid nods. “Well, Yoshino can’t train you properly and get you out there unless you listen to her. Right now,
she has no faith in you and neither doe her Pokemon.”

Arctick dropped her head. Brock sighed, took out the Berry, and fed it to her. “Good. She’s learning right and wrong now.”

“Two minutes have elapsed,” Irian announced, “What do these ladies have in store for the final three minutes?”

Shaking off the pain, Doyubi managed to get back up, baring its fangs. Seeing her Pokemon ready to continue, Yoshino made next move. “Dig then Tail Wave!”

The Normal type clawed its way underground. Immediately, plumes of silver exploded from beneath the surface like a field of geysers. Wartortle hastily ran about, like a chicken with his head cut off, trying to avoid being blasted. “Calm down, Wartortle,” May shouted, “Use Aqua Tail!”

Wartortle got his act together. Moving out another plume’s path, the turtle stood on both hands and performed Aqua Tail again, the rotating jets off fighting the Tail Wave.

“Time for a repeat!” Yoshino cued. “Come out and attack!” All of sudden, the plumes stopped and Doyubi sprang out of the ground directly below Wartortle. A single claw swipe went the Water type skyward and screaming all the while. Yoshino pointed at him. “Wartortle’s wide open. Snarl!”

Teeth becoming a purplish-black shade, Doyubi vaulted itself to the sky after its target. Using its front claws and two tails to steady Wartortle, Doyubi howled in his face loudly enough to produce a black soundwave. It congealed around Wartortle to form a bright purple and black sphere. Finally, the Normal type kicked the orb down back to the stage.

“Wartortle!” A concerned May shouted over the following explosion.

“Power beyond belief!” Irian marveled at the purple and black streaming out and into the air around her. The points now stood at 60-50 percent with May still clinging to her slim lead. In the aftermath, a struggling Wartortle rose to his feet, puffing out his chest like at the start and grinning. “Yet Wartortle stands tall! What resolve!”

Doyubi matched the fellow Pokemon’s expression. “(Tough guy, huh?)”

Wartortle chuckled. “(Not bad yourself.)”

Right then and there, May’s muse struck her with inspiration. To get through Yoshino, she’d have to start with her Pokemon. May pointed forward. “Wartortle, Ice Beam! Right at Yoshino!” Her mind raced once the words left her mouth. “Take the bait, take the bait, take the bait.”

“Snarl again!”

“(Time for a shootout, Tex.)” Producing a blue ball before his mouth, Wartortle fired an ice beam from it.

“(Hope you brought you’re A-game then!”) Doyubi retaliated by roaring, sending out a dark soundwave in the form of a beam.

Ice Beam and Snarl met midway, both moves cancelling out on the spot. Changing positions, the Pokemon fired two more shots in rapid succession. Every stalemate cranked up the volume of the
crowd, who burst into cheers and chants. Both Pokemon were motivated by the sounds, moving and firing faster and faster, trying to best the other.

“That’s it, Wartortle!” May shouted, “Keep going! You can do it!” She then looked at Yoshino from across the stage and said, “Time to see which of our Pokemon has the better aim.”

Yoshino, meanwhile, stood there in a trance. Water meeting darkness in a brief union that faded all the same. It was beauty and power in togetherness. Just then, Yoshino realized a lot of people were cheering them on, including her—an individual, a Pokemon Coordinator, herself and not ‘sister of our Gym Leader’.

Her trance broke when she heard Doyubi yelp in pain. Wartortle landed a hit on its front paw, ending the impromptu shootout. Because of that, Yoshin’s points decreased to 35 percent. “What? No!”

“You’re a great Coordinator, Yoshino,” May admitted from across the stage. She got her attention. “I really mean it! But, me and Wartortle are winning this. We’ll show you the bond we built from our trips in Hoenn and Johto!”

Yoshino focused on both May and Wartortle, the two were all smiles as confident as they were at the beginning—each other’s mirror image. It was almost uncanny. Yoshino had also noticed that, with every command, Wartortle carried it out with gusto. She glanced at Doyubi. To her surprise, it was smiling just like them, lost in the thrill, having the time of its life.

And she wasn’t.

Doyubi slammed on its leg on the stage, shattering the ice and soldiering through the pain. “(Come on, Yoshino! Forget the difference! A minute is all we need! I’m with you all the way!)”

Yoshino, as a general rule, hid her emotions. If things did not go her way, she figured the outside world didn’t deserve to see the real her. But, right then and there, things were different. She felt like she belonged again. Excitement poured out her like sunshine through fine white curtains. A large smirk cracked her face that hadn’t been seen for awhile. Yoshino reciprocated in the banter. “You’re preaching to yourself. I won’t lose. Tail Wave!”

“Aqua Tail!”

The luster of Doyubi’s twin tails matched the overhanging lights. “(Rematch. Double or nothing!)”

Wartortle assumed his handstand pose. “(OK by me!)”

The two Pokemon clashed once again, giving the audience the encore they craved. Feeding off the intense environment, May and Yoshino yelled out directions like pros, full of life, energy, and the desire to win. The eventual end came not because of a clear winner, but the timer going off.

“Time expires!” Irian yelled. As soon as she did, all participants ceased. Everybody’s attention went to the scoreboard. It was a 40-20 difference. “And your victor for today is May of Petalburg City!”

May took a deep breath, taking in the sweet air, as applause thundered, letting the happiness soak right into her bones. She wanted the feeling to still be there when she won her next Contest, the Grand Festival, future ones in her career, and when she was old. May closed her eyes and savored the moment. Then she felt a tug on her dress. When she reopened her eyes, Wartortle jumped into her eyes and nuzzled her. May laughed. “Wartortle, you did so great. You got me my first Tenla ribbon.”
That aside, May gazed at Yoshino and Doyubi center-stage. Giggling, she petted the Normal-type's head and stomach as it panted, tongue lolling out. Even in defeat, they were content. May and Wartortle walked over. In a display of sportsmanship, the two girls shared a handshake, one much firmer than before, smiling and staring one another in the eye. Doyubi shook Wartortle's hand with one of its tails. May then thought, “Wow, Yoshino looks like a brand-new person. Newer than when we first met.”

“You win this time,” Yoshino said, “Just don’t expect to win two in a row.”

May smirked. “We’ll see. I’ll be looking forward to our rematch.”

In the Contest Hall lobby, May had long returned to her travelling clothes and examined her new silver and turquoise Contest Ribbon. The gold piece holding the fabric together shined in the light. With a giggle, she winked at her reflection.

“Man, I’m so jealous now,” Dawn said with a sigh, looking at the ribbon from over May’s shoulder, “I can’t wait until it’s my turn.”

“Chin up, Dawn!” Ash patted the blue-haired girl roughly on the back. “No need to worry, right?”

Brock chuckled Dawn’s wince and halfhearted glance to Ash. Then, he spotted Marina and Yoshino in the distance, the two sisters engaging in idle chatter and laughter. When the sisters shared a brief hug, his heart warmed up. The breeder stood and walked over, Arctick and Croagunk tailing him.

“Hey, you two.”

Yoshino immediately locked onto her Arctick, and all she did was stay in place. “You tamed her.”

“It’s a little trick called ‘positive reinforcement.’ Helps curb behavioral problems.”

“But I don’t get it. You manage to do what I’ve been trying to do.” The magenta-haired girl sighed and hung her head. One problem solved and another still out there. “This is—”

“Let me stop you there.” Brock took a couple more steps forward, an edge lacing his voice. “Yoshino, did you know this Arctick is just a child?”

Yoshino’s face relaxed, so much so her lips parted slightly, letting loose a belated gasp. In that moment, her entire view on her delinquent Pokemon changed. “A-Are you serious?”

“All that acting out was an attention-seeking thing,” Brock explained, “It didn’t know any better, but it wanted to get to know you guys. Arctick wants to be a part of Contests too. That’s why she always seems to come out when you guys are practicing.”

Yoshino looked down at the Frozen Pokemon. “Is that true?”

Arctick cooed and nodded.

“I do suggest gradually giving Arctick experience.” Brock gently nudged Arctick forward with his
foot, the Bug/Ice type crawling toward her trainer. “It’s an excitable little thing. You may have to deal with incidents every now and then, but I think, if you work with Arctick, she’ll work with you, and the two of you will finally reach the emotional connection you have with your other Pokemon. Then she’ll eventually mature, and this’ll be a thing of the past.” He then handed over a Cheri Berry to the Coordinator. “And she likes Cheri Berries. Give them to her every now and then.”

Yoshino bent down and picked Arctick up. She smiled, her yellow eyes growing wet with unshed tears. “I promise to do better. Both of us will get better.”

Arctick cooed, doing a small nod.

And then shot string right in her face for old time’s sake.

Marina burst out laughing, falling to the floor while kicking her legs. Even Ash couldn’t stop the ripples of laughter pouring out of his mouth. Yoshino swallowed thickly and forced herself to smile. “Sign of affection. Sign of affection. Sign. Of. Affection.”

Chapter End Notes

And that’s it. Ash and the group will be leaving Morwenna City early in the next chapter.

Also, quick note. Even if a Pokemon’s gender isn’t confirmed in the original version, if the dub says male or female, I’ll use it. Like in the case of May’s Wartortle.

Oh, yeah. Marina and Yoshino are twins (since they’re both 15). Yoshi’s older by mere minutes.
Nighttime in Morwenna City was peaceful. Although the lights remained on for the night-crawlers, most residents stayed in to get rest for the next busy day. Ash and his friends were no exception, having long fell asleep in rooms at the Pokemon Center. Boys and girls separated by a wall, all of them laid as still as a brick. The only movement was the slight rise and fall of their chests. Ash splayed all over his bed, clutching his newly earned Marine Badge while May had her Morwenna Contest Ribbon on her pillow like it was her lover.

Elsewhere, a scampering figure prowled through the shadows of Morwenna City. The two tails of the bandanas hiding its face swayed in the wind. Crimson eyes scanned everywhere until they found a target: the Pokemon Center. With peerless grace, it rushed over and jumped onto the roof. Seconds later, it entered a storage room through the air ducts. A devious smirk stretched across its hidden face, finding itself in good fortune. “(That didn’t take long.)”

Pikachu’s ears perked, waking the mouse from his sleep. He lifted his head from Ash’s chest and saw the door closing, a much-too-tiny figure responsible. After holding a sustained stare for several seconds, he blinked twice to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating. “(Eh. It’s the middle of the night.)”

That’s when he noticed Ash’s Marine Badge was no longer by his side. “(Uh-oh.)”

Two soft pops, and Pikachu looked to see Croagunk and Rockler coming out their Poke Balls from inside their trainers’ bags. The latter exchanges glanced between the other two, a bemused smile appearing on his beak. “(I see I’m not the only one to sense evil afoot.)”

Keeping his eyes forward, Croagunk shrugged his shoulders. “(I couldn’t sleep, but yeah, same page and all that.)”

Pikachu gently hopped off the bed and got in-between them, speaking in a quiet voice. “(Great timing, you two. I think someone just took Ash’s Gym Badge.)”

For the briefest moment, Rockler’s eyes widened to perfect circles. Then, he narrowed them into vicious slits. “(I cannot allow that. Not after what we went through. Let us pursue.)” He led the trio, flapping over to the door and pulling it open for Pikachu and Croagunk to go through.

The three Pokemon scoured the halls of the Pokemon Center with a sort of meticulousness that was
quite uncharacteristic of either Pikachu or Croagunk. As the trio sifted, their sets of eyes darted more wildly with each passing second, constantly on the lookout for any passing silhouette that stood out from the shadows.

And Croagunk was the one to find such—a spot of darkness moving near an air duct. Both hands glowing purple, he darted and then slammed the Poison Jabs into the wall beneath the passageway. The rumble almost tipped over several objects. The figure exclaimed in surprise, slipping out and falling headfirst. A bag clattered against the floor, causing an assortment of stolen goods like jewelry and money to spill out.

From that pile, Pikachu noticed the luster of Ash’s Marine Badge and May’s Contest Ribbon. He trotted over. “(Stand up. You’re caught.)” Electricity pouring out of his cheeks, he could tell the intruder was his size and had features like navy skin, a bushy tail, and the bandanas’ tails where ears normally were.

Rockler hovered above the electric mouse, ready to fight as well. “(You have got quite the nerve storming in here.)”

“(Who, little ol’ Scere?)” replied the feminine voice as she stood and dusted herself off, “(I’m here to continue the pursuit of my passion. Chivalrous thievery.)”

Titling his head, confusion made Pikachu drop his guard and stop producing electricity. “(Uh, chivalrous thievery? What does that even mean?)”

Rockler landed beside him. “(Well, you see Pikachu. Madam here has referenced an oxymoron. Now that is—)”

“(I steal from the rich and well-living,” Scere interjected, fearing a long lecture, “(and I give to the poor and helpless. But, today, I’m doing a side job. I’m stealing for tributes.)”

“(Tributes? For who?)” Pikachu asked, standing on his hind legs.

Scere took a step towards her fallen burlap sack. Croagunk mimicked her, air sacs going in and out at regular intervals. He had already clawed out half of her goods. “(A secret.)” She turned to the other two and winked, the indent of a smile appearing on her bottom bandana.

Cursing himself for getting off-track, Rockler got back into the air. “(Enough of your prattling, Scere. Stealing is stealing, a crime. All your jibber-jabber about rich and poor is moot.)”

Scere narrowed her eyes, her paws digging in the floor. “(I don’t have to justify myself to you. I know it’s for a good cause, and I’m doing it.)” She suddenly pounced, driving her feet into Pikachu’s face. When he fell back, Croagunk and Rockler turned their heads, which meant neither of them were looking at her bag. With the same speed, Scere springboarded off Pikachu and snatched up her burlap sack. “(Give my regards to the folks holed up in here. Their stuff goes to a good cause.)”

Rockler narrowed his eyes and, in a single wingbeat, darted at Scere. “(Halt, scoundrel!)” By the time he made it over, the image of Scere vanished into the shadows. He hovered in place, looking around frantically. “(A Double Team illusion? Where’s the real deal?)”

Pikachu’s ears perked up at the sound of windows flying open.

Scere had vanished into the night.
Off the beaten path in Morwenna Forest, Team Rocket huddled up inside a circle of bushes with a giant TV coming out a small, mechanical box. They stood hopping from one foot to the other like a little girl and none of them were ashamed one bit. Jessie, James, and Meowth were deliriously happy, giddy even. Any minute now Giovanni would appear on the big screen to give them their next set of orders. It’d break a personal record for number of consecutive times he’d contact them. All the mundane worries of their lives had been muted, and all there was to know about was this moment.

Jessie was the first to snap out of her excited stupor. She turned to her male friends and frowned at how childish they looked despite being part of them mere seconds ago. “Will you two cut it out?!”

Both guys stood straighter than an arrow. “Sorry, ma’am.”

Then there was static. It grew softer and softer as the TV made a connection, giving the trio an unrestricted view of the boss of Team Rocket. Giovanni sat there, fingers steepled, staring into the screen. “Hello, you three.” He paused, expecting the usual ‘Hello, sir’ response but instead received several rapid nods, the three remaining tight-lipped. He put it aside due to more pressing matters. “I’m hearing rumors of Team Hectic involvement near Ifrit Mountain. I want you three on the case.”

“You can count on us!” The three blurted out, hands snapping up for a salute.

“I will be sending you some Tenla-native Pokemon as aid as well as a Pokenav to get you around Tenla.” Giovanni leaned forward, chair creaking like a rickety house in a gust. “Do not fail me, am I clear?”

The rapid nods again with addition of teeth chattering and the sweating of bullets. “Y-Yes, sir!”

“Good.” Giovanni ended the transmission and reclined. Now, all he had to do was play the waiting game. “I know what I want, but I need more information. I hope those three can get it.” Giovanni cracked a small yet wicked smile. “Team Hectic… You guys were once just like us. Now, you’ve transformed into something more. I want those resources you have. All Pokemon exist for Team Rocket, and what sweet irony would it be if we used your toys to win while you fail!”

An abrupt knock on his door tore Giovanni away from his thoughts. “Who is it?” He barked out, letting those on the other side know he didn’t appreciate the sudden intrusion.

Slowly, Butch and Cassidy entered, keeping their composure in the face of their leader’s wrath. “Reporting for duty, sir.”

“Unnecessary,” Giovani replied, “I already have three people on the Ifrit Mountain case.”

Cassidy glimpsed at Butch, who responded with a confused look and a shrug of his shoulders. She resumed eye contact with Giovani. “Sir, if I may ask, who?”

Giovanni cupped his chin, taking a moment to reach deep inside his memory. “Hmm… If I recall correctly, their names were Jessie and James.”
The morning after, the people crowded the line to retrieve their stolen items from Pokemon Center personnel. Most were satisfied, ready to continue their lives despite the setback. Others were reduced to angry ranting. Ash and his friends stood outside, packed up and watching the line move at a snail’s pace.

“I know I should be happy we got all our stuff back,” May said, watching what seemed like a heated argument, “but I still feel bad for the people who didn’t.”

“Pikachu,” Ash spoke, glancing at his starter, “you said the thief was a Pokemon, right? A Scere, you said?” When Pikachu nodded several times, Ash took out his Pokedex.

“Scere: The Rambunctious Pokemon. Dark-type. A Scere has magnificent skills of thievery and can successfully rob a whole city in the span of a night.”

Ash slumped in his posture. “Yikes. I hope the Pokedex is just saying things. I’d hate for that to be true.”

Pikachu had a feeling that would not be the last time he’d see Scere. If she engaged in so-called chivalrous thievery, he had to keep his guard up in case she returned to snag Ash’s badge. “And what did she mean by ‘tribute?’”

“Nurse Joy and the staff can handle the rest,” Brock stated, adjusting his bag, “It’s out of our hands. We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover.”

“That we do!” Dawn tingled from her head to her toes. She bounced on her flexing feet and rubbed her hands together, arms encircled around her Piplup. She wore the facial expression of a small child with an especially large Christmas present. “I remember the directions Marina gave us earlier. We just take the boulevard and follow the main path. We said we should go to Fimbulvetr Town before Ifrit City because it’s less of a walk, but Gyms are at both places.”

“Then, it’s settled.” Just as excited as Dawn, Ash stepped forward and watched the horizon. Shortly, the familiar landscape of Morwenna City would be gone and be replaced with that of an unknown land. Just what he wanted. “Fimbulvetr Town, here we come!”

Dawn sneezed loudly. “OK. Marina never said the way to Fimbulvetr Town was so cold!”

The young heroes followed Marina’s directions to a tee and had long left the city. What lied beyond it was that of total whiteness. The wind howled, piling up snow in drifts, blinding the day with ice-white dust. The gang walked bent over against the cold, some protecting their eyes with their arm.
The trail they walked on looked suspiciously barren. They immediately assumed workers shoveled it clean so travelers could walk without being buried knee-deep in snow.

Misty shivered, feeling the goosebumps all over her exposed skin icing over. “Yeah, that’s a detail I would’ve loved to know myself.” Every hot breath she took was released into the air in visible puffs.

“I wonder where this snow came from,” Brock said, making a conscious effort to walk tall and proud in the face of the elements. It failed time and time again, “With how nice Morwenna City was, I would’ve never guessed this.”

May hugged herself and rubbed her arms. “Maybe she didn’t know about the weather?” She thought about what she said and snorted. “Oh, what am I talking about? This is her region!”

As his head sagged back down to his chest, Ash frowned, sneered even. “Then she kept that secret to make me suffer for beating her.” She could imagine her laughing it up in the comfort of her warm home on a hill in the suburbs. Despite his mood, Ash still smelled adventure in the air. It lingered in the frosty swirls of mist, reflected in the sheets of ice, and echoed through the flatlands and up into the sky. If this was his next challenge on the path to stardom, so be it.

Focused completely on braving the cold, none of teens noticed some people spying on them. Amongst a dune of snow near the trail, Team Rocket peeked out from the top. The three of them wore heavy, black and red cloaks. "Still at it, huh?” Meowth commented, "They’d be nice practice for the new members of the family.” With time to burn, Team Rocket also intended to keep up their streak of good luck by stealing the Pokemon that started it all.

James smirked, smelling the scent of a rose as white as the land around them. “Not to mention, since things always happen when they’re around, they might lead us straight to Team Hectic.”

A loud sneeze almost made James and Meowth jump out of their skin. Jessie muttered to herself, brushing snow out of her long hair. "Let's just get this over with already.”

Eventually, the persistence of Ash and his friends paid off. A rest stop lied near the path, its tall sign a beacon of hope for struggling travelers like them. Recharged, they sprinted, enduring the icy, rushing wind. When they got close to the entrance, the doors opened, and a surge of warmth greeted them, beckoning them in. The Pokemon Mart wasn’t as big as a Pokemon Center, but this one had a lounge for people and Pokemon wanting a break from the cold. Most of the customers inside had the same goal: getting something to prepare them for the weather.

Dawn stood there, basking in the tepid heat the AC produced, melting away the tension in her body. "Much better.” She then felt a brisk breeze, making her hair dance a little, and she reopened her eyes to see May moving like a blur through the shelves of the clothing section. “Oh, wow.”

May examined all the racks, looking around for a suitable winter jacket. Pikachu was on her shoulder while his trainer busied himself elsewhere. Something then caught May's eyes. She plucked it away from the rest. "Oh, Pikachu! Wouldn't this look so cute on you?" She presented a jacket perfect for Pikachu's size. Sad thing was the outfit was a shade pink brighter than the sun itself and had tutu-like frills.

Dread had Pikachu’s stomach locked up, nothing getting in or out. Dread set his face like rigor mortis, teeth clenched tight together. “(I wouldn't look much of myself if I wore it.)” His tone of voice was deceptively calmer.
"Come on, Pikachu! Try it on!"

Hearing the sounds of a struggle and his Pikachu's desperate cries for help, Ash emerged from the other lane to see what was going on. His eyes strained at the sheer pinkness of the cloth, something he'd never put his Pikachu in. "Maaaaay!"

"What? Pikachu's even cuter now!" May replied as Pikachu whined in embarrassment.

Not wanting to deal with this, Ash simply selected a Charizard jacket and went about with his business.

Brock popped up and noticed Ash's choice of apparel. "Ah, Ash, that's boring. Get something like mine!"

Ash unblinkingly examined the silver and grey jacket with the silhouette of a Lopunny’s head. He fell quiet, trying to understand the meaning behind Brock’s words. Eventually, he said, “I don’t get it.”

Brock’s mood deflated like a balloon. “Of course you don’t.”

“OK, does everyone have their jacket?” Dawn asked, wearing an ankle coat featuring the Piplup evolutionary line.

"I think Mist-Ooooh!" May squealed when she spotted a khaki jacket with red collaring. She tried it on and it fitted her figure nicely, "Soooo warm~" Meanwhile, Misty settled with a selection of a dark burgundy jacket with navy stripes.

"I'll go pay for these, guys," Brock announced, proceeding to take the coats off everyone's hands.

"I'll be at the lounge warming up then," Misty said with the other girls following her.

"I want to take in the sights." After getting his coat back from Brock, Ash headed out, Pikachu positioning himself on Ash's shoulder. Amazing how one coat worked. The frigid temperatures seemed more bearable. "I bet you twenty bucks Fimbulvetr Town itself is even worse than this though," Ash said to his Pikachu as he walked down the road while looking at the little features the quaint route had to offer.

"(Agreed,)" Pikachu replied, the breeze making the frills billow in the wind.

Ash’s eyes twitched, his very sense of sight offended. “OK, that thing is coming off you!” Yanking the pink eyesore off Pikachu, the sudden force was enough to both of them back-first.

In that moment, a mechanical hook snatched Pikachu away.

"What the-?! Pikachu!" Ash quickly returned to his feet, but his eyes turned wide with shock when he saw a very familiar hot-air balloon, one he hadn’t seen since Zumi Town.

"No matter where you go, Team Rocket will still come to snatch this Pikachu!" Jessie said as Meowth reeled in Pikachu and placed him in a small container.

James mockingly waved the boy goodbye. "And now it is time to bid you adieu!"
"Bye-bye, you shrew!" Meowth said as the balloon began to drift away, wasting no time in making their escape. This could not have gone any better. No one was in sight to help the little twerp, and if he released his Pokemon, they had their own.

Ash chased after them. "Team Rocket, get back here!" Concern made his legs lighter, making him run faster. He powered through the far-reaching white. As Ash headed deeper into the chaparral, snow grew thicker and thicker, forcing him to slow down. "Oh, man, why here? Why now?!"

Jessie glanced over her shoulder saw Ash still giving chase even in the middle of hostile terrain. "The twerp has moxie. That much I'll give him." She then took out a Poke Ball and pressed the button in the middle to enlarge it. "Hey, twerp! Why don't you meet our new friends? Go, Spife!"

James followed suit. "Eacon, you’re up too!"

Jessie sent out a Pokemon made of orange fire, black eyes, and a black mouth with fanged teeth. The other was an eagle-like Pokemon with a shiny gem on its head and a look as sharp as his Rockler. To get an idea of what he was up against, Ash took out his Pokedex to scan them.

"Spife: The Wisp Pokemon. Spife are seemingly docile creatures and kindly light the way for lost travelers in caves. If agitated or threatened, they will melt down the vicinity."

"Eacon: The Signal Pokemon. Eacon are used for tracking and are able to locate prey from miles away. They have been used for rescue missions to act as a sort of homing beacon. The three glaring characteristics that make up an Eacon’s personality contribute to its forked evolutionary pattern."

"Spife, use Shadow Ball!"

"Eacon, Sonicboom!"

Seeing a ball of darkness and an air wave heading towards him, Ash jumped out of the way. The attacks hit the ground him, the snow kicking up into the air. Before he moved to get a Poke Ball, all of that snow came crashing down onto his back, trapping him up to the shoulders.

Jessie cracked a smirk, patting her Spife on the head, the flame lukewarm to her touch. "There. No more twerp to worry about!"

The snow weighing down like heavy shackles, Ash tried his best to power out, but the intense cold sapped Ash of his strength. He weakly looked up, with blurred vision, at the departing hot-air balloon. "Pikachu…" He couldn't believe it. Team Rocket was actually going to get away with it this time.

"Unrefined and unsightly. You have my pity. Glaceon, Ice Beam!"

As if suddenly revitalized, Ash's eyes shot wide open. The balloon itself was swiftly encased in ice. Just like himself, it was weighed and slowed down. Meowth’s mouth went ajar, and he let out a shocked scream. "Our getaway's been frozen!"

James frantically looked around for the culprit, nerves frayed. "Who would dare do that?"

"Deli Deli!" At the noise, Team Rocket looked behind them to see a Delibird perched onto the balloon basket's edge.
Meowth blinked several times, making sure his vision was fine. "What's the Team Rocket Delibird doing here at a time like this?"

"We're saved!" Jessie squealed, deciding to look at the more positive side of the spectrum. "Delibird must have come to give us even more Pokemon!"

"Delibird, Focus Punch!"

Immediately, the Delivery Pokemon used a glowing white fist to break open Pikachu's imprisonment. "(Hop on!)" Taking everything in stride, the Electric type jumped on the delivery bird's back and was flown away from the falling Meowth balloon.

"That crook!" Meowth yelled at the top of his lungs.

James jumped up and down like a child throwing a temper tantrum. "A thief stealing from a thief is much worse!"

“Snover, Magical Leaf! Glaceon, Ice Beam!"

Below, a Snover and Glaceon stood on top of shrubbery. The former raising its arm, glowing green leaves flew from them, whistling through the air with enough speed to cut even clouds. Glaceon followed up, shooting a beam of ice from its mouth. Each leaf was turned into a crystal of ice.

“Ice blooms in full splendor like flowers in spring. Each blossom is another second closer to your end.”

When the crystals contacted the hot-air balloon, ice flowers sprouted all over it, instantly trapping Team Rocket, their Pokemon, and their escape vehicle in a pillar of ice.

“Be devoured by pure white flakes, trackless and untrodden.”

The ice construct hit the ground with a slight rumble. Delibird snickered, readying another Focus Punch. Pikachu held on tight and braced himself, the Ice/Flying Pokemon gliding over.

“Scatter.”

In a single punch, the pillar of ice shattered, sending flakes and cold wind out in a shockwave.

"Team Rocket's blasting off again!" The trio disappeared in the sky, leaving behind a white twinkling star. Add another loss to their record.

Ash summoned the strength to prop himself on an elbow, watching the scene before him. Small chunks of ice fell all around like rainwater. In the middle of it all, a girl stood, long teal hair swaying in the breeze and one hand held to catch some in her palm, the other close to her chest. She lifted her chin to feel them on her face, eyes cracking open to show their own teal color. Her snowcap, boots, and coat were colored like the snow around her, and the turtleneck and tights he caught glimpses of matched her hair.

“The chill of snowflakes waft.” From a first impression alone, this girl was all about snow and ice. Her style, her voice, everything, was as soft yet captivating as fresh snow itself.

She let her hand drop, eyes teal irises suddenly growing wide. She whirled around to see Ash still
trapped. “O-Oh my goodness! You’re over there suffering and here I am lost in the moment.” She immediately rushed and began shoveling away soon with her hands. “Nice going, Winter, you can’t do anything—”

“No, no, no!” Ash interjected. He wiggled his arms free once Winter removed enough snow. “You did more than enough!”

Winter pursued her lips, focusing on the task at hand. “Please stay still.” Sounding oddly insistent, Ash relaxed. After all, he was safe now. Eventually, Winter freed him and took a step back so he could walk right out. She helped him brush off the residual snow on his jacket.

Pikachu jumped off Delibird and into his trainer’s arms, proceeding to nuzzle his face. Ash chuckled, glad yet another crisis was averted. “Pikachu. I'm glad you're fine.”

Winter entangled her fingers in her lap, smiling a little at the affectionate display. “I’m guessing you're fine now?”

Ash looked back at her and preaced his words with rapid nods. “A lot better now that Pikachu is safe.” He jabbed a thumb in his direction, sticking his chest out. “Don’t worry about me, I’m a big kid. I can tie my own shoes and everything.” He extended his hand for a handshake to finalize their fateful meeting. "I really owe you one. I'm Ash Ketchum from Pallet Town."

A gentle flush of pink had arisen in Winter’s cheeks that made her look vulnerable. "I'm Winter, Fimbulvetr Town. A pleasure." She accepted the handshake. Ash had the grasp of a ghost, thinking she was as delicate as she was soft-spoken—on that note, he did notice she was far less boisterous than when she handled Team Rocket. "But you should really thank Delibird and Glaceon. They did most of the work."

Ash flashed a toothy smile at them. "Thanks, you two!"

Delibird laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of its head. "(Oh, go on.)"

"(No, really, you're lifesavers!)" Pikachu said with a bright smile.

Glaceon averted her eyes, uninterested in them. "(Whatever.)"

"Were you heading anywhere before this happened?” Winter asked.

"I was actually in front of the Pokémon Mart taking in the sights,” Ash answered, "I'm heading back now. My friends are probably worried. You're welcome to come with!” He received a nod as his answer. The two new acquaintances proceeded to head back to the main road. As they did, Ash sparked up a conversation. "So, Winter, you said you’re from Fimbulvetr Town?"

"Yes,” she replied, Delibird flying above her, “I'm on my way there now. I guess you can say I have a promise to keep."

“Is it colder than it is now?”

Winter answered, "A little bit more, and there's more flurries, but everyone’s used to it. The people at home love playing in it." She glided her hand across the smooth surface of a snow-covered stone, relishing the cold and mushy feeling against the pads of her fingers. “The town’s very peaceful at night too.”
Delibird flew down to Pikachu’s level, wanting to make small talk. "(So, Pikachu, how long you been with Ash?)"

The Electric type answered, "(I've apart of Ash's team since he was 10.)"

The Delivery Pokemon glanced back at Ash and estimated his age based on how he looked. "(Wow! Sounds like a while.)"

Pikachu heard a snort from the Glaceon on the other side Winter’s legs. Realizing Glaceon never spoke once yet, he then asked, "(What about you and Winter?)"

Glaceon replied without looking at the Mouse Pokemon. "(Don't know, don't care.)"

Pikachu's brown eyes widened a little. "(How can you not care?)"

Delibird descended to Pikachu's level and whispered in his ear. "(Don't worry, that's her way of saying she loves Winter, and they've been together for a long time. She likes acting touch.)" Now it made more sense to the yellow mouse. Then, the Ice/Flying bird snickered. "(But that doesn't stop her from fawning over her own tail.)"

The Fresh Snow Pokemon shot a venomous glare at Delibird and snarled. "(Don't make me come over there and kick your tail, Delibird!)"

Delibird snickered and regained altitude before Glaceon could do anything else.

Ash watched the small scene over his shoulder. He nudged Winter and spoke in low voice so that the Pokemon wouldn't hear. "That's a weird Glaceon you have. It's not like May's."

Winter covered her mouth and let out a few, light giggles. "Well, Glaceon has her quirks. I sort of expect her to be different from others. But, who is this May person?"

Ash mentally slapped himself, realizing that of course Winter would have no idea who he was talking about. "Oh right! I never told you about my friends. May is from Petalburg City of the Hoenn Region, and she's a coordinator. Misty and Brock are both Gym Leaders from Cerulean and Pewter City and they've been with me since forever! Dawn is from Twinleaf Town of the Sinnoh Region, and she's also a coordinator."

"Th-That's a lot of people," Winter remarked as she slid down a slope of snow with Ash, "How’s it like traveling with a group? Is it nice?"

Ash laughed. "Oh yeah, it’s great! Never a boring moment. I wouldn't give them up for the world. Same with my Pokemon." He remembered all the good times he had with each individual member of his group. Of course there were bad times, but that only seemed to deepen their friendship when they overcame them. "Speaking of coordinators, Winter, are you one? How you finished off Team Rocket was real sweet!"

"Me? Oh, no, no," Winter said, shaking her head. "I just like to express myself during battle, so things like that happen." A faint blush crept on her face as Winter averted her eyes, mumbling. "And I don’t like dressing up."

“You say something?”
“No, nothing.” Winter reached inside her waistpack and pulled out a case. “I’m actually a Pokemon Trainer going around challenging Gyms.”

Ash examined the case that was stylized like a snowflake. The front part was see-through, and in one of the corners, he saw the Marine Badge. Excitement tugged at the corner of Ash’s mouth. “Gary, Aaron, Novak, Antia, Paul, and now Winter…” He brought out his own badge case. “Same here, so you better watch yourself.”

Glaceon let out a loud, irritated groan. "(Can we please hurry before this convo gets even mushier?)"

"Oh, Glaceon." Winter giggled as Delibird snickered. Ash only shook his head – Winter's Glaceon was definitely different from May's.

Finally, they made it back to the spot where Team Rocket stole Pikachu, the Pokémon Mart nearby. Ash noticed nobody outside. “Man, I’m glad Winter came along. I don’t think I’ve been gone long enough for the others to worry about me.” The two of them walked into the Mart, the accompanying Pokemon following them.

When Ash entered, May, who was sitting over at the armchairs, got up and ran over. "There you are, Ash! You slipped away from us, didn’t you?"

At that, the rest of his friends gathered around, Misty and Dawn in particular having prying looks to them. Ash held up his hands in defense before any sort of accusations could be made. "OK, see, there’s a good reason! I know I said I was going to check the sights, and I did, but Team Rocket tried to steal Pikachu when I walked out.”

Misty bared her teeth, shaking with rage. “Those creeps are back at it again?!”

“Yep. They don’t know when to quit.” Ash then gestured to Winter behind him. “But she helped us out of a big-time jam. Meet Winter, guys.”

Under their gazes, Winter withered. She tried to put up a friendly demeanor with a smile and everything, but there were times she look elsewhere to avoid eye contact. "Th-There weren’t many people around… The weather here tends to make sure of that.” She rolled her fingers within one of her locks. “I-I thought it was the right thing to do.”

Dawn stepped up, the first to begin the introductions. "Anyone that helps out a friend is a friend in my book! I'm Dawn!" Most of her attention was on Winter’s shimmering teal hair. "I love how your hair looks. What kind of shampoo do you use? I’d love to get my hands on it." "Hempz Couture, but in my honest opinion, yours looks great as is.” Winter replied, sounding a little more comfortable being in a crowd.

Yet another eye catcher of a female meant it was time for Brock to follow his usual protocol. He let his supply bags hit the floor to take Winter's left hand into his after she shook hands with May and Misty. "To bask in the presence of an unknown yet elegant and beautiful snow angel is enough identification for me and my increasing body temperature. My name is Brock! Please tell me, fair maiden, what is thy name? Please don’t be shy, I won’t bite.”

Winter balked at Brock's display of affection, never having met someone like this. "Uh, uh, er…” She looked at the others for help. Ash snickered, May giggled, Dawn sighed, and Misty drew a
mallet out of nowhere. Realizing she was on her own, she responded to the best of her ability. "W-Well, I'm Winter, Brock… from Fimbulvetr Town!"

Brock continued his little act. "Ahh, Winter; the name of the same chilly, snowy season that everyone adores so much. It's no wonder how much you've captured my—"

"COR!"

A lethal Poison Jab was stabbed into the left side of Brock's hip. "So. Has. This. Thing." Brock collapsed to the floor. Croagunk stood with a readied Poison Jab, perplexed that somebody else took his job. At Brock’s side stood stark white, scorpion-like Pokemon. Its barbed tail stopped glowing, and it scuttled up Winter’s with its six jointed legs and stood guard at her shoulder. Narrow, bright purple eyes and two snapping pincers dared someone else to discomfort Winter.

Croagunk shrugged his shoulders and dragged Brock away. Meanwhile, the creature hissed as further warning but stopped when Winter petted it. "I-I'm really sorry! Corsenic is just very protective of me! That's all! Honest!"

"Corsenic, eh?" Ash said as he took out his Pokedex.

"Corsenic: The Monoxide Pokemon. Corensic capture their prey by infecting blizzards with carbon monoxide. To prevent prey immune to the carbon monoxide from escaping, they stab them and inject near-lethal poison into them."

"Yikes. What a killer," Ash said in a hushed tone, glancing at Corsenic. He then decided to change the subject since Brock left everything on an awkward note. Ash approached Winter, ignoring the dangerous hisses from Corsenic, "Hey, Winter. I'm kinda curious. With how your Pokemon are, I wanna see how good you are at battling. I challenge you!"

A switch was turned on in Winter. At the prospect of battle, she smirked – just a small pouting of the lips; a narrowing of the eyes and a tilting of the head. "You're on."

Outside, Ash and Winter stood apart from each other to recreate the length of an actual battlefield. Ash had fists balled at his sides, his competitive fire making the cold a nonfactor. Winter stood arms folded behind her back and hands clasped together just behind the waist. Misty, May, and Dawn stood aside as spectators to the battle while Brock assumed the position of an official referee.

Glaceon grinned excitedly. "(Finally. This is something I can get behind.)"

Pikachu narrowed his eyes at the Fresh Snow Pokemon. "(Let's see if your bite is worse than your bark.)"

"This battle between Winter and Ash will be a standard trainer battle; only three Pokemon will be used by each trainer, and the battle will end when either trainer's Pokemon are unable to battle anymore," Brock stated.

Ash grinned while nodding. "Gotcha!"
Winter kept her eyes forward. "Understood."

"Now, send out your first Pokemon."

"Rockler, I choose you!" Ash took out his Poke Ball and threw it out, releasing the Strength Pokemon onto the battlegrounds.

Winter glanced over her shoulder. "Please, Delibird, if you would." With a salute, the Delivery Pokemon flew out in front, facing its opponent.

On instinct, Rockler hovered higher into the air, Delibird following him. "(An aerial battle, is it? Capital idea. I do need to redeem myself.)"

Delibird tilted its head. "(Redeem yourself for what?)"

"(Never you mind.)"

Glaceon whistled to get the Delivery Pokemon’s attention. "(Hey, delivery boy! Start off on a good note, okay?)"

"(Excuse you!)" Delibird whirled around and sending a glare down at the icy animal. "(It's delivery man, thank you very much!)"

"Begin."

"Rockler, Wing Attack!" At Ash’s command, Rockler rushed the Ice/Flying-type, wings glowing almost as white as the land around them.

Winter wanted to test their physical abilities first. "Delibird, use Focus Punch!" Getting his head into the game, Delibird charged dead ahead, right wing matching that of Rockler’s. Both Pokemon clashed midair, the force enough to send them rearward and back to square one. A grin tugged at Winter’s lips, satisfied with the outcome. "Follow up with Present." Upon her order, Delibird swung his bag around a full circle, hurling out a large box decorated in gift wrap.

Ash wasn’t ready to gamble so early in the match. "Dodge and use Rock Throw!" Rockler barrel-rolled out of the way while launching a giant rock. Hit, the Delivery Pokemon fell right out of the sky, chirping in pain as he crashed to the ground.

Winter cringed at the impact. She swallowed down the lump forming in her throat. "Not yet, we’ve only begun. Delibird, get up and use Water Pulse!" Sensing the urgency in her voice, Delibird took flight and summoned a blue sphere. After throwing it, a ring of water formed around it.

“Quick Attack!”

Surging forward, Rockler sidestepped the oncoming Water Pulse and rammed into Delibird. He tried pushing back, but the resistance meant nothing to Rockler as he continued driving him backwards. "(You cannot equal my strength!)"

“Focus Punch.”

“(Oh yeah?)” Delibird lifted a glowing wing. "(Let's see how you handle it then!)") Suddenly, Delibird rolled away while driving a punch into Rockler’s face. He went straight to the ground
headfirst, skidding across the ground and coming to a stop only when a pile of snow buried him.

Ash grimaced. “That’s gotta hurt.” Hearing a boom, he saw Rockler rising from the snow, still determined to win. Ash grinned, sharing his desires. “That’s the spirit! Head straight for Delibird!”

Placing a hand on her snowcap to keep in place from the sudden rush of wind, Winter kept her eyes on the charging Rockler as she ordered, “Stop it in its tracks, Delibird. Ice Shard!” Eyes glowing blue, several shards of ice were created all around Delibird. With a hard wingbeat, he launched them at Rockler.

“Get through and reach Delibird!” Ash commanded. Rockler did that and then some. He dodged each and every Ice Shard and, when he was face-to-face with the last one, he bounded off of it with his talons, closing the gap between himself and Delibird. “Now Rock Throw!” Ash cheered when Rockler landed another blow on Delibird, sending him to the ground.

“Wow. It looks like to me Rockler is trying to make up for losing to Marina’s Finneon,” May pointed out.

“Delibird, can you get up?” Winter asked concernedly. He laid there breathing laboriously. Yet, despite taking two hits that targeted his biggest weakness, Delibird nodded before jumping back to his feet. Winter smiled with relief. “Great. Now try Ice Shard again!” Delibird summoned more shards of ice and fired them in droves.

“You know what to do!” Ash cued. Rockler moved out of the way of an Ice Shard so that it would stick into the ground. Flying forward, the Rock/Flying-type Pokemon dodged until he met the last line of offense. He bounced off the last Ice Shard and using the force to jettison himself toward Delibird again.

“Water Pulse. Block its way.” Immediately, Delibird unleashed a Water Pulse in front of it. Nothing but surging water was in Rockler’s sight, and he was immediately caught in its grasp.

Ash’s eyes widened at the sight. “Rockler! Oh man!”

“Sorry. Fool me once, shame on me.” Winter snapped her fingers. In tune, Delibird ended the Water Pulse, throwing Rockler down to earth.

The Strength Pokemon writhed, releasing awkward squawks while banging his head on the ground. Surprise registered on Ash’s face before he could make his next move. “What the—? Rockler, what are you doing? Cut that out!”

Dawn chewed on her bottom lip. “Just like that, everything is under Winter’s control.”

Smiling triumphantly, Winter pointed at the confused bird. “Delibird, now’s your chance! Focus Punch!” Delibird ran as fast as his little legs allowed. While Rockler was busy slamming its head, the Delivery Pokemon time himself and delivered a Focus Punch right below the beak. The Strength Pokemon rolled uncontrollably after impact and stopped right in front of its trainer, eyes closed.

“Rockler is unable to battle! Delibird is the winner!” Brock announced.

Misty watched Winter’s Delibird take flight, heading toward his original position before the beginning of the battle. “Ash wanted to see what she’s like, and he’s getting the full experience. That Delibird’s pretty tough to be still flying after taking two Rock-type moves.”
“Return, Rockler.” Ash recalled his fallen fighter back into his Poke Ball. After softly whispering his words of gratitude, he took another one. “Alright, Gouzatile,” Ash yelled as he threw it out, “I choose you!”

Ash’s Tenla starter, Gouzatile, was set for battle. He hissed as orange wisps of flames leaked out of his mouth, eyeing Delibird with an equal amount of fire in his eyes.

“Begin!”

Winter started off this round. “Delibird, Present!” Delibird reached into its bag and hurled another box at Gouzatile.

“Ember!” Gouzatile opened his mouth and released a barrage of small orange spheres at the Present. Once the moves came in contact, the heat from the Ember caused the Present to explode instantly.

“Focus Punch!” Delibird suddenly shot through the black smoke with his right wing covered with white energy.

Ash reacted fast enough. "Leer!" So did Gouzatile. The Salamander Pokemon shot his charging foe a cold glare. Eyes growing wide and heartbeat running high. Delibird stopped dead in his tracks and left himself wide open. “Now! Use Slash, Gouzatile!” Gouzatile’s white claws glowed white, and after a quick leap, struck his opponent twice.

While Gouzatile landed on all fours, Delibird hit the ground with an audible thud. Gouzatile turned around to see Delibird trying to get back up, but his efforts took away the rest of his strength. Collapsing, the Delivery Pokemon groaned as swirls appeared in his eyes.

“Delibird is unable to battle! Gouzatile is the winner!” Brock declared.

Winter’s Glaceon rolled her eyes. “(Way to go, delivery boy. You lost to a little lizard.)”

As the Fimbulvetr Town resident recalled Delibird, Gouzatile shot the Fresh Snow Pokemon a fiery glare. “(You shouldn’t be talking, puppy.)”

Glaceon felt a vein pop in her forehead. “(I beg your pardon?! I’ll show you puppy!)”

Winter held out her foot to stop Glaceon in her tracks. “Now, now, Glaceon, it’s not your turn yet.” Once she quit with a huff, Winter pulled out another Poke Ball. “I see your style, Ash, and I’ve begun to like it.” With a grin, she pressed the button and enlarged the device. “Let’s enjoy ourselves more!” She threw it into the air. “Cloyster, your turn!”

After the Bivalve Pokemon was released to the battlefield, Brock raised his hands. "Begin!"

“If that’s what you want, let’s kick it up a notch!” Ash declared, pumping a fist, “Gouzatile, Ember!” The Fire type discharged more sparks and flares of heat at his new opponent.

“Ice Shard.” The Water/Ice-type’s horn illuminated ice blue and fired shards of ice at the Ember.

May scrunched her face at Winter’s command. “Wait, she used an Ice-type move against a Fire-type move?” Either she had something up her sleeve, or that was the best her Cloyster's arsenal had.
When the Ember and the Ice Shard crossed paths, steam hissed like Sevipers warning their prey. Only one attack cleared the shroud of mist, and that was Ice Shard—thinned to the point they resembled needles or small lances. Ash’s brain lagged trying to think of a quick way to save Gouzatile. “Oh man! She planned that!”

Glacer sneered smugly. “(I would love to see you dodge that, skinny.)”

Gouzatile sneered, generating fire within his mouth. “(Watch and be amazed then.)” Fate was an interesting thing, and it manifested itself in the form of Gouzatile releasing a glorious burst of red-orange flames. The intense Fire-type attack melted the ice needles away.

Watching the fire melt the stronger Ice Shard, it took a second or two for the new information to sink in, even though it was right before Winter’s eyes, larger than life. Then Winter’s lips stretched wider into gaping grin and her eyebrows arched for the sky. “Beautiful.” Her Pokémon’s reactions were the very opposite: a sneer and glare in disappointment.

“I don’t think anyone expected that!” Misty exclaimed, “Gouzatile learned Flamethrower in the nick of time!”

“Great job, Gouzatile! That’s the way to do it!” Ash cheered with his smile agog, “Now let’s try again! Use Flamethrower on Cloyster!” Complying, the Salamander Pokémon once again released Flamethrower, this time for the Bivalve Pokémon.

The momentum shifted in Ash’s favor thanks to Gouzatile’s new move, and that’s exactly how Winter liked it. The tension, the rush, the thrill of being backed into a corner. “Defend yourself with Barrier, Cloyster.” She ordered. Cloyster’s smirk returned as its eyes glowed purple, summoning a force-field to block the Flamethrower. “I wonder if he’ll…” Wanting to enjoy the satisfaction of being back on top, she hoped that Ash’s next course of action was within her expectations.

“Now Slash!” The Salamander Pokemon jumped through the flames and attempted to strike Cloyster while it was busy.

“Aha! He did!” Winter waited soundlessly, letting Gouzatile get as close as it could. Then, when Gouzatile proceeded to swings his claws, she shouted, “Clamp!” With the same suddenness as Winter herself, Cloyster closed its shell and captured Gouzatile’s arm in a crushing vice.

Gouzatile let out a heavenward, helpless cry. Pain gripped it so much, he couldn’t muster the strength to set himself free. One of Dawn’s hand went over her mouth, silencing her gasp of horror. May cringed, unable to watch the sight.

“Hydro Pump,” Winter commanded with a smile. Through the gap in Cloyster’s shell, glowing blue lights flashed before a torrent of water surged, engulfing the Salamander Pokemon with the rage of the seas themselves. When Hydro Pump disappeared, Gouzatile was seen spinning in the air several times before falling limp to the ground.

“Gouzatile is unable to battle. Cloyster is the winner!”

Winter closed her eyes, voice growing soft as feathery down. “The final flame fades.”

“Return, Gouzatile.” Ash extended out Gouzatile’s Poke Ball and recalled it. “That was more than great, Gouzatile. Take a break.” Putting it away, Ash glanced back up to Winter and Cloyster. She continued to stand with poise and grace while Cloyster grinned smugly, daring him to send out
another victim. Ash balled his fists—it was down to the wire, but he’d been in the situation more than enough times. Ash visualized at the battles he pulled through, all of the tough ones. The ones against Paul, against Gary, the Gym Leaders and Elite Fours, even the ones he’s faced against Legendary Pokemon. “I won’t lose.” He looked down to Pikachu. “Alright, Pikachu, it’s your turn!” The Electric-type ran out on all fours, sharing Ash’s resolve.

At that, Glaceon cracked a humored smirk. “(Hey, small fry’s finally battling.)”

“(Come and get me, little one,)” Cloyster challenged with its ever-present grin on its dark face.

“(Just remember, you asked for it!)” Pikacuh replied, sparks in its cheeks.

“Begin!”

“Here we go, Cloyster! Ice Shard!” Winter commanded. The Bivalve Pokemon instantly shot out many shards of ice from its horn.

“Use Quick Attack to dodge and head toward Cloyster!” Sprinting for the Water/Ice type, Pikachu dodged every shard in the way while leaving behind a trail of white. Eventually, Pikachu found itself within range of Winter’s Cloyster. “Iron Tail!” Ash commanded. Jumping up, Pikachu’s tail turned to iron, and he aimed for Cloyster’s face.

Winter waved her arm. “Clamp!”

Cloyster chuckled mockingly. “(A good effort.)” Right as Pikachu’s tail was going to hit, the Bivalve Pokemon closed its shell and trapped the Iron Tail in a tight clutch.

“She did it again!” Dawn exclaimed in shock.

“Watch out, Pikachu!” May cried out, covering her eyes in fear of the worst.

“Watch out for what? It can’t dodge!” Misty said in distress.

Winter suppressed the euphoric giggles welling up in her chest. “Hydro Pump.” Blue light seeped out of the crack that divided the halves of Cloyster’s shell.

Ash smirked. “Gotcha now! I knew you would do that!” He enjoyed how Winter’s pleased expression plummeted to surprise. She understood his strategy. Unlike Gouzatile, Pikachu could actually do something about his situation, and he caught her with her guard now. “Pikachu, Thunderbolt!”

Upon command, Pikachu let loose electricity from his tail and directly into Cloyser’s vulnerable face. The flash of yellow dominated the blue light as Cloyster roared in pain. By the time it faded away, Cloyster released Pikachu and fell to one side, shell opening up to reveal swirls in its eyes. Winter gasped in shock, her hand hovering over her mouth, “Cloyster, no!” This was one of the times the classic type advantage championed the day.

Glaceon scoffed. “(Not cool.)”

Brock raised up his left arm to signify Ash’s side as he declared. “Cloyster is unable to battle! Pikachu is the winner!”
“So Ash had that planned! Way to go!” May shouted happily.

“Planned? That’s rather un-Ash-like.” Misty said, eliciting amused giggles from May and Dawn. “So you have grown, Ash. I’m impressed.”

Ash heard that and glared at the redhead, pointing at her. “What’s that supposed to mean, Misty?!”

Winter recalled her Cloyster, “That Pikachu’s stronger than I imagined.” She crouched and ran her hand across Glaceon’s back. She purred, appreciating the attention. “You think you can handle it?” She asked, buttering her up.

Glaceon chuckled and trotted out, motivated. “(Watch me, Winter.)”

Winter smiled, straightening up. “Glaceon will be my last choice.”

“(Wonderful,)” Pikachu said sarcastically. Glaceon shrugged it off, deciding to pay it back during the battle.

“Begin!”

“Glaceon, Ice Beam!” Forming a blue ball in front of her mouth, Glaceon released a beam of frozen energy for Pikachu.

“Pikachu, dodge and use Thunderbolt!” Pikachu jumped to the side to avoid the Ice Beam and unleashed another Thunderbolt.

“Mirror Coat.” The Fresh Snow Pokemon’s ice blue fur shined with a pinkish light. The Thunderbolt rebound off Glaceon’s coat and headed straight back to Pikachu. He yelped in pain, feeling his own power draining his strength. “Now Iron Tail, Glaceon!” While Pikachu was still trying to shake off the Mirror Coat, Glaceon rushed for him as her tail turned into iron with a glowing aura around it.

“Pikachu, head’s up!” Ash yelled, “Quick Attack to dodge!”

Pikachu dashed away instantly to evade Glaceon’s Iron Tail. “Now use Iron Tail!” Pivoting around in the midst of its Quick Attack, Pikachu rushed the Fresh Snow Pokemon with his own tail glowing white.

“Barrier.” Glaceon’s eyes flashed before summoning a purple force-field that blocked Pikachu’s Iron Tail.

Ash gritted his teeth as Pikachu skidded back. “Dang it!”

As Brock watched the battle continue to unfold, he thought to himself, “Her Glaceon is rather balanced in its move pool. She has Barrier and Mirror Coat to defend herself against both Special and Physical attacks. At the same time, her two attacking moves are Special and Physical attacks. If Ash wants to win, he’s going to have to work for it.”

“Ice Beam, Glaceon!” Glaceon summoned another azure sphere in front of her mouth and unleashed an Ice Beam. Instead of aiming it for Pikachu, she hit the ground, creating rows of stalagmites. As the Ice Beam moved toward Pikachu, so did they.

“Pikachu, destroy them with Volt Tackle!” Sharing Ash’s lack of fear, the Electric-type charged
straight for the ice pillars as a burst of yellow electricity surrounded his body. Each one broke to pieces under Pikachu’s might.

Captivated by the display of power, Winter couldn't utter a command in time for Glaceon. The Volt Tackle-induced Pikachu rammed straight into the Ice-type’s body. Glaceon growled in pain as she slid across the battlefield from the impact. After stopping, Glaceon forced herself onto her feet.

“(Lucky shot.)”

Pikachu grinned, one eye closed as Volt Tackle's recoil side-effect kicked in. “(Don’t hate.)”

“Iron Tail!” Winter and Ash commanded simultaneously. As Pikachu and Glaceon charged, their tails turned to iron, and they looked at one another dead in the eyes. When they were close enough, they swiveled around to strike each other with their tails, the lights from which formed a visible X.

The following silence of made everyone’s blood as cold as the air around them. Bereft of any wind, there was no whispering noise or rustling.

“(You’re tougher than I thought, small fry.)” Glaceon spoke, breaking the silence.

“(I expected nothing less from you.)” Pikachu admitted. Glaceon smiled before finally collapsing onto the ground, swirls replacing her eyes.

“Glaceon is unable to battle. Pikachu is the winner and the victory goes to Ash.”

Ash burst into a sprint and scooped up his longtime buddy. “Great job, Pikachu!” He further expressed his appreciation with a tight hug. They pulled off yet another come-from-behind victory.

Winter walked over to her fallen Ice-type, kneeled down, and picked her up in her arms, cradling her like a baby. “It’s all right, Glaceon. We have to stomach a loss every now and then.”

“(Yeah, yeah,)” Glaceon replied indignantly, but she knew her trainer was right. Winter chuckled before taking out a Poke Ball and returned her into it.

Ash walked over to the Fimbulvetr Town resident with Pikachu on his shoulder and extended his hand. "Winter, you were awesome. I hope this isn't the last time we battle."

Winter took his hand and gave him a firmer handshake than during their introduction. "It won’t be. I hope I battled to your expectations.” She stared him directly in his eyes, squeezing his hand a little bit more. “I wasn’t too weak, right? Too aggressive?”

“No, no,” Ash interrupted her, slipping his hand out of her grasp, “you were totally fine.”

Winter’s shoulders slumped in relief. “OK. Good.”

The two trainers were finally joined by everyone else. “Well, now that that’s over, we can head to Fimbulvetr Town,” Brock said.

An idea popped into Winter's head. Since everybody was heading to the same location, might as well make the trip easier. "U-Um…" She cursed herself for her words not coming out right, but it did catch their attention. "If none of you mind, I can be your tour guide there. I'm sure you'll need someone familiar with the terrain." Thinking she sounded pretentious, Winter held up her hands in defense. "But you don't have to agree! I don't want to impose!”
Dawn threw an arm around her. "We'd be honored to have you travel with us!"

"Even if it is just for a short time," May added in.

"I'm just glad I get to hang out with this wonderful masterpiece longer," Brock said, leaning over while cupping his chain. He was pulled back when Misty seized his ear.

"Too bad that masterpiece isn't for sale,” Misty said with a small snarl.

Farther down the road to Fimbulvetr Town, Scere stood before a sign signaling a dead end, discouraging all from entering the forest of both dead and living trees. Scere jumped atop the sign and stared right down the path that eventually disappeared into darkness. She rummaged through her burlap sack and tensed in frustration. "Not enough."

She couldn’t go back now. Not without enough tributes. “Master Silverpilen …”

Scere would describe her sadness like death by a thousand paper cuts, for every time she remembered her loss, it was another cut to her already damaged mind. None were enough to kill her, but over time, their accumulation bled her of the compassion she had once had. She once was gregarious and generous natured, now she was just gaunt and melancholy.

Scere whirled around and jumped off the sign. “I need more, plain and simple.” She scampered off, hoping to find more suckers to swindle.

Chapter End Notes

Unlike the anime, I don’t plan on padding out the sequences of events. I’m taking things from point A to B, only stopping when it involves a new capture, world-building, character development, or plot development. Though, please do let me know if I’m rushing things. Feedback helps!
The Abandoned Route

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Abandoned Route

After meeting and befriending Winter, Ash and company continued down the road to Fimbulvetr Town for Ash’s next Gym Battle. Thanks to their warmer clothing, they moved at a faster pace, braving the snowy weather. Soon, the group arrived at a fork in the road with a large sign at the divergence point. It was partially covered in snow, the right-hand trail had dunes of snow on either of the path, and the left much thinner.

"So, which way is to Fimbulvetr Town?" Dawn asked, exchanging glances between the two different pathways.

"Fimbulvetr Town has more snow flurries than the rest of the area, so right," Winter answered, "Going left is the way to Aparra Village. Then dry, old Ifrit Mountain."

Misty went up to and examined the sight to confirm Winter’s reasoning. She also saw something else behind it and had to suppress a laugh. “U-uh? Ash, I think you might want to see this.”

Ash cocked his head to the side and walked over to the sign. Curious at the tone of Misty's voice, everyone else huddled behind them and examined it as well. There was something written on the bottom by someone other than the person who made the sign.

You’re waaaaay behind me, Ashy-Boy. Signed your rival, Gary

P.S. Ash is a loser. Gary was here, obviously.

Brock burst into chuckles. "Oh, where have I seen this before?"

Dawn laughed as May covered her mouth to suppress hers. "A-Ashy-Boy?"

"Aww, how cute. Is that a nickname?" Winter commented obliviously.

Ash sucked in his breath and formed loose fists at his sides. His heart beat with such fierceness he thought it may explode as a multitude of memories of lives they shared flooded his thoughts. He saw their interactions all throughout Kanto, their final battle at the Silver Conference, and when they took apart the halves of a broken Poke Ball. It wasn’t Gary’s ego or his superior skill that irritated Ash, it was the fact he went back to using this stupid nickname. "Just wait ’til I find you, Gary!" He roared
to the snowy heavens and sprinted off.

Misty raked her hand down her face. "And off he goes. Let’s hurry after him."

She and May began the chase. Meanwhile, two more sneezes and a couple of coughs from a struggling Dawn caught Brock’s attention. “Are you okay, Dawn? Your coat long enough?”

“I’m fine!” Dawn insisted, breaking out into a run to prove herself. “This is just as long as the one I wore to Snowpoint City!”

In their haste, none of them noticed Scere watching them all like a hawk. She hoisted her trusty burlap sack over her shoulder and grinned. "(A second chance, it seems.)" She moved out with such speed the whiteness of the snow provided ample cover for a little black creature like herself.

Up ahead, a sudden bend in the road halted Ash. The snow collected at his feet as he skidded, and he struggled to keep his balance, arms waving around in chaotic circles. Once settled, he turned to the part of the trail that was almost lost to snow and placed his hand on his hips. "Jeez, I didn't notice that wasn't part of the trail until the last minute. They really should fix that."

Having caught up, Misty left little personal space between herself and Ash’s closest ear. "If you slowed down, it's pretty obvious!"

Before he opened his mouth to retort, a black blur zoomed by--from Brock and Dawn in the back, to Winter, and finally to May, Misty, and Ash.

Winter was the only one not to immediately stop in her tracks and check herself. "W-What was that?"

"(That'd be yours truly correcting an error,)' said Scere, appearing on Ash's head. The trainer collapsed at the unexpected weight, and thieving Pokemon jumped off while carrying some items.

Pikachu assumed an aggressive stance on all fours. "(Not you again!)"

"It's got my bag!" Brock shouted, "It's got all my cooking appliances and medicine!"

Scere smirked, whirled around, and broke out into a dead sprint, maneuvering through the snow with unrelenting quickness. Pikachu dashed after her and, like the other night, Croagunk and Rockler forced themselves out of their Poke Balls and joined the chase. "(Round two, huh, boys?)" Scere spoke over her shoulder, heading to a forest streaking the horizon. "(Sorry, I don’t lose two times in a row. Ciao, sweethearts!)"

“(Get back here, scoundrel!)” Rockler screeched, wings flapping as hard as possible.

May was not too far off from the Pokemon, her anger burning so hot an aura of fire formed around her. "Come back here, you! I can't live without Brock's cooking!"

Ash was hot on May's trail, the copious snow barely slowing him down. "Give me back my Gym Badge!"

Misty stood here, hands on her hips and eyes narrowed in annoyance. "Just wonderful. From a crazy person to a crazy Pokemon. What else is next?"
After Brock ushered Misty along, Dawn released a skyward groan of frustration. "It's too cold to be running like this!" The instant she tried to pursue, another coughing fit ensued.

Winter stopped beside her. "D-Dawn? Are you okay?"

Dawn clung to the Ice-type specialist as if she were a living life raft, her response drowned out in a sea of coughs and sneezes. Her skin, once a healthy shade of peach, approached an alarming whiteness. The redness around her blue eyes and the inexplicable sheen of sweat forming on her face made her look all the worse. "I-I'm fine!" She swiped her sleeve across her nose and rushed off.

Winter made sure to stay right by her.

In the dim foyer, a man sat by the window as the bits of daylight seeped through the curtains. He had a gray mustache, long gray hair, and dark green eyes. He was garnished with a black and red robe-like suit with a shawl lapel, a purple handkerchief tucked inside the breast pocket, a tux front with purple cloth on the top, and black trousers.

The man sipped his tea slowly, never stopping even when he heard steps echoing in the darkness. Only when he set down the teacup did he speak, "Why are you interrupting me, Çharade?"

Stepping into the dim light was a pitch-black, spiderlike creature. Its long, bladed legs scaled the furniture. The smaller main body bowed in reverence, its slanted, red eyes staring into its master and jagged red mouth barely moving as Çharade talked. "(Pardon me, Mr. Silverpilen. We have strays.)"

"The first in a long time." Silverpilen muttered and then looked at Çharade, "You know what to do." Çharade's bowed slightly and scuttled away. Silverpilen stared out the window for a prolonged amount of time before an odd smile appeared on his face.

"So my saving continues."

The pursuit for Scere led all the way to the forest of dead and living trees, the sign to turn back ignored by those trying to stop her.

Tall, spindly trees stretched as far as the eyes could see. The lack of undergrowth did nothing to clear up the grayness that muddled the horizon. Even the living plants fought to keep their greenness. When a breeze came back, they all swayed stiffly, their bodies preparing to snap like the twigs at their roots. The cracks their old, cold-battered bark made sounded almost like bones cracking.

Brock was the first to stop moving, Croagunk at his side. "It's official. It got away."

"Dang it!" Ash shouted, kicking snow out of frustration. "Now we're in some remote place and half our stuff is gone."

A sudden thud caught most of the gang's attention. Dawn was on her knees, face red, her breath
shallow, and groaning. Winter barely held the younger woman up. "Dawn!" The gang yelled out, rushing over to the coordinator's side.

Brock placed his backhand on Dawn's forehead. "You are sick. The cold's gotten to you."

May looked out in the distance and bit her bottom lip in worry. "Brock? You said that Scere had your medicine right?"

"Yeah."

"Then we can't sit here," Ash said, looking in the same direction as May, "Dawn needs to get well fast, but that Scere has everything we need."

"Oh my. I see something is dreadfully wrong."

The group of young trainers immediately noticed a fine gentleman, carrying a lantern and donning a snow coat, approaching them. His eyes were on the ailing Dawn.

"Yes sir," Misty replied, standing up, "do you have any cold medicine on you? As you can see, our friend is sick and a Pokemon took all our stuff."

"At my house, I do. Let's get your friend out of this weather to a warmer place." Silverpilen turned around and led the way, Ash and Brock helping Dawn out. The others followed suit.

Halfway there, May caught a blur out of the corner of her eyes and saw a creature before it vanished out of sight.

It was an Absol.

Winter marveled at how, despite the sickness, Dawn fought for her independence. Her hands were frail and cautious, shaking gently as she pulled the covers over her. In her movements were so much of the woman she was and still was. They were ashen where the bedside light caught them, not ghostly like a white person, just subdued and greyish.

Dawn acknowledged Silverpilen with the faintest of nods, sinking into the large cushiony pillows. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome," Silverpilen said, turning to Winter, Misty, and May, "The medicine should reach its full effects within a half-hour."

"You've been a great help, sir," Winter said with the other two girls chiming in their agreement. Winter turned to them. "I'm guessing Ash and Brock went to search for that Scere?"

"You're right." May sat at the edge of the king-sized bed. "They'll be back to check on Dawn in a little while."

Misty plopped down at a nearby rocking chair. "Mr. Silverpilen, why do you live out here? It's away from the main road, and a sign tells us not to come this way."
“The government made a shorter path through Tenla,” Silverpilen replied, setting down an extra tab of medicine and water on the nightstand, “They closed this one off as a result, but I never left. I actually prefer it. It’s quiet, peaceful, and view is nice once you get used to it.”

“Oh, yes, I remember something like that on television.” Winter mused, fingering her chin, “The details are somewhat vague…”

Silverpilen coughed within the crook of his elbow, possibly breaking an awkward silence before it even began. “I don’t mean to abruptly change the subject, but are you ladies hungry?”

May eagerly raised her hand into the air. “I am! Chasing down that little rascal built up an appetite.”

“I’ll pass,” Misty declared, rising from the rocking chair, “I’m going out to see about Ash and Brock. Eat enough for the both of us, May.”

As Misty left the room, Winter decided a change in scenery herself was in order. She looked at Silverpilen and asked, “Do you mind if I take a look around? You have a nice house, sir.”

“You’re more than welcome to,” he said with a gentle smile, “You’ll find it’s easy to navigate in here.”

Winter reciprocated it and set out to explore the kind stranger’s humble home. The outside had all of the old-world charm, but the inside championed modern design all the way. The floors were polished wood and the furniture Scandinavian, high end designers only. The paintwork was every hue of grey mother nature could provide. The only compromise to comfort was the sheepskin on the floor, so clean it was hard to believe anyone had ever stepped foot on it. Almost every corner had a plant decorating, explaining the fresh air she took in every breath.

The last stop on the impromptu tour was the foyer. Even the large, gossamers were parted, the musty old room was impossibly dark and unnaturally silent, and it sent a chill up her spine. Swallowing involuntarily, she instead chose to focus on the fireplace. Golden-framed pictures lined the top shelf and, upon closer inspection, showed Silverpilen, his wife, children, and a few other family members.

A sudden aroma wafted into her nose. She hummed in delight at the seasoning. “Now I’m hungry.”

“I’m making enough.”

Winter whirled around, hand going to her racing heart. How Master Silverpilen entered the room without her notice was beyond her. “W-Well, that’s good to know,” she said, masking her surprise with a shaky smile. In a hurry to change the topic, she gestured to the pictures. “These people are beautiful.”

His shoulders slumped and his eyes casted in a mournful gaze towards the pictures. “My dearly departed loved ones.”

There was an eerie hopelessness in his voice that made her uneasy. It was all too familiar to Winter. She looked down. “I understand the feeling.”

“What do you?” The gentlemen gestured to the red and brown, cushiony seats in the middle of the foyer. “I don’t mean to dredge up bad memories, and you can decline, but I’d like to hear your story. It’s interesting, inspiring even, to hear how others persevere.”
Winter’s bottom lip quivered, losing her cheer. “Persevere… Right.”

Silverpilen lit up a candle or two at the table, the orange lights making the shadows in the room dance to their will. It was actually quite soothing to Winter and did wonders to get her into the mood. Discussing her past grew easier with time thanks to help of her family. She then heard the pouring of liquid and saw the master preparing a cup of tea. She never noticed that there before—odd. Even so, she accepted it when he inched the teacup in her direction and savored the sweet taste.

“You know Heather Isolda?” she asked.

“The Gym Leader of Fimbulvetr Town, yes.”

“She’s my sister—my adopted sister.” Winter stared at her own reflection in the brown liquid, tapping her nails against the porcelain. “My real mother and father are gone. Mom lost a long battle with an illness, and Dad seemed… to have given up when she passed. The Isoldas were close to us and took me in.”

“That must weigh heavily on your heart.”

“You don’t understand…” She gripped the cup harder, knuckles going whiter. “What did I do to make them leave me? Was I unworthy?”

Silverpilen’s chair creaked as he leaned forward, aged features moving to form a stern gaze. “I’m guessing you were a child then. You should let that go.”

Winter shook her head, setting down her unfinished tea. “No, there’s got to be something. I had no special talents of note, wasn’t a good talker, and had a weak body. Compared to Heather… she’s pretty, smart, loved by all at home, and an amazing trainer. She’s a certified schoolteacher at only 18 for crying out loud! Most of my life I kept thinking ‘What’s my purpose? What can I do?’”

“Are you still lost?”

She offered a wry smile. “Not so much. At Orre, I did find something… I was a great battler. My first battle using Glaceon I won hands down with little prior experience. Finally, I found something to be other than a weak, unmemorable little girl. I sought ways to get better, stronger. Battling grew more and more enjoyable.”

“So then what?” He leaned back into his seat, placing his arms on the rests. “There’s more to life than Pokemon battling. You should know that.”

Winter balled her fists in her lap. “You don’t understand!” She shot out of her seat, headed to the curtains, and pulled one aside to reveal the forest of grey, bare trees trying to withstand father time and mother nature. “On the battlefield, I’m somebody. I feel powerful, confident. Like I could take on the world. It’s bliss; I get so caught up in them I forget my own shortcomings.” She wiped the curtains back in place, the brighter outside shut out as the shadows inside twitched in epileptic madness under the candlelit fire. “That’s why I’ll never turn down a fight. That’s why I’m challenging Gyms now at the height of my abilities. I want to be strong, special.”

Winter took a deep breath and nothingness seized the foyer. Once calm, she whipped back around, hands up. “S-Sorry! That was a very impassioned rant and I said more than I wanted.”
“It’s fine.” Silverpilen gathered the tea set and stood up, offering her a warm smile. “Talking is therapeutic. Everyone has their own way of handling loss. Me?” With another fleeting glance to his fireplace, he continued, “I prefer to live a quiet life in solitude where I can’t be hurt again.”

Winter somberly placed a hand over her heart, sharing his pain. “Sir…”

The smell of smoke filled the room. Winter didn’t immediately say anything, for she recognized the honey flavor of hickory, and licked her lips in anticipation. Silverpilen, on the other hand, broke into a dead sprint. “Oh, dear me, the food! Gracious, I hope it hasn’t burned!”

Winter chuckled, drawing some of her long tresses over her shoulder. “Yes, maybe some food will pep me up.”

Ash, Misty, Brock, and May gathered in a circle outside of Silverpilen’s house. The boys returned empty-handed. “I don’t want to burden Mr. Silverpilen, but we may have to ask him for supplies,” Brock said, more focused on the exterior of the house to avoid the girls’ disappointed faces.

“And if he has a couple of bags we can borrow,” Ash said. Then, he sharply turned around and kicked snow into the air. “Man, I can’t believe that happened!”

“It’s okay, Ash.” May walked over and placed a hand on his tense shoulder. “After Dawn’s well, we can just go back and tell what Marina what happened.”

Ash turned back around, snatching back his shoulder. “It’s not that, May! That Scere stole from all of us. I expected something like that from Team Rocket, not a Pokemon. Imagine if we didn’t have Mr. Silverpilen…”

“I’d rather not.” Adjusting her coat around her neck, Misty went to the door. “Speaking of which, let’s check on D—” She stopped mid-step upon seeing the door closed.

May voiced the redhead’s thoughts. “Wasn’t the door wide open?”

“It was.” Misty grabbed the handle.

Locked.

As Dawn roused from her heavy slumber, cool air bombarded her face and a steamy fragrance filled her nose. The sheets were as soft as when she laid in them. She soaked in the warmth of the covers before letting her eyes welcome the bedside light. Dawn sat up, looking to see Winter at the rocking chair reading a book that she likely got from the nearby bookshelf. At the nightstand was supper, the steam rising in curls before disappearing.

“Did you make this, Winter?” Dawn asked.
Winter glanced up from the book. “Ah, you’re awake. No, Mr. Silverplien did.” She set it aside and help set up the tray in the bed. “Please eat while it’s hot if you have the strength to.”

“Yeah, I’m like 90 percent right now.” Dawn’s bright smile appeared full force. “Thanks, Winny!”

Winter chuckled. “You sound like my sister right now.”

The first bite electrified her taste buds; she was instantly hooked. Forgetting all the manners taught to her by Johanna, Dawn devoured the meal. It took a whole minute, capped by her guzzling the tea to wash it all down. “Now that’s good eating!”

Winter’s jaw dropped. “Um… yes…”

Dawn threw the covers off of her, feeling even better, and stood on the floor. “Okay! Time to brave this cold again! Where are the others?”

“Around here somewhere,” Winter replied, “I’m hoping they found that thief.”

Dawn got fully dressed and headed out the door, Winter right behind her. The two went into the hallway, dark and gloomy with large portraits in gold frames hanging high on the walls. Dawn narrowed her eyes. “Hmm. It feels a little… off in here.”

Winter looked at her quizzically. “Are you sure? It shouldn’t be. The master is a nice man, and the others didn’t feel the same.”

Dawn shrugged her shoulders. “Must be my imagination.”

The stillness of the air seemed to suck even the sound of their footfalls into the nothingness of the hallway. Nothing, pure nothing. Dawn figured it normal—after all, she was ill and barely able to get a proper first impression—but she noticed Winter’s footsteps steadily growing slower than hers. Now, Dawn couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right. Not this time. For what reason did Winter have to worry?

Winter stopped, eyes glued to a large frame. “Didn’t we pass this picture already?”

Dawn took a look. In fact, that was the picture near the guestroom door, which wasn’t there. “Yes,” she croaked out.

Winter’s throat rippled after a silent swallow. Her fingers clawed at the fabric of her coat. “W-What’s going on?”

Deep laughing.

Stiffly, the girls turned around. The darkness cloaking the other end of the hallway stirred.

“W-Winter.” Dawn tried her best to keep voice normal.

“Y-Yes?”

The black turned purple.

“Run.”
The specter of a Haunter burst out, eyes red and jabbed mouth wide open to let loose wails of the deceased. The girls sprinted, never stopping, never looking back again. Dawn’s breath came in small spurts, hot and nervous. Her fingers curled into sweaty fists, swinging forward as if it would make her faster. She still could hear the baying howls of the ghost and Winter breathing laboriously herself.

"Where’s the outside? Where’s the outside? Where’s the outside?" Dawn cried aloud, throwing herself forward with even greater abandon. Her lungs and heart were pumping, but the air didn’t seem to be enough as she kept at it, panic trembling in her limbs.

Dawn examined Winter out of the corner of her eyes. She looked paler than usual, a glaze sheening her teal eyes. She was fighting something. Fear? An unknown illness herself? In either case, Winter was now slowing down. “Come on, Winter!”

She saw her eyes roll back. Winter collapsed to the floor.

Dawn stopped breathing.

A pop. Winter’s Corsenic surged out from its Poke Ball and faced the monstrosity without any fear. “(Begone!)” It fired an Ice Beam that nailed the Haunter square between the eyes.

A flash of lightning.

The boom of thunder.

Gone.

Dawn started breathing again. Safety. She kneeled down to where Winter was and shook her. “Winter? Winter! Say something!”

Corsenic hissed and appeared on Winter’s back at breakneck speeds. Dawn yelped and scrambled backwards. “D-Don’t hurt me! I’m just trying to help!” She groped around for Piplup’s Poke Ball and clumsily released him. “Piplup, please talk to him.”

Piplup looked at Corsenic and his beak dropped at the sight of the unconscious Winter. “(W-What happened here?!)

Corsenic grunted and glimpsed the spot where that Haunter formerly stood. “(Remember when the tall one put the move on Winter?)”

Piplup snickered. “(Yeah. What about it?)”

Corsenic stated, “(My mistress has been plagued by weak constitutions since childhood. She’ll faint under great duress. I’ve since conditioned myself to come to her aid the moment I sense her in peril.)”

Dawn casted a forlorn look at Winter. Then, balling her fist, she steeled her resolve and stood up. “Let’s go. We have to get to the bottom of this. If whoever’s behind this won’t let us out, we’ll make them.” She reached to pick Winter up, but Corsenic halted with a snakelike hiss. She flinched. “C’mon, Corsenic! You got to trust me!”

“(Yeah, seriously, trust us!)” Piplup chirped, waving his small fins. “(Let’s work together to get out
Corsenic took a moment to contemplate the odds. Its eyes were as sharp and uninviting as ever, making Dawn believe Winter was the only thing that mattered to it. Then, with another grunt, it said, “(Very we—Behind you!)”

Dawn twisted her head in shock.

Blackness.

Ash scouted the house for at least a fifth time, trying to find a way to get in. The windows were shut, and the curtains sight of everything inside. He heard the others yelling for help, for someone’s attention. Like the other times, it never worked. It was as if the inside was soundproof. Silverplien or Winter should have noticed by now. “And how’s Dawn doing? Is she better?” He asked loud.

“(You’re better off leaving.)”

Ash and Pikachu turned around to see an Absol staring at them hard. Its attention then drifted to the house as Pikachu asked, “(What? Why?)”

“(Master caught at least one of you the moment he found you in the woods,)” Absol explained, closing its red eyes, ”(I was too late to intervene. By now, Çharade has your friends in his clutches. It’s over.)”

Sparks on his cheeks, Pikachu approached the Absol closer without apprehension. “(I’m not giving up on them! You know what’s going on, don’t you? Help us.)”

“(There’s nothing I can do!” Absol snapped, making both Pikachu and Ash flinch, ”(I’ve tried saving many, but Çharade’s more powerful than either me or Dusknoir. When we stopped people from coming here, they extended their reach. We thought the route getting shut down would put an end to this, but we were wrong apparently.)”

“Çharade?” Ash pulled out his Pokedex to get an idea of whom they were up against.

“Çharade: The Shape-Shift Pokemon This dark pokemon is highly intelligent as it is able to morph its own appearance to that of other Pokemon or even humans. It is a master of illusion.”

Pikachu shouted suddenly to get their attention. The yellow mouse pointed at the house. A strange violet substance seeped out in certain spots one would miss unless completely focusing on it. Ash’s eyebrows drew together as the mist disappeared as quickly as it came. “What’s going on now?”

Disbelief washed over Absol. “(An anomaly? That happens every time… Scere? Is she inside?)”

Now it was Pikachu's turn. “(Scere? Seriously?!)”

Absol pawed at the ground. A look of renewed determination crossed its face. “(Seems like you met her. You’re in luck. Scere's made it possible to save your friends.)”
“(What’s different now?)” Pikachu asked.

“(Scere steals to give tribute to our fallen master somewhere around here. To ward off him and Çharade. Her timing is especially impeccable this time.)” Absol's scythe-like horn glowed, crouching down in an aggressive stance. "(Might want to gather your troops. We have one shot.)"

Scere unclasped her hands and stepped away from the crudely made altar. She put her hands on her hips. “That should do it.” She looked at the items she took from those trainers. “(Hopefully, those guys were smart enough to take a hike, or I was in time to stop the master.)” Turning, she almost tripped over a broken Poketch. “(Not like they or these other people will miss it. It went to a good cause.)” She kicked the Poketch to one of the many piles of stolen stuff used for her offerings. “(Now then… to target the city again or hit someplace new?)”

Scere exited through a stairway near the back of the underground altar room. She pushed the hatch open. Taking a quick to make sure the coast was clear, she came out and closed it. Çharade was slick but not enough to outsmart someone like her—after all this time, it never discovered her little countermeasure that was so close to home.

Feeling lucky, Scere decided to check things out at the home. She entered a nearby crawlspace and headed into the shadowy depths, humming a soft tune to herself. The closer she got, the more she heard muffled commotion. Her heart sank. “(Was I too late?)” She quickened her pace.

She emerged from the other end of the crawlspace and followed the noises. It led her to a familiar room, or rather, a dungeon. It was featureless, the floorboards stripped away to reveal the earthen ground. The stone walls were cold like the outside. In the very back, a large door. Scere went here a grand total of one time, and what she saw was enough to come up with the offering plan and never return. Bless Absol and Dusknoir for coming to this place more than once in their attempts to stop Çharade and Silverplien.

The unfortunate visitors were the blue- and the teal-haired ones. “(Shoot... I was too late.)”

“I’m glad you finally woke up, Winter,” the blue-haired girl said, “We need to work together to get out of here!”

“I-I’m so sorry, Dawn,” Winter replied, unable to look her in the eye.

“Welcome, ladies.” Although that was the master speaking, Çharade crawled down from the ceiling. Winter screamed and hid behind Dawn, who glared at the black Pokemon. With a swish of its long legs, Master Silverplien appeared, arms resting in the small of his back.

“S-Sir!” Winter called out, watching from over Dawn’s shoulder, “What is going on? I don’t understand.”

Dipping his head slightly, regret washed over Silverplien’s face like the long slow waves on a shallow beach. “All I have to say is... I know nothing, I have nothing, and I exist for nothing but hatred and rage. Team Hectic did this to me, so I want to save everyone from the pain.”

This is why Scere no longer could tell who the true mastermind of this plan was. True, Silverplien
was the trainer, but he had well intentions hidden behind his pain whereas Çharade was aggressive and capable of reveling in this kind of heinousness.

Dawn formed fists at her sides, narrowing her eyes to make a defiant glare. “Well, leave us out of it! I won’t taking this lying down, you freak!”


“Heck no! I have goals I’m pursuing, and I won’t rest until I reach the end! I’m sorry, sir, but you’re going to have to try harder than this!” As Piplup stood in attention, ready for a brawl, Dawn faced Winter, holding one of her hands and squeezing it hand comfortably. “Come on, Winter. Let’s fight! I’m with you! Even if you are scared, you can lean on me!”

Winter stood there for a moment and then nodded. With a shaky hand, she reached and retrieved a Poke Ball, releasing a Glaceon where Piplup was. Corsenic was already out there. For a moment, Scere contemplated on going out there and helping to put an end to this madness, but what if they lost? Her whole secret operation would get exposed and the one thing that worked, if temporarily, would be shut down.

Çharade took an aggressive stance before Silverplien, laughing maniacally. Silverplien stiffened at the sight of their resistance. “Why should I have to suffer? Why does everyone else get to live happy lives while mine and my families’ were cut short? Why does Team Hectic get to roam free while I’m left to suffer?! This is a fate I refuse!”

Çharade stated, “(You will be ample sacrifices to the chaos below. He will feed off your torment when he rises again to submerge this pitiful universe in endless darkness!)

“(What are these wackjobs talking about?!)” Piplup shouted in confusion.

Glaceon gritted her teeth, pawing at the ground and lowering her stance. “(I don’t know, but I ain’t about to sit here and find out. We’re going down swingin’!)

Thus the fight raged. Three against one, but to Çharade, it mattered little. It scurried everyone, dodging the attacks of Glaceon, Piplup, and Corsenic with ease. It looked so much like bumbling idiots struggling to squash a scurrying cockroach. Çharade’s Night Slash clashed with Glaceon’s Iron Tail and easily bated her.

Piplup jumped and did a spin as per Dawn's command. The swarm of incoming Bubble Beams hit Çharade on all sides. Emboldened, Corsenic charged and nailed a Poison Jab that knocked Çharade off-centered, followed by Glaceon driving it into a wall with Ice Beam.

"(Oh wow, they're actually winning.)" As soon as Scere said that, Çharade recovered and jumped high enough to attach to the ceiling. It begin raining Dark Pulses from its red mouth, dust and ash kicking up with each explosion. As the three Pokemon were hit, Scere shivered at their cries of agony.

"(I can't sit here anymore.)" It was against her better nature, but she rushed out. As Charade descended to finish off the weakened foes, she closed the gap at a much faster pace, her fist glowing with a red-orange aura. She struck Çharade’s exposed underside, sending it all the way to where Silverplien was.

For the first time he revealed his deceit, the master's face showed shock. "S-Scere? You're here?"
Scere chuckled sheepishly. "(Uh, long time no see, Master Silverplien...)") She refocused on the battle when Çharade snarled, eyes glowing menacingly. It was mad, that much was to be expected. Corsenic hissed at her while Glaceon looked ready to destroy her. Scere sighed in defeat. "(I don’t know what I’m doing. This is hopeless, yet here I am fighting by your sides.)"

"(We're still going to kick your butt for getting us into this,)") Piplup declared, deadpanning.

A monstrous growl rolled out of Silverplien’s mouth. Scere stood there petrified, taken aback as he yelled, “You abandon me too…? Fine. FINE! You can join them too!”

A sudden chill.

Scere swallowed thickly.

A complete shutdown of light except for the dull one of the doors. This darkness weighed heavily on her shoulders. From there streams the smell of sulfur. The pungent vapor filled her nostrils, turned her stomach. Scere heard muffled voices spilling out from her left. It was Winter mumbling sickly. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she fainted again. Dawn barely caught her. “Winter! Dang it, not again!”

Glaceon ripped her attention from the door to her now unconscious trainer. “(If ya ask me, I’m impressed she’s lasted this long. That’s an improvement.)”

The door flew opens.

Purple.

Black.

White.

The wails of the passed.

Glaceon’s eyes bugged out. “(Wait a minute! Just what the heck are we dealing with?!)”

Then, an invisible, magnetic force proceeded to draw them towards the door. Scere tried to stand her ground but to no avail. “(He’s dragging us in!)”

Piplup flailed and clawed at the ground in sheer desperation. “(I’m too young to die!)”

Çharade’s crimson eyes turned blue, adding the force of a Psychic to the pull. Scere gasped as the others began to pass her, holding onto each other and the ground for dear life. “(Çharade, stop! Master! Think about what you’re doing!)”

"(That's enough!)

A blur of white. Scere almost choked on her own breath. "(A-Absol?)"

Absol’s scythe-like horn glowed a vicious vermilion and struck Charade in a wide, slashing arc. Meanwhile, a Dusknoir emerged from the shadows and tackled Master Silverplien.
"No! Stop! I must save them from the darkness!" A frenetic Master Silverplien was sent into the portal and vanished within the violet depths.

"Pikachu, Volt Tackle!" Çharade was the next one on the list. Pikachu hurtled past her, coated in electricity bright enough to eliminate all the spectral darkness the room. Pikachu rammed into Çharade with such force the dark Pokemon went right after its master.

Absol rushed over to one half of the doors and pushed its bodyweight into it. "(Close it!)

Everyone else, except Dawn who stayed with Winter, assisted in shutting the gate. By the time it loosened up, Dusknoir returned and helped out. Finally, they closed the doors with an echoic slam. Light returned, and all was calm. No eeriness. Just relief.

Dusknoir pulled away with a lingering gaze at the doors. "(We’ve finally put Master Silverplien’s spirit to rest.)"

Absol bowed his head in reverence. "(Rest easy, master. It’s all over. Your family awaits.)"

Ash and company, with Brock carrying the still unconscious Winter, were escorted to Scere's personal domain. There, she return all of their stolen items.

May couldn't help but steal glances at the sheer number of stolen goods hanging around collecting dust, some already in disuse. "Look at all the stuff. Scere, why do you have all this?"

"(I use them as tribute to pray to the shrine,)" Scere explained, sitting at the shrine, "(It works every single time, but after today, I'm more than sure it lost its powers.)"

Ash stared at the Dark-type hard. "So why not tell anyone?"

Scere shrugged. "(Same reason Absol and Dusknoir stay in the forest to ward off strays. This is a private matter. We tried to resolve it and our own different ways. We succeed most of the time, and sometimes we fail.)"

"But going around stealing..." Dawn said, "Don't you think there's something wrong with that still?"

Scere chuckled mirthlessly. "(You poor kids got a lot to learn. When you know only one way, let alone one way that work, you can’t help but stick to it.)"

Pikachu stepped forward. "(So why’d you fight then?)"

Scere grew quiet, hands half-curving into fists, then straightening. "(I really don’t know.)"

Pikachu smiled. "(Because you know deep in your heart something better had to be done.)"

Jumping off the altar, Scere shook her head with a sigh and smile. She went over and patted Pikachu on the head. "(Ah, you’re so cute and innocent, it’s almost pitiful.)"

Everybody went outside. As soon as they did, Silverplien's house was surrounded by the same violet
color as the portal. It faded in and out of experience like a struggling flame before finally disappearing on the spot. It was as if it was never there in the first place. The whole gang stood the slack-jawed.

"D-Did we just..." Ash's pointing finger shook uncontrollably. "I-Is what I think just happened?"

Absol shook his head. Poor guy was so shaken up he couldn't form a proper sentence. "(The master was nothing more than a vengeful revenant remaining on this plane through sheer hatred.)"

"(When Silverplien and Çharade were sent to the spirit world, their influence on the real world faded away.)"

"My head hurts," May declared, running a hand through her brown locks.

"Good thing Winter's still out or else she'd faint a third time," Dawn said, taking calming breaths and forcing herself to look elsewhere. "This is just insane. Good thing it's still daytime. I don't think I'd sleep after what I just saw."

Dusknoir faced Absol and said, "(Well, old friend, our job is done.)"

Absol nodded. "(Yes. We're free. I wish you the best.)"

Scere instantly stepped in-between them, exchanging looks of disbelief at her former comrades. "(Wait a sec. So you guys are just going to leave?)"

"(There’s no more reason to stay.)" Absol stated, turning around, "(It's time to see the world, Scere. To put the past behind us.)" With not another word, Absol sprinted and lept to the nearest tree. Within seconds, he disappeared over the blurry horizon.

Dusknoir patted Scere on the head as a parting gesture. "(Goodbye, Scere. Hope to see you in another part of the world.)" It then phased through the ground.

Once they left, Brock looked at the hidden entrance of Scere's underground altar. "Before we go anywhere, we may need to call a Pokemon Ranger or something to round up that stuff."

Ash looked at the Dark type standing there motionless. "Well, Scere? Aren’t you going to leave?"

Scere stared at him long before slowly shaking her head. "(I… wouldn’t know where to go. To be honest, I didn’t think this far ahead.)"

Piplip leaned forward in Dawn’s arms, forming a glare with his large eyes. "(You still have to pay for getting us roped into this mess.)"

"(Indirectly!)" Scere insisted, unfazed by Piplup’s glare. That was when a Poke Ball round in front of her. She looked to see it was Ash, kneeling down.

"Know how you can pay us back?" Ash asked with a grin, "Come with us. I could use someone like you."

Surprisingly, Sere didn’t take long to give an answer. "(Hmm. I guess I’ll give it a try.)" She stared at the sky, at the falling snowflakes that seemed fresh and new. "(I like stimulation. Maybe I’ll find my place in the world hanging with you guys.)"
Pikachu turned around to hide his huge smile. “(I doubt she and Rockler will get along…)”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is long overdue. Ironic because I was looking forward to this one. It didn’t help a recent setback delayed its completion for a few weeks (those who follow my DeviantArt or read my profile know the whole story). Sorry about that, folks.
The Permafrost Princess: Heather

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Pokemon is copyrighted to Satoshi Tajiri and Game Freak (characters, concept, and creatures). The content I claim ownership of includes everything involving the Tenla Region, its mythology and history, native Pokemon, NPCs such as Gym Leaders and Elite Four, and among other things. I also own the original characters that appear in this story.

The Permafrost Princess: Heather

Professor Ironwood entered a room full of white-coated scientists moving in choreographed silence. The hum of machinery was like a soft whisper in the background. The aroma was mostly of the setting agar plates, but there was an undertone of bleach. Xavier approached a small reserve where a Claw Fossil lied, examining the data appearing on the nearby computers.

“Still doing things, sir,” Wilma said, leafing through her clipboard, “Hopefully, we’ll be able to explain why Prehistoric Pokemon can be infected with Pokerus and why stat-boosting drugs work on them too.”

Xavier smiled proudly. “That’s something I’m looking forward to.” For now, it looked like he could head into his office and wind down for a little. At least until another trainer arrived to receive a Starter Pokemon. Good thing he had a whole stock of them this time to avoid what happened with Ash. “Speaking of which…”

“I’m sorry, sir?” Wilma said, hearing him.

“I’m going to see how Ash likes Tenla so far.” Xavier took note of the girl’s quizzical expression. “I always make an effort to see how my newcomers are doing. Once they’re fine, I no longer need to. For example, Novak and Antia are all the way in Skyglow City, meaning I’m letting them go for good.”

Xavier headed to the nearest video phone, fished through a nearby logbook of numbers, and dialed the one associated with Ash’s Pokedex. After a few rings, someone picked up. “Hello, Ash, it’s Professor Ironwood.”

“Professor Ironwood, just who we needed to see!”

Xavier’s brows drew together at Ash’s distressed tone of voice, but he nonetheless kept up his professional tone. “Why is that? A Tenla Pokemon got you stumped?”

“No.” That’s when Ash and his friends took turns explaining the whole situation to him. “—we’re almost out of here. There was no reception, so we’re glad you’re able to call us through my Pokedex.”

Dread welled up in Xavier’s chest, almost robbing him of his breath. “What?! You all wound up on
the Abandoned Route?” He heard glass dropping and turned around to shush his assistants. Then, he said to Ash, “This is unacceptable, and I’m sorry all of you had to go through that. Here, write down my number. It works for Pokegears, mobile devices, video phones, all of them. If you encounter something like that ever again, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Yes, sir.”

After giving them his number, Xavier then said, “Keep following the path and you’ll wind up in Fimbulvetr Town. The Abandoned Route used to be the main way, and much shorter than the one we have now, until strange activity happened on it. As you saw.”

“Thanks, Professor. We’ll be more careful.”

“Please be.” Xavier ended the transmission, turning away from the video phone while running a hand through his hair. “Unbelievable…”

“If you ask me,” Renee said out of the blue, leaning against a corner with her arms crossed and a scowl across her face, “the Tenla Government should’ve had that whole route razed to the ground. Their ‘foolproof’ measure nearly endangered Ash and his friends! And they aren’t the first!” She ended her rant with a growl. “Goodness, they’ve been messing up the past few years.”

“Now hold on, Renee,” Wilma interjected, “let’s not forget the great economical things they’ve done for us. The bridges, the roads, Future Island, all of that!”

Soon, the rest of the crowd joined in, divisive in their opinions. Xavier slammed his hand on the closest tabletop as powerfully as he could. “Enough!” Pure silence. He stared each and every one of his helpers in the eye before he said, “This isn’t a place to discuss sociopolitical matters. We’re scientists and researchers. Let’s do our job and our job alone.”

Whether begrudgingly or emphatically, they all assented.

“Wilma, contact the Tenla Police Ops,” he ordered, “Have them send some Rangers and maybe some officers to the Abandoned Route.”

“On it.” She set out to do her task.

“Everyone else, get back to work.” Quickly, his men and women resumed their experimentations in peace. Xavier calmed down and took off his glasses to clean them. “Seems like every place Team Hectic touches is forever tainted.”

The remaining walk towards Fimbulvetr Town was far too quiet for Dawn’s tastes, but she did nothing to change it. Everybody wanted to leave what happened behind them, and the only cure was arrival at Fimbulvetr Town, a new place and the next step on their journey. It wasn’t as cold to her, but that was thanks to the extra pair of tights she wore courtesy of Winter. She considered buying a temporary pair of pants when she reached town.

As Dawn hugged Pipulp a little tighter, she checked Winter over her shoulder. Winter trailed behind everyone. Corsenic lied on her right shoulder like a guardian angel while Glaceon walked in tune
with her. Her eyes, bereft of their natural sheen, stared at both the ground and what was forward, almost curtained by her teal tresses.

Dawn slowed her pace to walk beside Winter, ignoring Corsenic’s piercing glare. “Hey.”

She acknowledged her with a sideways glance.

“How are you holding up?”

Winter barely shrugged her shoulders. “I think… I’ll get better once we reach my hometown.”

“That’s good.” Dawn smiled. “I want you to know I appreciate you staying with me that whole time.”

That got her full attention. “But I didn’t do anything.”

“Sometimes, just being near someone helps,” Dawn said, “I didn’t have to go through that alone, and your Corsenic was a real big help too. Without it, that Haunter would’ve got me. You obviously had the courage to catch it.”

Winter stayed quiet for a few seconds before petting the Ice/Poison-type on her shoulder. “He is quite loyal. I’m proud to have him.”

“(And I’m grateful to be by your side,)” Corsenic remarked, eyes closed as he was petted.

“That’s the silver lining, Winny,” Dawn said, smiles widening, “Always look for it.”

Winter smiled back. To Dawn, it was the sweetest of rewards for reaching out to a new friend. “Thank you.”

Before long, the path changed. Naked winter trees lined the avenue. Breaths rose in visible puffs to join the steel grey and chalk white sky. The chill brought a crispness to the fallen leaves, bejewelled with frost, that crunched underfoot. Towards the end of the trail, an ice blue sign stood tall and proud:

*Welcome to Fimbulvetr Town*

*The beauty of nature blanketed in eternal white*

Winter danced down the steps marking the end, twirling and hopping on her tiptoes, light as feather. At the bottom, she spun in place, arms above her head, before stopping and curtseying to the gang. “Ladies and gentlemen, I welcome you to Fimbulvetr Town.”

Dawn’s eyes were drawn to the massive, ice formation in the very back of the small town. Then, she looked at the glimmering lights on posts and through open windows as people gathered around fireplaces, munching winter delights. Children played and built snowmen as big as the universe. People walked to and from like normal, unburdened by their surroundings. Ledges at the top of every building were filled with ice cold snow whilst telephone wires were frozen solid, with icicles dangling at a threatening height. Every building used the same shade of red, a cherry scarlet, to keep their identity as they battled white and blue.

Brock looked around as they joined Winter at the bottom of the steps. “This is Fimbulvetr Town,
“Yes, humble, old Fimbulvetr Town,” Winter said, leading the way, “Our only attractions are the Niflheim Maw, that giant slab of ice you probably saw first, and the Academy, where my sister Heather, the Gym Leader, teaches at. I’m taking us there now.”

“Your sister?” May echoed, blinking owlishly. “I know that must be stressful.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Misty rolled her eyes, recalling reception about her and the Sensational Sisters. “It’s not fun being related to quote-unquote ‘celebrities.’”

“I’m fine with it,” Winter replied, “In fact, it motivates me. I’ve been waiting for a long time to finally have a serious battle with Heather.”

Ash chuckled. “Don’t wear her out too well, Winter.” He tossed her a smirk, his competitive fire igniting. “You’re not the only one itching for a fight.”

“So, you weren’t that far behind me, Ash. I’m impressed.”

The smugness in the voice could melt the whole area. Ash sharply turned to the owner of the voice. “Hello, Gary.” The smirking grandson of Professor Oak was leaning against a street pole. He wore a beige jacket with yellow sleeves, cuffed denim jeans, and boots. The jacket was unzipped slightly to reveal a white short-sleeved shirt with buttons.

“Sup, everyone!” Holding up one hand as a form of greeting, Gary peeled himself off the street-pole and walked toward them.

Ash formed a death glare, but the corners of his mouth twitched upward. “Thanks for leaving that message for me on that sign, Gary.”

“Well, hey, I did that when we started out back in the Kanto Region. And since I’m coming out of being Pokemon Researcher temporarily to battle again in a new region, I figured I should do a repeat. We’re basically starting all over again.” As Gary ended his explanation, his grin changed into a smile.

A smile of Ash’s own finally broke free.

Gary then diverted his attention to the rest of the group. “Don’t think I forgot about some of you guys either.”

“Not for a second, Gary.” Brock shared a high-five with Gary and pulled him in for a brief hug. Misty gave Gary a full hug.

Unleashing her pent-up enthusiasm, Dawn invaded Gary’s personal bubble, hands clasped together. “It’s really you again, Gary! It’s been a real long time since I’ve heard a riddle from you! Say one! Pleeeesease?”

She was subsequently pulled back by Misty. “Give the man some space!”

Gary sheepishly raised his hands to show no offense. “No, no. It’s fine.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” May said, walking up, “Ash has told me a lot about you. My name’s
May. I’m daughter of Petalburg City Gym Leader, Norman.”

“I thought that name sounded familiar,” Gary said, “The Princess of Hoenn, right?”

May blushed in embarrassment. “Oh, please, don’t say that.”

“Well, I seem to be the only person you haven’t acquainted yet,” Winter spoke up as she approached Gary and extended her hand out, “Nice to meet you, Gary, I’m—”

“Winter, right?” Gary interposed while shaking Winter’s hand, “Heather told me about you.”

“Really? Does that mean you challenged her?”

“Sure did.” Gary ran a hand through his hair, shifting uncomfortably in his spot. “But I gotta tell you, your sister is tough.”

Winter chuckled a little, folding her hands in her lap. “I bet. That’s why I made sure I was completely ready before I took her on.”

Ash burst out laughing, causing his friends to back up uneasily. “You lost?! Jeez, Gary, you’re slipping!”

Gary crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “Okay then, Ash. Let’s see how you do. You're going over there now, right?”

“Yes, I am!” Without another word, Ash marched forward like a soldier going to war, brimming with confidence and braggadocio. Not even one meter later, he walked back to everyone and looked at Winter. “Um, Winter? Can you go back to showing us the way?”

The building was so warm after the wintry chill outside. Coats were hung up all across the entrance to it. After Ash and the others did the same to enjoy the warmth, Winter escorted them into the lecture hall. At the front of the green chalkboard stood a woman slightly taller than Winter herself. Her mauve hair was styled in a bob with even bangs across her forehead. She wore a mauve turtleneck, white pants, and plain grey boots. Her white-rimmed spectacles brought out the bright orange color in her eyes.

Her class of young students, ranging from seven to nine, sat on the brightly colored rug in the middle of the classroom. One boy raised his hand to interrupt Heather’s talking. “Ms. Isolda, I have a reeeally weird question.”

Heather whirled around and pointed a manicured nail at him. “Ask away, my dear. The only bad questions are unasked ones.”

“Okay, so, I saw on television a couple of times trainers beating others even with type disadvantage,” the boy explained, rocking back and forth in his spot, “So, I wanted to know if this was possible: in a six-on-six fight, one trainer is down three-to-six, and the rest of his or hers are quad-weak to one or
two of the others. Could the first trainer still come back and win?”

Heather fingered her chin, eyes going to the ceiling. “Hmmm.” She paced back and forth. “Hmmm.” She spun around a couple of times in her spot. “Hmmm.” Everyone inside anxiously awaited her answer. She looked at the boy, waving her hand dismissively. “Nah, not possible.”

“Awwwww!”

Heather shrugged nonchalantly. “Yeeeah, sorry. Real bummer, huh?”

A girl raised her hand next. “Wait! I’ve seen people on television beat those same exact odds! Please explain that, teacher!”

“Oh, have you? Let’s see…” As Heather mused aloud, she used her hand to check off items on an imaginary list. “Heart? Willpower? Skill? Experience? I don’t know how to explain it, and even then, it’s all hypothetical talk.”

“I want to find the answer!” The girl shouted, “I’m gonna train real hard and become just like them!”

“Me too!”

“Yeah!”

“Alrighty. Good luck,” Heather said abruptly, turning around with her hands behind her back and heading to her nearby desk. After the class’s stunned silence lasted for a while, she faced them again with an arched brow, “What? I mean that from the bottom of my heart!” The schoolteacher grinned and clapped her hands together. “But riddle me this, young ones, why is there no true way to win, to train, to battle?” At this point, she looked in the direction of Winter, Gary, and their company and added in, “Annnnd, cut! That’ll be your assignment for tomorrow. Top marks, class dismissed!”

The children shot to their feet, grabbing their belongings and coats, and left the classroom in record time. Heather approached her younger sister with a radiant smile. “Good to see you back home, Winny! Gary, nice to see you back on such short notice.”

Gary chuckled. “Don’t think I’m here for a rematch so soon.”

Heather released a long, drawn-out, and exaggerated gasp of horror, hand partially over her mouth. “You mean, you don’t want my badge?”

“W-Wha—Of course I do!”

Heather started sniggering. “I’m just pulling your leg.” She directed her attention to Ash and his group. “So. This is interesting. Winter, you embarked on a journey by yourself and returned with friends. Great! Lovely!” She draped an arm around Winter and smiled brightly at them. “I’m Winter’s older sister, Heather Isolda.”

Once introductions were finished, Ash spoke up, “Heather, I hear you’re the Gym Leader around h —”

“And you want to challenge me?” Heather interrupted, making Ash do a double take, “I’m all for it but let’s wait until tomorrow. I got papers to grade.”
“But of course, Heather!” Brock slid in front and softly caressed one of Heather’s hands. “Maybe after you finish your paper-pushing, might I take you, the loveliest wintry girl of this region, on a romantic date out in the snow? Why? Because even when my heart is trapped in a cage of icicles, being near you thaws all that ice out!”

Heather deadpanned. “Goodness, man, my students spit better lines than that.”

No interference from Croagunk or Misty was necessary. Brock slumped to the floor in defeat, whining to himself.

As everybody else settled in their dorms for the day, Gary and Ash sat in the Pokemon Center lobby catching up and enjoying some hot chocolate. “—I guess you can say I couldn’t stay away,” Gary said, eyes examining his own reflection in the brown liquid, “but my heart is in researching, that’s for sure, so I’ll probably do this every once in a while until my new career gets in the way.”

“Well, it’s glad to see you again,” Ash said sincerely, “You pushed me to be a better trainer. I want to win this region more than ever.” He grinned. “You and a couple others being here will make it all the better.”

Gary snorted, lightly kicking Ash under the table. “Get real!”

Ash snickered. “So, Gary, gimme some pointers. What’s Heather like?”

Gary closed his eyes and sighed, recalling the exactly how the battle went down. “Well, here’s how everything started…”

“Send out your Pokemon!”

“Umbreon, go!” Gary hurled out his Poke Ball, releasing his Pokemon.

“Shirit, go!” Heather did the same. Shirit was a legless creature and with a light blue ‘kite’ on its back. The end of the kite had patterned grooves. Its body was light blue with its shoulders and chest area covered by snow white, giving it the likeness of a mantle. Bandages covered its wrists and face save for its left eye.

Wanting to get an idea of whom Umbreon now faced, Gary took out his Poke Ball and scanned it.

“Shirit: The Snow Bandit Pokemon, and the evolved form of Shiric. Shirit have a tendency to swoop down and blindly capture something during the winter, whether it is prey or someone's items.”

“So that Shirit is an Ice- and Normal-type Pokemon, huh?” Gary muttered as he put away his Pokedex.

“Begin!”
“The challenger may have the first move,” Heather announced with a smile.

Gary grinned and pointed forward, focusing on Heather's Shirit, “Umbreon, Double Team!” Umbreon stood its ground and multiplied itself, surrounding the Snow Bandit Pokemon as it hovered in place motionlessly.

“Hyper Voice!” Heather commanded.

Acting quickly to preserve Double Team, Gary barked out another command, “Guard that with Light Screen!”

Shirit raised its right hand and removed the bandages around its mouth, releasing a series of sound waves. Umbreon and its clones created a cube of golden glass around Shirit in hopes of keeping Hyper Voice at bay.

A crack.

Light Screen shattered, and Shirit's Hyper Voice blew away Umbreon, causing all of its clones to disappear. The Dark type cringed and grimaced, forced to endure the shrieking.

"Brick Break!” Heather yelled. While still using Hyper Voice to prevent any form of retaliation from the Dark type, Shirit floated over with a glowing hand and chopped Umbreon right across its head, sending it into one of the many icicles on battlegrounds.

Gary saw Umbreon struggling to get up, and when it did, its legs shook in its stance. “Don’t give up! Sand-Attack!” Turning around, Umbreon used its back legs to kick sand into the Ice/Normal-type’s visible eye while it was putting the bandages back over its mouth. Growling, Shirit furiously rubbed its eyes with his hands. “Now hit him with Payback!” Umbreon enveloped itself with a black and purple aura, dashed over, and rammed into Shirit. The Snow Bandit Pokemon flew back into an icicle itself. Gary’s grin returned full-force. “Reel it back in with Psychic, Umbreon!” Umbreon’s crimson eyes illuminated and psychically caught Shirit in mid-air.

Gary checked Heather and found her in suspiciously high spirits. She caught his gaze and smiled. “Giga Impact!” As Shirit returned to Umbreon, it enveloped its body in a bright aura shaped like a bullet.

Gary gasped. “Watch out!” Alarmed, Umbreon jumped out of the way, the Giga Impact creating a crater on the ice floor. “Keep up the pressure! Umbreon, Double Team!” Instantaneously, the Dark-type Pokemon created clones that circled around the Ice/Normal-type.

“Not on your life, Gary,” Heather said, smirking, “Ice Punch on the floor!” On her command, Shirit drove a glowing fist into the battlefield, unleashing a shockwave of icy blue energy. The feet of the clones were frozen to the ground when the wave reached them.

“Umbreon, no!” Gary exclaimed in dismay.

Heather sunk into a hip. “Giga Impact.” Shirit moved in a circle, hitting each and every Umbreon until it met the real one with explosive force. Umbreon slid across the ice, motionless and drained of energy.

“Umbreon is unable to battle! Shirit is the winner!”
Growling, Gary recalled his Umbreon, “Man, what a beast…” The brunette remarked inwardly as he took out his next Poke Ball. “Electivire, go!” He threw it out, and Electivire was sent out into the battle.

“Begin!”

Heather placed her hands on her hips. "I think I'll go first this time. Ice Punch." Shirirt charged forward with its right fist glowing ice blue.

Gary formed fists at his side. “Protect!” Electivire summoned a green dome to block Shirirt’s oncoming Ice Punch. Shirirt hit the force-field and harmlessly bounced off it. “Grab it and use Thunder!” While Shirirt was stunned, the Thunderbolt Pokemon grabbed both of Shirirt’s arms and released its attack with a roar. Shirirt’s roar of pain was even louder.

After only ten seconds, Shirirt fell limply to the floor, and Electivire released its hold.

“Shirit is unable to battle! Electivire is the winner!”

Gary’s shoulders slumped as he leaned on one of the icy railings for rest. “Phew. That’s one down.” Muttering to himself, he watched Heather recall her Shirirt.

“I commend you for taking out my Shirirt so quickly, Gary, even if it fought against your Umbreon,” Heather said as she took out another Poke Ball and tossed it up and down.

Gary couldn’t help but smirk with pride at the compliment. “Heh. Thanks.”

Heather flung the Poke Ball after a quick spin. “So, let’s see how you handle this one!”

Gary’s smirk faded at the sight of a gorilla-like Pokemon with thick yet smooth, pure white fur and hair. Its bare hands, torso, chest, feet, and face were dark blue. Its mouth had tusks protruding upward from its bottom jaw. It stood about the same height as Slaking. Even his Electivire had to tilt its head up to meet eyes with the simian. Gary then took out his Pokedex again and looked up the creature.

"Monizzar: The Powerhouse Pokemon. With mammalian strength and icy-cold breath, Monizzarr reigns as "kings of the blizzards”

“An Ice- and Fighting-type. This’ll be tough,” Gary said as stowed away Pokedex again.

“Begin!”

“Earthquake, Electivire!” Gary commanded. The Electric-type slammed its arms on the floor, shaking the whole arena and sending out a ground-based shockwave to Monizzar.

“Jump and use Hammer Arm!” Monizzar jumped up to avoid the attack, both of its beefy arms glowing white on the trip back down. Monizzar’s Hammer Arm connected with the deadliness of a guillotine, shaking the battlegrounds far worse than Electivire’s Earthquake and forming the biggest crater yet.

Eyes growing wide, Gary used the railings to keep himself on his feet. “Wh-whoa!” Taking in air in short gasps, Gary regained his composure to bark out another command, “Thunder!” Electivire,
forcing itself out of its daze, grabbed Monizzar’s arms with its tails and released massive jolts of electricity. Monizzar arched backwards, screeching in pain.

Heather nibbled at her bottom lip. “Throw it away!” Monizzar cracked its eyes open and grabbed ahold of Electivire’s tail. Channeling all of its pain to physical strength, the Ice/Fighting-type flung it away, finally stopping its onslaught.

“One more Thunder!”

“Block that with Stone Edge!”

Electivire, while in midair, discharged another Thunder. Monizzar stomped on the ground and summoned rock pillars to protect itself from the oncoming attack Thunder. “Hammer Arm again!” Monizzar jumped from behind the rock pillars and drove its arm into Electivire’s gut, sending the Electric-type kicking and screaming into one of the glassy ice walls surrounding the battlefield.

“Electivire is unable to battle! The winner is Monizzar!”

Gary snarled exasperatedly as he recalled his fallen Electivire and pulled out his final Poke Ball. “Last one. Gotta make it count.” Hoping to pull off a miracle, Gary kissed the Poke Ball before throwing it into the air. “Magmar, go!”

After appearing, Magmar blew some fire, showing no fear in the face of the stoic Powerhouse Pokemon.

“Begin!”

“Fire Blast, go!” Magmar took a deep breath and unleashed a 大-shaped blast from its mouth.

“Stone Edge!” Monizzar proceeded to punch the ground to erect stone pillars to form a shield the Fire Blast.

Gary waited until the precise moment Stone Edge disappeared. “Will-O-Wisp!” On cue, Magmar summoned blue balls of fire and willed them over with fluid arm movements.

“Blizzard!” Monizzar howled and unleashed a snowstorm from its mouth, the fast, blistering cold thinning out the fire with extra power leftover to catch Magmar in its clutches.

“Keep calm! Sunny Day!” Magmar reopened its eyes and focused on the ceiling. A layer of light coated it, gifting the battlefield with sunlight. Steam hissed as Monizzar’s Blizzard melted. “Now Solarbeam!” Without letting up, Magmar fired a green and yellow beam and struck the Powerhouse Pokemon dead in its chest. Monizzar staggered backwards but remained on its feet.

Gary smirked, seeing he was gaining the upper hand. “Let’s wrap this up. Will-O-Wisp one more time!” The Spitfire Pokemon summoned more blue balls of fire and, this time, successfully cloaked the Ice/Fighting-type in flames.

Gary pumped a fist. “Yes! Now Monizzar’s power is cut in half, and it's on a timer now.”

Heather smiled in an impressive manner. “Great job, Mr. Oak. A well-played move.” A silence followed, one so dissonant it plummeted Gary’s mood. Then, Heather proceeded to confirm his worst fears when her smile turned into something wicked. “If my Monizzar’s Ability wasn’t tailor-
made for it.”

The hairs on the back of Gary’s neck stood on end as Monizzar’s eyes flashed a deep red. When their gazes met, Gary felt the color drain from his skin at the wave of killer intent. With a guttural and vicious roar, Monizzar stood tall with its chest out as if Magmar’s assault did nothing.

Gary ran his tongue along his suddenly dry lips. “I-Is that Guts?”

“Correctamundo.” Heather coyly adjusted her glasses as the lenses shined in the light of Sunny Day. “Sic him.”

Monizzar’s thunderous charge and screeching voice brought Gary out of his trance. It had Hammer Arm on the ready. “Dodge!” Magmar sidestepped the oncoming Hammer Arm, but the resulting force caused a lot of ice to fissure. “This thing’s a total monster!” Gary swallowed as a reflex. “Fire Blast!”

“Blizzard!”

The two moves of contrasting elements clashed, reacted midway, and imploded one another, a storm of mist and energy engulfing the whole battlefield. Gary protected himself from the sudden burst and, after waiting it out for a little, moved his arms to peer into the mist to see who survived the explosion.

Eventually, the mist thinned out, revealing Monizzar and Magmar laid out on the floor.

“Both Monizzar and Magmar are unable to battle! This round results in a draw! Since the challenger has no more Pokemon left, the victory goes to Gym Leader Heather!”

Ash slouched in his seat, lips pursed and hands choking his mug. “So, her Monizzar has the Guts ability? Dang, that means Rockler may be a better choice than Gouzatile.” He had no intention of using Scere since she was a fresh catch. Pikachu, Gouzatile, and Rockler were enough, considering two of them were strong against Ice-types. Yet, if Gary’s grim storytelling was any indication, Ash’s sinking suspicion may not be unfounded.

“And then she only used two Pokemon and three of Monizzar’s moves,” Gary said, “Then again, you probably won’t have to worry about it.”

Ash rested his head on the table, realizing he was still at the drawing board. “Yeah, you’re right. Man…”

A quiet yawn tore Ash out of his thoughts, and he looked to see Winter approaching them. She looked so much more refreshed. “Hello, Ash, Gary.”

Ash raised one of his hands lazily as a form of greeting. “Hey, Winter.” He paused to sample more of his hot cocoa. “You got a game plan for Heather?”

A smile ghosted Winter’s face. “I do. I talked with every Pokemon I have and chose the best for the job.” Her gaze fell, fingers playing with the hem of her coat. “This is something of a turning point in my career, so there’s no holding back.”
Gary rested his head in the palm of his propped arm’s hand. “Is it that personal?”

“I made a promise to Heather I’d battle her when I’m most ready. That’s now. I want to be Tenla Region Champion after all.” She briefly glanced at Ash before immediately looking away, fumbling with her clothes even more. “U-Um, I hate to sound selfish, but…” She mustered the will to look at him. “Do you mind if I go first?”

This was perfect, Ash thought. With Gary’s accounts and a firsthand look because of Winter, he’d be more than prepared to battle Heather himself. That suspicion vanished instantly when he flashed a grin at Winter. “Not at all! Knock her dead, Winny!”

Winter blinked a few times before her bottom lip poked out in a pout. “Now, you guys are just teasing me.”
Schooled

Chapter Notes

Sorry, guys. So much happened in the past month or so it delayed this chapter far more than usual. It doesn’t help that major battles need more time and care to be produced. Doubly so since this one features both Ash’s and Winter’s battle with Heather.

In any case, it’s here now, and I hope it was the worth the wait.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Schooled

Having received a call on Winter’s Pokegear from Heather, Ash and his posse got dressed and headed over to the Fimbulvetr Town Academy. Winter guided them to Heather’s office, where they found her humming a loud tune to herself and grading papers. Heather wore the same outfit as the other day with the addition of a beret and an overcoat.

“Hey, guys,” she greeted while giving them a fleeting glimpse. A couple of more seconds, and she stopped, turning around to fully face him and crossing with her legs, an innocent expression plastered on her face. “So. What do you need?”

“W-What?!” Ash took all of one second to run up to Heather and get into her face. “Y-you know exactly why we’re here! What’s all this about?!”

Heather grinned impishly, patting Ash on the head to placate him. “Oh, I’m just pulling your leg. Thanks for the reaction, by the by, I’ll be treasuring that for some time.” She stood up, ignoring the exasperation on the young heroes’ faces. “Gym Battle. I know. I’m raring to go myself. Who’s up first?”

Winter stepped up. “Me, sister.”

“Cool,” Heather remarked with a grin. Then May slapped her forehead with her palm. Heather cleared her throat. “Uh, no pun intended there.”

Heather escorted them to the ice battlefield held in a section of the Fimbulvetr Town Academy. Bleachers lined every wall, and two of the walls bore large viewing windows. A versus screen hung in the middle of the ceiling. As Ash and the others went to sit, Winter took her spot on the
challenger’s podium, hands on her lap, and looked down at the battlegrounds to study what about it could tip the odds in her favor.

“Yo, Winny!” Heather called out to her on the other side. She jabbed a thumb in the direction of one set of viewing windows to see her class hurrying to watch. “You don’t mind if my little tykes take some notes, right?”

“Not at all.” Winter ran her hand through her teal tresses, her other hand upon her heart. “In fact, I’m flattered. Two sisters, two maidens of the snow, duking it out before a live audience. Our battle may be the stuff of legends. In town at least.” She grinned at her adoptive sister, holding up a fist. “Nevertheless, we intend to reign supreme! No matter the cost!”

Heather placed her hands on her hips, leaned a little, and tossed her a dry look. “Way to steal my thunder, *show-off*.”

That threw Winter for a loop. “Wha—”

“My follow-up was supposed to *blow*—” Heather threw her hands up to imitate the bloom of an explosion. “—your mind at its grandeur! All of your jaws should’ve hit the floor at its greatness!”

Winter pursed her lips together, suppressing a smirk. “Sister, I can’t help it. This is how I am at the onset of a battle.”

“Ugh. Fine. Scene-stealer.” Heather adjusted her beret. The time for fun and games was over. She snapped her fingers. “Lights!” The main lights dimmed, allowing the blue lights to cast an azure sheen over the battlegrounds. “Versus screen!” A single panel featuring static images of Heather and Winter appeared on-screen. “Ambience!” The vents hissed, releasing a storm of snow, finally giving the Ice-type Gym an appropriate setting.

Dawn pulled at her coat and pressed her legs together tighter. “An artificial blizzard?! Oh, come on, Heather!”

Heather snapped her head in Dawn’s direction at lightspeed, eyes contracted. “Oh, you think that’s ‘stupid,’ do you?!” When Dawn rapidly shook her head, Heather let a series of titters roll out. “Oh, lighten up! Geez. Jenkins?”

Jenkins, who Winter recognized as a teaching assistant, nodded at Heather’s subtle command. He took up his spot on the referee’s stand. "This is an official Pokémon Gym Battle between the challenger Winter Isolda and the Gym Leader Heather Isolda. A winner is declared when all three of their opponent's Pokemon are defeated. Only the challenger can make substitutions. Now, bring out your Pokemon!"

“Let’s start off a good note, Weavile!”

“Here we go, Cryoxide!”

With six, small hind legs on the base of its tail, Cryoxide stop resting its bodyweight on its bulbous chelae and stood up straight, showing its purple underside and white segments resembling a ribcage. The rest of its body matched the snow flying around. With a hiss, Cryoxide aimed its stinger at Winter’s Weavile.

Ash took out his Pokedex and scanned Cryoxide. “Yikes.”
"Cryoxide: The Monoxide Pokemon and the evolved form of Corsenic. With twice the amount of poison its pre-evolved form possesses, a Cryoxide can easily quell even the angriest of Tauros, Rhyperiors, and Fearows. Cryoxide also creates monoxide-induced blizzards to capture prey."

Brock stiffened up. “I thought it looked familiar.”

Heather pushed her glasses up the incline of her nose. “Winny, you go first.”

“Much appreciated. Weavile, Swords Dance.” Per her command, several blue glowing swords circled Weavile and crossed together. Weavile then glowed red, showing Swords Dance did its job in raising its attack power.

Heather pouted. “Oh, that’s classy.”

Winter cracked a smirk. If her sister was in the mood to talk, she planned to take full advantage of that. “Screech next!”

“Oh, no you don’t! Drill Run!” Even with those short, spidery legs, Cryoxide had the power to sprint away from the oncoming sound wave and go into a jump. Extending its claws and tails to make itself more streamlined, Cryoxide span rapidly and launched itself at Weavile. The Dark/Ice type intercepted the Drill Run with its own claw but was propelled into the waiting ice wall.

“Fight back, Weavile! Metal Claw!”

Weavile peeled itself off the wall and sprinted with glowing, now metal claws. As Weavile lumbered toward Cryoxide, it crouched down and scraped its claws across the ground, sharpening their edges. When the Ice/Poison-type was within striking distance, it sprang up with its gleaming claws outstretched.

The Metal Claw scored a direct hit, sending the icy scorpion into the opposite wall along with a message neither Weavile nor Winter would be taking this lying down. “Our first blow!” Winter praised. The climb up this steep mountain had begun.

"Get up, Cryoxide. The party has yet to begin!" Getting up, Cryoxide dusted itself off and faced Weavile once more. “Blizzard!” Heather ordered. Cryoxide released several hisses, summoning a ball blue and unleashed a powerful blizzard that streaked toward Weavile.

“icicle Crash!” With the swipe of an arm from the Sharp Claw Pokemon, a series of icicles were fired, cutting through the Blizzard, and heading straight to Cryoxide.

"Block with Poison Jab!" Heather commanded.

“(Got it!)” Cryoxide yelled back and began to whack at flying icicles with its claws every time one came close.

When there were no more incoming icicles, Heather told Cryoxide to use Drill Run again, and it responded in swift kind. Winter told her Weavile to use Metal Claw, and the two Pokemon clashed and held their ground for several seconds before pushing each other back to end their clash.

“Consecutive Metal Claws!” The Sharp Claw Pokemon growled, charged, and repeatedly swiped at its target with its gleaming claws.
After Cryoxide dodged and endured some hits, Heather then shouted, “Throw it off and hit it with Poison Jab!” The Monoxide Pokemon dodged the next few Metal Claw attacks, and when Weavile threw back its arm for yet another slash, the Cryoxide drove its glowing stinger in its face. A stream of glowing poison coursed from the point of impact all the way down to Weavile’s toes.

Winter gasped. “Oh, no! Weavile’s poisoned!”

“That it is,” Heather said proudly, “Another one!”

“Get away, Weavile!” Winter ordered. Instantly, Weavile wiped its still-glowing claws at Cryoxide’s oncoming stinger and knocked it away. It summoned the strength to grab the Ice- and Poison-type and throw it halfway across the battlefield to create some breathing room.

Winter chewed her on bottom lip. “Cryoxide won’t be going so easily. Tenacious little thing.”

“Weavile, Screech. We’ll whittle it down.”

Heather cracked a smirk. “Glacial Break.”

Like with Drill Run, Cryoxide made itself streamlined and coated itself in an aura of blinding, blue light. As Weavile reared its head back, Cryoxide rocketed itself in the form of a spinning icicle. As the loud soundwave was unleashed from Weavile’s mouth, the Monoxide Pokemon continued its course and eventually hit its mark, sending shards of ice and mist in every direction as Weavile yelled in pain.

“The power!” Ash shouted, shooting up from his seat.

May held her hand over her mouth. “What kind of move was that? It was so powerful!”

Ash took out his Pokedex and checked its database for a move named ‘Glacial Break.’

“Glacial Break: Physical. A damage-dealing Ice-type move. Glacial Break will cause the user to receive recoil damage equal to \( \frac{1}{3} \) of the damage done to the target. This move has a 10% chance of freezing the target.”

When the aftermath settled, Weavile was seen on its legs, panting heavily as the poison continued to eat away at what little of its stamina remained. Heather could hardly contain her triumphant grin.

“It’s almost down! Cryoxide, Glacial Break again!”

Winter still had hope. After recoil damage and what Weavile did before, Cryoxide had to be ready to fall too. “Metal Claw to intercept!”

The two Pokemon clashed and held it once more, but an aura of purpleghosted Weavile’s own whole body, weakening it. With a hiss, Cryoxide pushed forward with all its might and drove the Pokemon into the ground. Then, sparks of light blue snaked all up Cryoxide’s own body. It swayed, tried to stand its ground, but the recoil sapped the rest of its energy, and it too fell down.

“Cryoxide and Weavile are unable to battle! This round ends in a draw!”

Both trainers recalled their fallen fighters. Heather immediately sent out her next choice, “Come on out, Jynx!”
Winter swallowed as a reflex when Jynx appeared and swayed a little in her spot. She tugged at the collar of her turtleneck as she thought, “I know that Jynx. It needs to go down as soon as possible.” She withdrew her next Poke Ball and tossed it out. “You’re up, Walrein.”

Once both Pokemon and trainers were ready, the referee threw his hands up. “Begin!”

“Jynx, use Mean Look!” Heather shouted without warning. Just as quickly, Jynx summoned a dark purple cloud right above her that formed into an eye with a black pupil. Walrein glared back defiantly even as the strange eye crafted a similar aura about its bulky body.

Without options, Winter decided to gamble a little bit. “Sheer Cold!” A light blue field of energy formed around Winter’s Walrein, and with a roar, it willed the field to expand, adding another layer of ice to a place already frozen. Jynx crossed her arms in front of her face, bracing herself as she met Sheer Cold head-on. The energy field drove her all the way to wall nearest to her trainer, burying the Human Shape Pokemon alive.

Although Winter was more than content to wait it out to see if Jynx survived, Heather had other plans. “Now, use Perish Song.”

Humming. When it started, crimson and black soundwaves stretched from one end of the battlefield to the next. It was a death knell to all whom heard it, for this kind of dark and foreboding humming was never a good sign. Walrein screwed one eye shut and groaned as black static appeared over its body.

Feeling the anxiety begin to well up, Winter gently grabbed the railing. “Figured that was next.”

“Of course!” Heather gave her younger sister a deliberately goofy smile as Jynx dug its way out, eager for more.

“That’s pretty weird,” May said, watching the battle resume, “Heather can’t switch out, so why use Perish Song? Her Jynx is going down no matter what.”

“She must be confident her last Pokemon can take on Winter’s,” Brock said, “but that assumes Walrein can’t beat Jynx before the countdown.”

The corner of Ash’s mouth twitched with excitement at the prospect of a sudden death match. “This might be a quick one then.”

After watching her Walrein expertly take another attack, Winter then said, “Walrein, you’re on a timer now, but I chose you to fight Jynx for a reason. She can’t take your hits.”

Jynx huffed and crossed her arms. Heather chuckled nervously in response, dropping her guard. “You’re offending her.”

That’s exactly what Winter wanted. “Iron Head!”

As the Walrein used its flippers to shoot it forward, a flustered Heather exclaimed, “Heart Stamp! Hurry!”

Jynx’s full lips glowed a vivid pink before she blew a kiss that summoned a pink heart made of energy. Even though it blocked the way, Walrein was a juggernaut that did not yield such a parlor trick. It pierced through the Heart Stamp and drove its skull right into Jynx’s face.
Once Jynx fell flat on her back and Walrein cooled down after Perish Song’s black static reared its ugly mug, Winter then commanded, “How about this? Earthquake.”

“Jynx, get up!” Heather yelled, alarmed.

Walrein raised its front body and slammed it down with enough force to shatter every and all ice made by Sheer Cold. The lights flickered, Winter’s friend screamed and nearly fell out of their seats, and Jynx was sent aloft before crashing back down to Earth. This time, the Ice/Psychic-type struggled to even sit up.

“Not only is your Jynx a glass cannon,” Winter said, finally feeling calm enough to let go of the railing, “it’s a one-trick pony too. Fall before my Walrein’s full might! Iron Head!”

As silver light poured from Walrein’s head, the black static appeared again, delaying its attack. Seeing that, Heather retorted, “That doesn’t mean anything if it can’t survive sudden death! Get up, Jynx! Heart Stamp!”

“Earthquake!”

Both Pokemon locked glares and prepared their moves, but the song of death hit its final note and cut their battle short. Both of their eyes went blank, and they collapsed in a heap. Jenkins threw his arms up for the second time today. “Both Jynx and Walrein are unable to battle! This round also results in a draw!”

“Another one?” Ash adjusted his hat uncomfortably. “Sheesh, they’re even.”

Gary leaned forward, eyes glued to the final Poke Balls both girls took out. “The last one will determine if they’re as equal as we think.”

“Well, sis,” Heather said, tossing hers up and down, “I can’t front. You really have grown into something serious.”

Winter smiled demurely. “Thank you. That means a lot coming from you.”

“Alas, it’s not over yet. You want my badge? Beat this guy!” Heather threw it out, and the behemoth known as Monizzar was summoned to the battlefield. It calmly surveyed the status of the battlegrounds before nodding to itself.

Winter watched Monizzar exercise its arms in preparation, a bead of sweat sliding down the side of her face. “There you are, Monizzar.” She held up her Poke Ball to her lips and whispered, “Beartic, you’re my last hope. Let’s close the book on this chapter.” After transferring all her hopes and wishes to it, she threw. “Go!”

After Beartic was released, Jenkins gave the signal. “Begin!”

Winter hardened her gaze. “Here we come, Permafrost Princess. Try to stop us. Bulk Up!” Flexing its body, Beartic’s was surrounded in a crimson aura, causing its muscles to thicken for a few moments.

“Hammer Arm!” Monizzar charged forward, arms upraised and glowing whiter than its hairs, and swung them like clubs. Beartic backpedaled to avoid the hits, their sheer force blowing air with every
“Superpower!” Time to match might with might. Muscles activated once again, Beartic caught Monizzar’s Hammer Arm, the ice below them cracking on the spot.

Monizzar and Beartic locked hands and engaged in a contest of pure upper body strength. Each ice monster stared the other dead in the eyes, grunting and roaring as they stood their ground and tried to muscle their way to superiority. With a primal howl, Monizzar took a powerful step forward and slowly began driving Beartic back.

“Ice Beam right in its face!” Per her command, Beartic opened its mouth and fired Ice Beam, coating the Ice/Fighting-type’s entire face in ice. “Now Shadow Claw!” As Monizzar staggered back, Beartic closed the gap and swiped with a blackened claw, shattering the ice and sending Monizzar flying.

But, the mighty ape caught itself midair and landed on its feet with a thud. With a howl, it pounded its chest, no worse for wear. Winter chewed on her bottom lip, thinking she needed more power to wear it out. “Bulk Up!”

As Beartic raised its stats, Heather pointed at it. “Now’s your chance, Monizzar! Glacial Break!”

“So, that’s its fourth move!” Gary shouted, shooting out of his seat.

Monizzar sprinted forth, enveloped in a bright white aura as ice spiraled around it. Every step shook the platform Winter stood on and increased her heartrate. “H-Here it comes, Beartic! Superpower again!”

The icy behemoths clashed once again except, this time, Monizzar came out on top much more quickly. Beartic screamed as it was sent flying, rebounding off an ice wall.

Heather belted out a triumphant laugh. “Keep up the pressure! Stone Edge!” The Powerhouse Pokemon clapped its hand together and summoned a ring of floating stones before willing them over to the prone Ice-type.

“Defend yourself! Please!” A worried Winter cried out. Taking a deep breath, Beartic pushed up and then focused on each sharp stone and used its bulky arm to bat them away one-by-one.

“Hammer Arm!”

Monizzar crossed the space with shocking speed, one arm geared back. When the blow thundered against Beartic’s gut and sent it into the ceiling, Winter went deaf. A void emerged in her being, stealing all of her emotions – she had no poetic lines to spout, her ice-cool demeanor melted, and her determination shattered. Although Beartic survived its crash-landing, she deemed its survival futile.

“End this, Monizzar. Blizzard!”

Using Winter’s favorite move to pick off the defiant Beartic confirmed what Winter dreaded the most: she was not ready yet.

“Beartic is unable to battle! The winner is Monizzar, and the victory goes to the Gym Leader, Heather!”
Defeat, a bitter taste, turned Winter’s mouth drier than a desert and numbed the rawness in the bottom lip she chewed when things fell apart. Yet, she was a woman of class and dignity, so she put up her usual expression and met Heather halfway on the sidelines as Ash and his friends surrounded them.

“Hey, Winter?” Out of nowhere, Heather snatched off her cap and ruffled her hair. It did manage to wrest out a laugh or two from Winter. “You did your best.”

“She’s right, you know,” Ash said, “There’s always next time! That gives you a reason to train harder and get better.”

“Yes.” Winter accepted her cap back and turned away from everyone. “If you’ll excuse me, nature calls. Be right back,” she said, hoping she didn’t walk off too fast to rouse suspicions.

In the bathroom, Winter stood hunched over a sink and gazed at her reflection, but she did not see what her family saw. She did not see what her friends saw. Instead, she saw exactly what she described to Master Silverplien: a weak girl bogged down by emotional baggage and shortcomings as a trainer. Her eyes roamed critically from one feature to another and cataloged it in her brain. “All that time, and you’re still not ready. You’re so pathetic.”

“You quit too easy.”

Winter whipped around so fast she almost fell over and had to use the sink for support. Standing there was Heather, leaned against the wall by the entrance. Winter gulped down the nonexistent lump in her throat. “W-Why are you here? Ash is waiting!”

“Oh, I told him nature called me too.” Heather peeled herself off the wall and crossed the space between them, forcing Winter to look up to her taller sister. “Look, Winter, I only pretended to act myself, so your friends wouldn’t worry. You may have had them fooled but not me.”

Winter fought back the urge to bite her lip yet again and instead released a wry chuckle. “That obvious?”

“Call it family intuition.” Heather then gripped Winter’s shoulders firmly. “The point is, Winter, you quit too easy. Beartic still had a bit of fight left in him, but you chose to leave him at our mercy because things didn’t go your way. Winter, you’re not weak. All you’ve been through and here you are. I mean it when I say you’re better than you think you are.”

“B-But…”

“Nope, nope!” Heather slapped her hand over Winter’s mouth. Then, she pulled her into a hug and whispered tenderly, “No more of that. Take some time to think over our battle and come back for a rematch.”

Winter slowly snaked her arms behind Heather, blinking away unshed tears. “O-Okay…”

She broke the embrace and started towards the door with Heather following. Before she turned to go back to the battlefield, Heather grabbed her arm. “Hold on. This way first.”

“What about your Gym Battle?” Winter asked as she nonetheless complied.

“You see how many girls he hangs with? I think he knows by now we take long bathroom trips.”
Heather led Winter back to her office. After closing the door, she asked, “Is Shiric still a part of your rotation?”

“Yes.”

“Think he’s closing to evolving into a Shirit yet?”

Winter paused to contemplate. Shiric was a longtime member but a seldom used one at that.

“Maybe.”

“Ooh, a maybe.” Heather released one of her dramatic, exaggerated gasps. “Wait. Don’t tell me he doesn’t count. Oh, for shame, Winny!” She chuckled at her sister’s loss of words. She then walked over to a marionette’s head carrying one of her many berets and took the Mega Earring off it. In the drawer right below it, Heather removed a Mega Stone. Walking back over to Winter, she held out both items to her. “Here, take it.”

Winter slowly accepted her older sister’s gifts to her.

“If and when that happens, you’ll have a Mega Shirit ready to go.” Heather shrugged. “Seems like I have no need for it.”

A slow smile appeared across Winter’s features as she held the two gifts close to her heart. “Thank you, big sister.”

“Oh, can I borrow Snover, Shiric, and one of the twins?”

Winter figured that was the least she could for her role model. “Sure thing, sis.”

Ash paced on the sidelines and only stopped when the Isolda sisters returned. “What took so long? Does it really take fifteen minutes to go to the bathroom?”

Heather’s expression turned blank as Winter tossed her sister a knowing look before sniggering to herself. Heather then looked at May, Dawn, and Misty. “I’m guessing he doesn’t understand.”

“No,” they responded immediately.

Ash blinked. “Understand what?”

“Never mind.” Heather glimpsed to the display windows and saw that her class long left. “Ash, you’re up, and it looks like you no longer have a crowd.”

Ash never cared about limelights or audiences in the first place, just the battle itself. “Doesn’t make any difference. I give it my all no matter what!”

“Sure thing, hotshot.”

Ash stood on his side of the battlefield. Winter’s crushing loss mattered little to him; in fact, all it did was add fuel to the fires of resolve burning deep within him. He quiet frankly experienced tougher
challenges like Pyramid King Brandon and Drake of the Orange League. All he had to do was show prove it again even with his fresh set of Pokemon.

"This is an official Pokémon Gym Battle between the challenger Ash Ketchum and the Gym Leader Heather Isolda. A winner is declared when all three of their opponent's Pokemon are defeated. Only the challenger can make substitutions. Send out your Pokemon!"

“Rockler, I choose you!”

“Snover, you’re up!”

“Now, begin!”

"Snover, open up with Grass Whistle!" Heather shouted. Hand glowing green, Snover brought it up to its mouth and blew, creating a stream of high-pitched music that wafted slowly to Rockler.

Ash saw her game, trying to use passive attacks to control the flow of battle like with her Jynx. He refused to fall prey to such tricks. "Rockler, dodge and use Quick Attack!" Rockler responded with a caw, absorbing white light and then releasing it in a streak behind him. Even at top speeds, he dodged the Grass Whistle and was closing in on Snover.

Heather smiled as an idea for a counterattack sprung into her head. "Protect yourself with Blizzard, Snover!" Raising its arm up, Snover summoned a mighty snowstorm. Rockler plowed right through the minefield and immediately began to slow down from the freezing wind and stinging ice. By the time he made it through, he had lost a lot of his speed. “Let’s try this again, Snover. Grass Whistle!"

The Snover repeated what he had done before – it motioned music toward the momentarily helpless Rockler. This time, it swept right past Rockler, whose eyelids dropped and flying slowed to a halt. It gently fell to the floor, napping without a care in the world.

Ash pounded the railing of his podium with his fist. “Dang it!”

"Way to go, Snover!" Heather grinned at the sight of her defenseless foe. "Now blast him with Magical Leaf!"

Snover fired a series of speedy, glowing leaves from its hand that hacked and slashed into Rocker’s tough body, their collective power throwing him to the ground below Ash’s podium.

Ash hung over the edge of the railing and shouted, "Wake up, Rockler!"

A quick snore and Rocker jerked back to wakefulness, immediately taking flight. “(I truly apologize for napping on the job!)”

Heather pouted and pushed her glasses back into place. “Well, that didn’t last long.”

"Alright, now let's show them a Rock Throw!" Ash commanded with a confident grin. Rockler created a few glowing rocks around him and flung them all in different intervals to keep Snover and Heather guessing.

"Avoid them all, Snover!" Snover hopped along the battlefield with surprising speed and finesse, keeping calm as it dodged and rolled around each and every rock that came. However, the inevitable happened a second later – the biggest rock rocketed over and speared Snover dead on, sending it
sliding across the floor. Snover struggled to stand after that. "Come on, Snover, I know you can still fight!"

Ash took the momentary break to see about his fighter. “How’re you feeling, Rockler?”

Rockler looked at his master determinedly. "(It's not over until I drop. Simple as that.)" By this time, Snover was back on its feet. “(My opponent will fail. Not I!)”

“That’s the ticket!” Ash gushed, “Quick Attack!”

“Slow it down. Magical Leaf.”

Rockler burst into a mad dash as Snover pelted it with glowing, sharp leaves. A more prepared Rockler endured the hits and continued its course with not a drop in speed.

“Switch to Blizzard!” This attack, however, stopped Rockler cold. It tried to power through, flapping its wings without rest, but ice slowly encased him. By the time Blizzard ended, he fell down, trapped in an icicle. “That’s better! Now use Seed Bomb!” Swinging one arm, Snover tossed over glowing seeds that detonated on impact, throwing Rockler on its back.

When the Rock/Flying-type struggled to rise, Ash grew worried. “Rockler! Are you okay!?”

Rockler groaned and sucked in air in regular intervals. Then, he laid his head against the floor as a white glow enveloped his body. “(Yes. Allow me to take a quick breather.)”

Ash searched his memory for any battle that involved the move Rockler was using now. Seeing some of the scrapes and bruises on its body vanish, he finally recognized it. “Wait. Is that Roost?’

“It trades one weakness for another. Magical Leaf!”

Rockler sat up, pushed off using its talons, and flew off; however, its efforts were in vain – Magical Leaf followed his every move, gradually gaining ground, until the leaves hit their mark. Rockler caved in pain, taking more damage thanks to its temporary loss of the Flying type.

“I grow weary of this, Snover. How ‘bout a Blizzard to finish that off Rockler?”

“No, you don’t! Rockler, with all your strength, Wing Attack!”

Rockler’s flight pattern travelled in zigzags, fighting through the pain to stay aloft, but he willed his wings to illuminate with power and forged right into the eye of the snowy storm. The cold needleed his whole body, so he focused his remaining strength to his eyesight and his wings. He spotted Snover’s shadow, and in one last lunge, zoomed through the Blizzard and nailed Snover with a Wing Attack. Both Pokemon crumbled in the same heap, swirls in Snover’s eyes as Rockler lied there motionlessly.

“Rockler and Snover are unable to battle! This round results in a draw!”

“What’s with Heather and forcing draws?” May finally pointed out.

“To be fair, all the Pokemon Heather’s using in this battle are mine,” Winter replied, legs crossed and hands folded in her lap, “so that may have something to do with it.”
Ash recalled Rockler and whispered his appreciation, putting the Poke Ball away. “If Gary’s and Winter’s battle told me something, I need to be ahead fighting Heather’s last Pokemon.” He looked down at Pikachu. “You’re up. Show ‘em what you’re made of!”

Pikachu stood on his hind legs and gave Ash a thumbs-up, then leaping onto the battlefield on all fours. Gary grinned. “Now, he’s thinking. Pikachu should be able to tip the odds in his favor.”

“Snorunt, go!” Heather said, releasing her own Pokemon.

In an instant, Snorunt had materialized and was hopping around the battlefield in interest. It was momentarily distracted with his observations, taking the sight of the new environment, the couple of humans, and the strange Pokemon with the weird-looking tail.

“Begin the battle!”

Ash quickly called out an attack before Heather could. "Use Quick Attack, Pikachu!" Upon command the yellow mouse rushed off, leaving a blur.

"Stop Pikachu in his tracks with Frost Breath!" Heather retorted. Perched on its little toes, Snorunt inhaled deeply and blows out snow with sparkling blue wind at Pikachu.

Just as the Electric-type was about to land a hit, the deceptively quick and powerful Frost Breath blew Pikachu back to his starting position. "No, Pikachu!" Ash shouted, suddenly panicked.

"Thattagirl! Now give him an Ice Shard, Snorunt!" Heather ordered. Snorunt complied instantly, forming and launching a fine blast of ice that flew through the air at blinding speed.

“Dodge and use Iron Tail!” Pikachu leapt to the side to avoid the Ice Shard and charged as his tail turned metallic.

"No you don't," Heather said, "Snorunt, Frosh Breath!"

Ash shouted in reply, “Move around! Don’t stay in one spot!”

Pikachu used his incredible speed to strafe left and right repeatedly, causing Snorunt to miss Frost Breath every time it attempted. When the Electric-type crossed the space between them after another successful dodge, Pikachu swung his tail and sent Snorunt skidding back.

“Let’s keep this up! Thunderbolt!” Ash called.

“Double Team!”

At his trainer's order, Pikachu jumped into the air as sparks flew from his red check. Crying out his name, Pikachu released a stream of electricity, but Snorunt made many copies of itself in a straight line, the Thunderbolt hitting a dud instead of the real thing.

"Ice Shard, Snorunt!" Heather commanded.

"Iron Tail!"

Both Pokemon sprang into action. Snorunt fired three Ice Shards in quick succession, hoping to snipe the still-airborne Pikachu out of the air, but the Electric type used his tail to smash the ice aside.
like it was nothing. The last one was deflected, this time straight at Snorunt, slamming into her with amazing force, sending her rolling across the ground.

"Sno…" Snorunt groaned, stopping her roll with effort and trying to ignore the pain.

Heather gritted her teeth at seeing the Ice-type in such bad condition. “This isn’t good. Ice Shard!”

"Thunderbolt, Pikachu!” replied Ash.

Snorunt summoned ice particles in front of her mouth and fired it as a projectile, and Pikachu retaliated by unleashing a strong Thunderbolt that tore right through the oncoming Ice Shard, turning the tables.

“Bide!” Heather cried out. Snorunt screwed her eyes shut and braced for impact. The Thunderbolt landed, the shock producing a smoky explosion, billowing outwards and flinging ice destroyed by the blast wave everywhere. When the dust settled, a wheezing Snorunt stood in her same spot.

“I heard that Bide, Heather. It won’t work if Snorunt can’t handle this next move!”

Feeling victory on the horizon, Ash smiled at the sight of Snorunt’s helplessness. With equal calm, he ordered, "Pikachu, finish with Volt Tackle!"

Charging ahead, Pikachu generated enough electricity to cloak his whole body and then some, rapidly closing the gap between himself and a rooted Snorunt. In one, last powerful lunge, Pikachu rammed into her, but that wasn’t the finishing blow. Snorunt finally unleashed its stored energy in the form of a burst of light. Pikachu screamed in pain as the Bide returned his own power. Ash’s gasp of disbelief was downed out by the noise while Heather stood there with a smug smile. After the aftermath cleared, both Pokemon lied entangled like the two before them.

“Both Snorunt and Pikachu are unable to battle! This round results in a draw!”

“Even Pikachu too…” Dawn mumbled in concern, bringing her knees closer to her chest.

Ash stomped his foot. “Man!” Despite the knockout, his Pikachu managed to return to the podium with the remainder of his energy.

“We Isoldas use nothing but premiere Pokemon. We can turn around a loss just like that,” Heather declared, recalling her sister’s Snorunt, “Sure, we may be tied right now, but it’s how you finish that matters. You want my badge? Show me you deserve it by winning with the odds against you!”

With that said, Heather sent out her final warrior: a humanoid Pokemon that resembled a pale, youngster garbed in tattered, ice blue robes two sizes too big. The ridges in its eye mask of bandages brought to mind the pointed ends of snowflakes. Ash took the time to scan the new specimen.

“Shiric: the Snow Child Pokemon. With its body temperature less than -160 degrees, whenever Shiric touches a surface, it could freeze instantly.

“Shirit’s pre-evolved form, huh?” Gary commented, “Ice and Normal.”

After putting away the Pokedex, Ash took out his final Poke Ball. “He might not be my best, but he’ll still get the job done! Gouzatile, I choose you!”

After Gouzatile was released, Heather quirked a brow. “A Fire-type? You claim it’s not your best, but it’s a Fire-type? Whose leg you trying to pull?”
Ash’s response was caught in his throat at the nasty glare Gouzatile sent his way.

“Begin!”

“Gouzatile, Slash!” Ash called immediately, once again cutting Heather off before she could speak. “I have to take control if I want to win!”

"Use Power-Up Punch!" Heather commanded in reply

Gouzatile crouched lower to the ground and slithered forward at amazing speed, claws elongating. But, the Shiric curled the fingers of his right hand into a fist and swung right as Gouzatile lunged. The Fire type snarled from the dull pain coursing in its jaw as he landed back on his feet.

“Ember!” Dauntless, Gouzatile unleashed a spray of hot embers and ultimately returned the favor as Shiric mewed in discomfort.

"You alright, Shiric?" Heather asked concernedly. He replied with a nod, shaking off his shock. "Perfect. Now use Hail!"

Holding his arms out, Shiric’s body glowed light blue as he released an ominous hum, reminding Ash of Jynx’s Perish Song. A thick fog formed, increasing the speed of battleground’s ambience. Once Shiric stopped casting Hail, large balls of hail flew down and pelted Gouzatile.

“While it’s distracted, Power-Up Punch again!” Shiric then leapt into the air before coming down on the still-recovering Gouzatile.

"Dodge it!” Ash ordered, and Gouzatile easily slipped away as Shiric’s attack smashed into the ground. "Now use another Ember!” Gouzatile summoned another burst of embers from his mouth. It hit hard, driving the Shiric back a few paces.

"Stay strong, Shiric! Slow it down; Icy Wind!"

"Dodge and Slash!"

Shiric opened its glowing mouth and shot out an icy burst of wind, but the Fire-type scuttled away with astounding swiftness and then came back with a fierce Slash attack. Cringing, Shiric continued to fire one Icy Wind after another, but each attack was dodged easily even as Gouzatile continued to swipe at it.

Heather gritted her teeth as Gouzatile steadily wore down Shiric’s stamina. “Shiric, Ice Lift! Keep it away!”

Upon her command, a section of the ice the Pokemon stood on broke off, forcing Gouzatile to back off or be carried with it. Meanwhile, Shiric, who stood in the middle of the floating platform, was at last given the break Heather wanted.

“Ice Lift?” Misty parroted, “Never heard that before.”

“It’s the signature move of Shiric’s line,” Winter explained, eyes on the battlefield as the break in action caused Gouzatile to accept more Hail damage, “You ever heard of Magnet Rise? It’s basically an Ice-type version of that; it lets the user get off the ground and enjoy the benefits being airborne for
a short while.”

Gouzatile, meanwhile, tried to catch up to Shiric and his floating platform, but Shiric expertly willed it away with equal speed. All this did was waste Gouzatile’s precious energy as Hail continued to damage him. Ash squinted his eyes, noticing Shiric was becoming less and less visible amid the hailstorm. That’s when it clicked. “Shiric has Snow Cloak?!”

“Congratulations!” Heather began clapping enthusiastically. “This is how Winter’s Shiric deals with Fire-types. Victory by attrition! I’m just mimicking her. All rights reserved.”

Gouzatile’s frustration held all the power of a wildfire, so much one could practically see the flames roaring in his eyes, ready to ignite anything that he came in contact with. He was winning, and then they pulled out this cheap parlor trick. “(Why you… Get down here!)” In a fit of rage, Gouzatile’s sharp teeth turned orange as fire swirled in his mouth. He jumped at the platform and bit down on it, releasing the pent-up flames. Hissing steam joined the howling winds and grey fog.

Ash grinned in anticipation. “All right, Gouzatile! You learned Fire Fang! Now you can—”

“—Sit there and take this Icy Wind.”

Ash’s moment of pride vanished when he realized Gouzatile’s haste left him wide open. Shiric hopped off his Ice Lift and unleashed Icy Wind at the Salamander Pokemon. The attack drove him through the platform and into the damaged battlegrounds. Gouzatile struggled to rise, and when it did, Hail put him back on his stomach.

Ash formed a fist at his side. He beat Marina in convincing fashion and wanted to do the same with Heather. His streak of good luck could not end like this. “We can’t lose! We won’t lose! Gouzatile, Fire Fang!” His impassioned order gave Gouzatile a second wind. The Fire type raced forward, mouth brimming with fire burning hotter than ever.

“Power-Up Punch,” Heather commanded calmly. Shiric formed a fist as light surrounded it and jabbed as Gouzatile Pokemon struck, the both of holding the power struggle. Yet, Heather’s confident demeanor never waned. “I’ve used it twice, Ash. That makes three.”

Punctuating her words, Shiric’s punch landed squarely on Gouzatile’s face, forcing the Fire-type all the way to the opposite wall. Eyes flung wide, Gouzatile released a breathless scream as he collapsed to the cold, hard ground. "No! Gouzatile!” Ash cried in dismay.

“(I-I…)” The Starter Pokemon coughed, getting up with difficulty. Gouzatile limped forth, breath coming out in hoarse wheezes. Battered and bruised, its defiant glare was the only thing Ash still recognized about it. “(I will… prove myself… I will… prove them wrong… I… will…)” Talking stole the last of Gouzatile’s strength, and he collapsed unconscious.

"Gouzatile's unable to battle," the referee announced, “Shiric is the winner, and the victory goes to the Gym Leader, Heather!”

Gary leaned all the way back in the bleachers, raking his hands through his hair. “This woman schooled all three of us.”

“Heather forces you to think on your toes and keep track of moves used in the heat of battle,” Winter explained, gripping the edge of her coat, “all while passive moves like Perish Song, Hail, and Power-Up Punch put your back against the wall. And that’s before she decides to outright overpower you.”
Over on the sidelines, Heather and Ash exchanged handshakes as the former stated, “Well-played battle, Ash. I’m sure you’ll be back.”

Ash nodded. “You bet I will. We’ll be back stronger than ever.”

“Might I recommend heading to the Ifrit City Gym?” Heather said as Ash’s friends surrounded them, “Some time away will do you both good. Who knows? Maybe Sojiro over there can help you prepare for the rematch.”

“I think that’s what I’ll do,” Ash stated.

“Just don’t be too hard on Sojiro,” Heather said, “He’s new to the position after having it dumped on him unceremoniously by the Pokémon Association.”

Brock released a drawn-out but empathetic sigh. “And the business side of being a Gym Leader rears its ugly head…”

“I think I’ll stay in town,” Gary announced, “I’ll just train by the Niflheim Maw. I’ll probably be gone by the time you guys get back.”

“It’s cool, Gary.” Ash walked over and lightly punched his longtime rival’s shoulder. “Don’t fall too behind now. I need someone up front to make me push myself.”

Gary snorted. “If I get too far ahead, you won’t catch up.”

“U-Um…” Winter’s soft voice caught Gary’s attention. “Gary, may I ask something that’s been on my mind?”

“Yeah?” He replied unsurely.

She then asked, “What’s this ‘Ashy-boy’ name all about?”

There was an outburst of laughter Heather made zero attempt at controlling. It was a high cackle, piercing the cold air. “W-What kind of stupid name i-is that?!” She shouted between laugh, doubling over.

“Time to go.” Ash left the room all too quickly.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be one of the rare times the focus won’t be on Ash or a member of his crew. Instead, we’ll checking up on the Dream Team (Aaron, Jacob, and Ian) who are a little farther ahead of them. Don’t worry; there’s a reason I’m doing this.
Nighttime Marvel

Guided by the soft color dusting the darkened horizon, Aaron, Ian, and Jacob were close to their next destination: Aparra Village, the site of a Pokémon Contest. When the village was in sight, the three stopped to take in the surroundings before actually entering it.

“Aparra Village. Our one stop before Ifrit Mountain.” Even at night, Jacob marveled at the mountain towering over the valley.

“Starting to get a little warm here too.” Ian said, taking out a canteen and squirting water down his throat. He then walked up to Jacob’s side, looking at the same thing. “A major city built on the summit of a mountain. Don’t see that every day.”

“A dead volcano actually.” Jacob fished out a traveler’s guide from his pack and flipped to the page about Ifrit Mountain. “To show Tenla’s ambitiousness, the government funded a project to drill walkways and roads through the volcano, capping it off with a whole city at the summit. It took around 50 years to get it done.”

“Interesting,” a halfhearted Aaron remarked behind them, head down.

Ian turned around to face his friend with a frown. "Aaron, you're seriously still fretting over losing to Heather?"

"I'm trying not to, but it's hard. I lost rather horribly." Aaron shoved his hands into his pockets. He presumed he was off to a great start in Tenla for procuring the Morwenna City Gym Badge and Contest Ribbon. Then came Heather and her Monizzar dashing away the burgeoning confidence, putting him essentially in the same wistful state when he first entered Tenla. “I'm better than this. I won't be able to surpass my parents and build a concrete legacy. I owe it to them.”

"Just learn from it, Aaron. You're a pro at reevaluating and fine-tuning strategies," Jacob said consolingly, "You know what to do now, so there shouldn't be any issue."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you got plenty of time to do that later, Aar," Ian asserted, changing the subject, "Right now, I gotta get my first Contest Ribbon." He then stared jobbing the rest of the way. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s get a move on!” Just as eager, Jacob picked up the pace as Aaron rushed to keep up.
In a matter of minutes, the group arrived in the heart of Aparra Village. Colorful ribbons and golden hung from pole-to-pole and edge-to-edge, brightening up a place that should be settling down for the night. Yet, it bustled with townspeople going to and from, engaging in festivities provided by stands and roving merchants. Thanks to the simple buildings, the village offered a lot of space to move around in, but the one thing that stood was the clock tower holding a giant screen.

Ian watched the various passersby and the general merriment. “Did we wind up in the middle of something?”

Aaron replied, “A festival maybe?”

“So, where’s the Contest Hall?” Jacob mused aloud as they navigated through the sea of people, “I don’t see any building with the insignia, and the biggest thing I can see is that clock tower. I hope it’s not closed. It’d be a pain to wait in a morning line to register.”

“I know for sure Mr. Contesta wasn’t lying to us,” Ian remarked, “I even double-checked before we left Morwenna City. There’s a Contest here, so where the heck is signup—Inkay!”

Ian almost fell over the sudden weight on his head. Inkay giggled as it comfortably upside down on the top of Ian’s skull.

Two boys passed by, seeing that. One snickered while the said, “Nice hat and cape, you freak.”

With lightning speed, Ian snatched up both boys by the scruff of their shirts, turning them around so he could glare with murder in his eyes. “I’ve seen your faces now. Don’t want me to hunt you down and hurt you? Take that back and get lost.”

“Sorry! SORRY!” After the boys were dropped on their butts, they scrambled away, reduced to crying wrecks.

Aaron deadpanned. “Really, Ian?”

“One, they insulted Inkay,” he said as Inkay flipped onto his shoulder, “Two, they insulted my cape. I made this myself, you know. Not my fault they can’t appreciate good fashion.”

Jacob held a fist to his mouth and faked several coughs to break the awkward tension. “How about we find the Pokémon Center? Getting there might answer some of our questions.”

“Good idea, Jacob,” Aaron said, taking off his hat and fanning himself with it. “They weren’t kidding when they said Tenla gets hot close to Ifirt Mountain. I hope that Pokemon Center has A/C to cool—Ah! Arctick, too cold!”

The Ice/Bug-type Pokemon slithered to his shoulder, head bowed apologetically. “(Sorry. I just wanted to help.)”

The trio braved the crowd in search of their sanctuary. With enough time and patience, they managed to find the Pokemon Center. Upon entry, they found the place in its usual calm state, a reprieve from the festive chaos outside.

Aaron enjoyed the air cooling his sweaty face. “Perfect. Just what the doctor ordered.” He went over to the sets of seats nearby and sat down on the couch, Arctick hopping off and landing on the coffee table. Ian took one of the armchairs perpendicular to the couch with Inkay deciding to sit on the
armrest. Jacob sat in the chair opposite to Ian.

“So, Ian,” Jacob spoke up, “Have you figured out what you’re going to do?”

He smirked that capital-S, predatory smirk. “Yes, I have. Honchkrow for the Battle Round, and the little guy debuting in the Appeal Round.” Ian’s Inkay did a flip at the mention.

Aaron nodded in approval. "Might as well break in the new guy."

"Exactly my point.” Ian leaned back and propped up his feet. “Rest assured, I'll be obtaining my first ribbon of Tenla by the time this is over.”

“Wow, Ian. You sound pretty arrogant for someone who has no clue who’s in the contest.”

All eyes drifted to the girl who said. She had short, reddish-orange hair – accentuated by the pair of sunglasses resting atop them – and dark red eyes hair. Her attire consisted of a silk carmine tunic, an embroidered blazer over the tunic that stopped just above her waistline, a pair of denim straight-leg trousers, and platform ankle boots. She held up two fingers to her head as a form of greeting. "Long time no see, Aaron, Ian."

The warmth in Aaron’s body abandoned him as quickly as if the world went old and everyone on it had vanished. “Z-Zoey?”

“What are you doing here?” An equally disbelieving Ian asked with narrowed eyes.

Seemingly oblivious to their reactions, the Top Coordinator smiled in a friendly manner. “What? You expected me to stop after one major win? I can’t get bigheaded like that.”

Having lost twice to Zoey, once at the Sinnoh Grand Festival and the other early in Jubilife City, Aaron had but one thing to say to Ian, “You have your work cut out for you.”

Zoey quirked at brow at the brunette. “You’re not participating? Don’t you still do Gym Battles and Contests?”

“I do,” Aaron answered, “Me and Ian are cycling. I won my first ribbon back in Morwenna City. So, now, Ian is going for his first here.”

Zoey released a light sigh, one of relief. Back then, she voiced to Aaron her dislike of his dual pursuits. “For a second, I thought you changed your mind.”

“Never.” Aaron figured Zoey of all people deserved some context. “My mother was a Coordinator, and I do remember being inspired by her, but my heart was with Gym Battles and the Pokemon League. I spent all of Kanto focusing on one thing, but seeing Ian do this thing and watching others at Contests was the final straw. I had to take a shot. It took quite a bit of extra effort, but it’s worth it.”

Zoey chuckled wryly. “Man, so people really do give it their all no matter what.” Then, she offered him a firm but caring gaze. “Just make sure not to favor one over the other. You have to invest equal amounts of time in everything you do.”

Aaron nodded in understanding. “She’s changed. I wonder what happened.”
Jacob loudly cleared his throat. “Ahem! Umm.”

“Might want to drink some water,” Ian joked, earning a glare from Jacob.

"Oh, right!" Aaron mentally slapped himself for being so rude. He gestured over to Jacob. "Zoey, this is Jacob. He's an old friend of ours. Jacob, Zoey – the winner of the last Sinnoh Grand Festival that I believe you watched.”

"A pleasure," Jacob said, standing and shaking Zoey's hand, “Sinnoh’s #1 Coordinator, right?”

Zoey sheepishly averted her eyes after the handshake. "C'mon. There's no need for that. Just call me Zoey, okay? I'm still young and have a lot to learn."

Ian laughed. “Sounds like you get that a lot.”

A rare blush dusted the redhead’s cheeks. “Kind of.” She waved off the subject, regaining her composure. “Anyway. Ian, I’ll be looking forward to our first-ever Contest together.”

“Don’t think being a Top Coordinator intimidates me.” Again with the trademark smirk of danger. “Once me and my Pokemon get a good night’s rest, we’ll gladly take you down.

Rather than continue the banter, Zoey blinked in confusion. “What do mean ‘good night’s rest?’ The contest is tonight!”

The boys’ expressions dropped like rocks. “Say what?”

“You guys must’ve missed gotten the memo,” Zoey explained, “Aparra Village has Night Contests at the clock tower square instead in a Contest Hall during the day. You guys saw a giant monitor coming in? Yeah, that’s what that’s about.”

“When does registration end?” Ian asked after a delay.

Zoey checked the time. “In ten minutes. There’s a stand at the square.”

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“MOVE!” Ian shouted as he jumped out of his seat and dashed out of the Pokemon Center at breakneck speeds, bulldozing through a number of hapless people

“(Ian! Don’t leave me here!)” Inkay shouted in desperation, hopping and floating after his trainer. “(I thought you loved me!)”

Aaron, Zoey, and Jacob eventually caught up to Ian, giving the first two a chance to check out the site of Aparra Village Pokemon Contest. There was a higher concentration of lights to keep things sufficiently alit. The stage itself was a large circle, a mote of water separating it from a ring of plants. The side facing the clock tower held a staircase with red carpet rolling from that to the curtains.
situated in front of the tower’s entrance. They were foldable chairs all around, but several early birds waited for the action to begin from rooftops or picnic blankets.

“Making the most of what you got,” Jacob remarked, adjusting his glasses, “I can appreciate that. Mom did that a lot.”

Ian found them, walking over as if a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Inkay was with him. “Zoey, you saved my hide. I owe you one.”

"Oh, it's no big deal. Just make sure to bring your A-game," Zoey replied. Then, she pointed to clock tower. "You can change in there when the time comes. Follow the signs, and you'll be shown practice fields."

"Let's go check it out." Aaron insisted. "It's always wise to see what kind of competition you're up against. If not, just to get some extra work in."

"Aaron's right. I was just about to go see myself," Zoey said. "Follow me!" The group followed closely behind the Snowpoint City resident as she led them behind the clock tower. Following the directions, they found an area within the village with practice fields and coordinators polishing their techniques at the last minute.

"Hmm. We got ourselves a decent crowd," Ian mused, looking around.

Light streamed from Jacob’s belt and materialized into the form of his Yanmega, who rested on his head. “(Hey. Yo. How’s it going, ladies and germs? Got bored and wanted to be nosy. What’s the stitch?)” Suddenly, his sensitive wings twitched, alerting him to something. "(You guys hear anything?)" The Ogre Darter Pokemon asked, lifting its head and looking around, especially at the sky.

Arctick tilted its head at him. “(Which question did you want us to answer first?)”

"(Don't get smart with me!"

"(I'm sorry!)"

Yanmega retorted, glaring at the Frozen Pokemon.

Inkay slapped its forehead with a tentacle. “(She wasn’t getting smart with you, dummy!)”

Then, Inkay looked up to the night sky, wondering exactly what Yanmega was talking about. There was only blackness and specks of stars. Just then, Inkay saw something moving. It hopped up and down, clapping its tentacles. “(Ooh! Ooh! Shooting star!)” Its motions were strange. First, it would move in a straight path, and then drop suddenly as if it had a hard time supporting its own weight. “(W-Wait, that’s a shooting star…)”

Now, it was falling straight to them.

“(Mayday! Mayday! Serpentine!)” Inkay positioned himself about the object would land. Eyes glowing, he forced an aura of blue upon the falling thing, using slow down its descent.

It was a badly injured Pokemon.

The humans gathered around, kneeling down to check on it. It was a draconic quadruped covered in black scales and skin. The wings based on its shoulders twitched with life, and its mouth was parted
to release hoarse wheezes.

"W-What happened to it?" Zoey asked, hands raised but hesitant to touch anywhere.

Jacob scanned the Pokemon’s body, instantly seeing several injuries. One of the tusks located on its mandibles was chipped, and gashes lined the rows of scales along its back and tail. “It needs to see Nurse Joy right now.”

Aaron removed his Pokedex, wanting to see what exactly was in need.

"Incinelsh: The Cremation Pokemon. Incinelsh, due to their skill manipulation of flames, were used in various ceremonies involving all forms of fire."

"An Incinelsh…” Aaron put away his Pokedex and removed two Poke Balls from his belt. He pointed one of them at Arctick and returned it to its confines. After doing that, he threw the other one and released Scizor. "Come on, Jacob. Let's take it to the Pokémon Center,” he said as Scizor picked up the injured Pokemon, adequately supporting its limbs.

Zoey stood up and faced them. "Let me come with you guys."

"You and Ian need to get ready for the Pokémon Contest," Aaron replied, not unkindly, "Don't worry. Jacob and I will make sure it's taken care of."

Zoey sighed in defeat, placing her hands on her hips. "Fine." Soon, Aaron, Scizor, Jacob, and Yanmega were out of them, hurrying back to the Pokémon Center. Zoey rubbed the back of her head and sighed. “I don't think I'll be able to perform well knowing that Pokemon is hurt.”

“Yeah, that's gonna weight on my mind too.” At this point, Ian finally noticed some of the people who gathered around to see about the injured Incinelsh. “Break it up, everyone! Nothing else to see! They got it under control!” The Coordinators immediately dispersed and went back to minding their own business.

Zoey put her hands behind her back, looking around, whistling, and kicking off invisible dust. “Okaaay. That ended awkward… Training! Yeah. That’s what we came for, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right!” Ian set down his Inkay. “Thanks for the reminder. Let’s get stated.”

"I think this one will help Inkay as a partner." She removed a Poke Ball from her person and threw it into the air. "Come on out, Maidow!"

The little device released the Pokemon that was held inside. The floating, humanoid Pokemon bore a skeletal visage and black skin. From its chest down flowed a decrepit grey, gown-like garment with darkness flowing from the bottom hem. Its eyes were hollow yet showed pink, woeful eyes. The back of the head resembles a droplet of water turned on its side upside-down. Its mouth was fashioned in a zigzag style, and the underside of its arms were garbed with sleeves of the same material as its dress.

Ian raised an eyebrow and examined Zoey's Pokemon with earnest interest. "Liking your style, Zoey."

"Okay, let's make this quick so we can get ready," Zoey said urgently, "What moves does your Inkay have?"
"Psywave, Psybeam, Psychic, and Flamethrower."

"Three moves, huh?" Zoey muttered, trying to think. Even though she planned to use Maidow in the contest, there was no shame in helping out a fellow coordinator in need. "Okay. Well, watch my Maidow and see if you can get any ideas out of this. Maidow, let's use Will-O-Wisp!"

Maidow raised her arms and summoned blue balls of fires around her. “Now use Ominous Wind.” She then began to twirl around when she floated as a spiraling black zephyr brewed. The Ominous Wind and Will-O-Wisp met, causing the ghostly flames to spread all across the black gale and create a rotating blue inferno.

“Separate and keep it in place with Psychic!” Maidow’s pink eyes glowed as she tapped into her ESP. The spiraling blue gale was pulled apart telekinetically into large spheres, essentially making a modified version of the previous Will-O-Wisp. “Now finish up.” With a wave of her arm, Maidow broke apart her combination on a molecular level. Blue sparks and embers showered down beautifully after she finished.

Ian and Inkay carefully watched Zoey and Maidow's short presentation. It was a good thing Maidow was at least part-Ghost, so there was at least some relation.

"You’ll have to improvise a little," Zoey suggested.

“(Ooh! Ooh! Watch me go!)” Inkay jumped up and springboarded off Ian’s head, its head beginning to glow multiple colors.

“H-Hey! Inkay, I didn’t you give a command yet!” Ian yelled as the Revolving Pokemon unleashed a number of Psybeams into the air, “That’s not what I had planned and you can’t handle that many!”

Inkay span rapidly, the Psybeams floating the movements to give the appearance of streamers, much like the ones seen around town. Then, it changed to Flamethrower, turning the multi-colored beams to flares of bright orange that exploded into showers of fire. Inkay landed on the ground, tentacles up in joy as the ember showered around him.

Instead of applauding, Ian tossed the Dark/Psychic-type a deadpan look. “You missed two.” He pointed over his shoulder. Inkay’s mouth went agape and face petrified as two of the streams flew elsewhere.

“Absol, Razor Wind!”

Before the attacks could stray too far away, a quick and sharp blade of wind lacerated through them, turning it into harmless sparks. An Absol landed near Ian, Inkay, Zoey, and Maidow, followed by a green-haired boy wearing a gray double-pocket vest, a white western woven underneath it, gray slacks, and loafers. He glanced at Inkay before settling on Ian. “You should really be more careful.”

Ian narrowed his eyes at his condescending tone. "Who's talking?"

“The name's Drew,” he said, flipped his hair in his trademark style, “Do not wear it out.”

Zoey asserted, “Well, it's nice to meet you and all, but we're kind of in the middle of something important.”

“You mean that Inkay?” Drew remarked haughtily, “I hope he’s not planning on using it in the
Pokémon Contest. He wouldn't make it past the Appeal Round.”

“(But, but!)” Inkay’s lips quivered, slinking behind Ian’s leg. “(I-It’s my first Contest!)”

Ian scooped up Inkay while keeping his dark glare on the boy. “Bold talk coming from a punk kid.”

Gritting her teeth, Zoey pointed accusingly at Drew. "All right, listen here, buster. I don't know who you think you are, but you have no right to talk about others like that!"

"It's just a friendly rival's advice," Drew replied, flipping his bangs against to show much little their animosity affected him.

Zoey put her hands on her hips. "Thanks but no thanks."

"And stop doing that. It’s obnoxious," Ian demanded.

Drew dropped all pretenses and matched their glares. “Hmph. We’ll see how ‘obnoxious’ I am when I’m in the winner’s circle at the Aparra Village Contest.”

“Well, Drew, I’m afraid you’ll have to get through the both of us,” Zoey responded.

Drew shifted his gaze to the Snowpoint City resident and smirked. “Shouldn’t be too hard since you’ll be too dazzled by me to notice.” He then, out of nowhere, took a rose and tossed it to Zoey who promptly caught it. “Keep that as a reminder of my words, Sinnoh’s ‘Number 1.’” With that, the LaRousse City resident walked away with his Absol wordlessly following him.

"(Isn't he quite the character?)" Inkay commented, watching them go.

Zoey shrugged her shoulders. “Talk is cheap.”

Ian glanced around the place but found naught but people everywhere. He grunted in disappointment. “Such a shame a dark alley isn’t nearby.”

The Top Coordinator laughed at his dark joke. “Let your skills do the talking, Ian… Oh, wait! I almost forgot something.”

Ian and Inkay quizzically looked at the redhead, especially when she turned her back to them so she faced the direction Drew sauntered. She cupped either side of her hand to amplify her voice. “Hey Drew!” When Drew looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow, Zoey tossed up the rose. “Will-O-Wisp.” Maidow instantly sent a blue fireball at the red flower, incinerating the flower.

The ash fell to the floor and Zoey capped her message with a haughty smirk and crossed arms. “I don’t accept cheap roses!”

Drew’s left eye twitched as roaring laughter rolled out of Ian and Inkay. Absol itself was snickering in amusement until its trainer shot a silencing glare to the Dark type. “Come on, we've got work to do,” Drew said, hoping to get far enough to drown out the two’s chortling in the crowd noise, “We’ll be having the last laugh tonight.”
In a medical room inside the Pokémon Center, the Incinelsh lay on its stomach with monitors around it observing its condition. Bandages were wrapped around two of its legs and its right wing with thicker ones applied to its body, especially where Jacob discovered the deep gashes. The Cremation Pokemon slept well, its breathing normal and even. A group of Chansey were in the room keeping an eye on both the Pokemon and the monitors.

Up in the closed-off observatory, Nurse Joy was currently talking to Aaron and Jacob about Incinelsh's condition, "Those wounds were recently inflicted. Only by the grace of the gods did it come in contact with civilization before it passed out."

Jacob’s brow knit together. "Recent? What could have possibly happened to do all that?" The only wild Pokemon knew were capable of such violence where the deranged birds that attacked Zumi Town, and the fierce members of the rivalry between Zangoose and Seviper. At least the ones he knew of.

"The Chansey will look over Incinelsh. I have to hurry and go to the Night Contest," Nurse Joy said.

"I'll stay and look after Incinelsh," Jacob replied. Even if the Cremation Pokemon lacked a trainer, it still needed comfort in its time of need, especially when nobody knew why it was heavily injured in the first place. "Aaron, you go support Ian."

"Fine. Take care, Jacob."

Both Aaron and Nurse Joy departed, intending to the head to the clock tower square. Jacob turned forward, facing the glass that allowed him to see the bed-ridden Incinelsh and the busy Chansey. It made him sad to know that Pokemon, innocent and gentle creatures, could be so badly injured. Jacob intended to ease the emotional and physical pain when it woke up.

"You'll be fine, Incinelsh. I'll make sure of that."

“How do you do, Aparra Village?!”

Cheers and whistles of elation echoed into the restless night from all corners of Aparra Village as Cecean spoke. Every inch of the area, from the given seats to the ground to the rooftops, were covered by someone. Some even used tall Pokemon like an Onix to get a good view. For those lucky enough to get close, a shoulder-high gate was set up to keep the crowd from the stage.

“Welcome to a special outdoor Night Contest! Don’t let the scene change fool you, rules and regulations still apply! The Appeal Round has Pokémon Coordinators using his or her Pokemon to astound our fabulous judges with graceful combinations, and the Battle Round has the Pokémon Coordinators lucky enough to pass on compete against each other with a time limit and point meter. But, we are going to spice things up a bit by letting Coordinators use different Pokemon every battle!”

The crowd erupt into cheers and whistles and barely calmed down as Cecean introduced the usual string of judges. “—now that that’s over with,” she said, “how about we kick this Pokémon Contest off with our first contestant, Ian Darusu from Lavender Town!” She gestured to the direction to the curtains hanging over the entranceway to the clock tower.
The curtains opened up and Ian strolled out, swishing for his sea green cape with a white underside for dramatic effect. He also wore a white suit and pants, black boots, a caveat, and a sea green sash. As he took center stage and called out his Inkay, Aaron – who stood front-row – couldn’t help but whistle in an impressed manner seeing his good friend. "He stepped up his game. That's a nice suit."

“Inkay!” Ian held out his arm for Inkay immediately jump on. “Psybeam!” After giving the small Pokemon a boost, Inkay twirled around in the air, enjoying the high ride. At the height of it, it repeated its demonstration to Zoey except it fired significantly less beams. “Now Flamethrower!” Then, the beams were cloaked in fire, falling down and converging into a single one. Ian grinned in anticipation. “Now, for the big one. Get inside and use Psybeam!”

Inkay entered the fire without a care in the world and used its attack, making the end of the falling stream of flames split open to form a fanged mouth. Somehow, the newly formed maw roared, growing bigger and bigger. Many of the children and people in the audience screamed and cowed, fearing the move was about to eat. Then, the construct did a U-turn and back in the air. The maw roared out a Psybeam, giving the impression of a dragon breathing fire.

Ian snapped his fingers, standing in the middle of the stage, and crossed his arms. The fire dragon instantly headed back to the stage and crashed onto it, exploding into showers of bright orange flares. Inkay landed upside down on Ian’s head as the crowd exploded into cheers.

“Short but sweet. What a way to kick this contest off!” Cecean said as Ian went back down the red carpet and disappeared behind the curtains. “We certainly hope something that set the tone. Now let’s introduce our next participant, Drew from LaRousse City!”

Drew emerged from behind the curtain wearing a black tuxedo. The left pectoral portion of the tuxedo had a large rose imprint and lines resembling vines stretching out to other parts of the tuxedo. His grin could cool down the warm valley. With a Poke Ball in hand, he tossed it into the air. “Masquerain, go!”

The device opened up so that the Eyeball Pokemon could appear. Masquerain squeaked, its wings fluttering rapidly so that it remained airborne. “Masquerain, Water Sport!” Drew commanded. Masquerain produced a blue ball in-between its orange-red antennae, releasing water into the air that branched out in different directions like a fountain.

“Now spin and use Blizzard.” Masquerain spun in midair, controlling its Blizzard to make snow out of the water instead of outright ice. “Spread it out with Silver Wind.” The Pokemon’s rhombus-shaped wings unleashed gusts of silvery scales. The Silver Wind slowly expand the dome of silver and white to the point nearby fans felt a pleasantly chilling sensation.

“Now finish up,” Drew confidently ordered. Masquerain suddenly stopped spinning and used the rest of its Silver Wind to jettison the entire combination out in every direction. The snow, leaving far more audience to enjoy a brief reprieve from the heat.

“And Drew sends Aparra Village a little Fimbulvetr Town to us and the fans!” Cecean commented. “Don’t get cooled off just yet, folks, we’re not even warmed up yet!” Cecean yelled into her microphone, “Now give a warm welcome to our next contestant, Zoey of Snowpoint City!”

Met with significantly more fanfare, Zoey walked out next, looking radiant in her amaranth-colored suit, pants, and boots. Swishing the transparent fabric hanging from one shoulder pad, she threw out her Poke Ball. “Lumineon, curtain!” She released the Neon Pokemon into the rim of water outlining
the battlegrounds. “Aqua Ring!” Lumineon trilled as its entire body gave off a translucent glow. Then, glowing rings spread out from each side of Lumineon until a circle of rings graced the inner depths of the water. “Waterfall.” One-by-one, these rings were lifted by columns of water, each one carrying an Aqua Ring atop their crowns.

“Now Safeguard.” The Water-type Pokemon illuminated again and spread the glow all throughout the water and up the columns. When it made contact with the rings of Aqua Ring, a phenomenon resembling an aurora formed, hovering above the contest area and blocking out the starry night sky.

"Now this is a light show!" Cecean remarked, her eyes shimmering at the sight.

Zoey raised her arm like a referee. "Finish it up!"

The Neon Pokemon deactivated its moves in go. The columns, aurora, and Aqua Ring dispersed into airborne multi-colored crystals. The sparkling display left the majority of the crowd speechless at the ability of a Top Coordinator – something like this was but a fraction of their skill.

When Zoey bowed, the audience erupted. Even the judges could not help but give their own round of applause. She returned Lumineon to its Poke Ball and retreated to the clock tower. Once the fanfare ended, Cecean took over, “Well, let’s not let that one performance makes us quit! We still got plenty to get to so let’s get this party rolling!”

For a place as small as Aparra Village, it was surprisingly loud as the remaining competitors went out performed. Each coordinator showcased something different thanks to their individual tastes and choice of Pokemon. Some were amazing, others tellingly rusty. But, what mattered most was that the audience enjoyed every last one of them, and that the competitors did their best.

“And that’s all she wrote for the Appeal Round! We’ll be taking a short break so our judges can figure out who will be moving on to the second round!”

In the clock tower’s makeshift lobby on the bottom floor, Ian finished watching the last person go and shook his head. “Tough competition,” he said under his breath, “I know it’s never easy, but fate could throw a bone at least once.”

“What’s the matter, Darusu?” Drew said as he walked up, enjoying the sight of Ian cringing at the sound of his voice, “Don’t like hanging with the big boys?”

Ian snarled and mockingly ruffled Drew’s hair. “Fruity small fries don’t count.”

Drew released his own growl, swatting away Ian’s hand. “I’ll show you fruity small fry.”

Before either boy took a single step, Zoey appeared between them and kept them at her arms’ lengths, preventing the situation from escalating any farther. “All right, break it up, you two! Save it for the Battle Round!”

Drew huffed and flipped his hair in order to regain his bravado. “Gladly, especially when I’m stomping you two.”

“All conversation stopped, and every coordinator paid attention to the nearest screen to see who advanced to the second round. The monitors showed eight cards with their flipsides showing, hiding
the chosen coordinators.

“And here are the eight coordinators moving on!”

The cards turned around, revealing the results. Ian secured a first place spot, Zoey second, and Drew seventh while the other coordinators filled in the remaining spots.

A victorious laugh bellowed out of Ian. “Looks like I was worried for no reason!” He turned to his two rivals and then said, “Good to see all of us are in. Now, the fun really begins.”

Zoey nodded, still facing the screen. “You’re right. Congrats by the way.”

“And now to determine who will be facing who!”

On-screen, the cards scrambled as the randomizer did its job. When the cards were arranged back into new positions, tournament bracket lines accompanied them as they revealed the battles. Zoey, Ian, and Drew each had to face one of the three other second-rounders.

Drew snorted. "This won't take long."

"For once, I agree,” Ian remarked.

Zoey smiled cheekily, deciding to stir up the rivalry for fun’s sake. “That is until I squash you two.”

For the same time that, Drew and Ian were on the same page and spoke the same language. “Dream on!”

"(Move before we make you!)

Deep inside a cavern illuminated by red light, many wild Pokemon quivered in fear or reluctantly stepped back at the demands of the more powerful Pokemon clearing the way. Their trainers wore by the black sunglasses and the trench coats.

"(You can't have it!)

The trainers and their Pokemon were halted by the dissidents blocking their path. A sizeable number of Pokemon refused to step aside or give up. The humans turned on their Gattlers as the Pokemon readied to aid them in the subjugation.

"(Last chance—move it or lose it.)"

The group did not budge; their act of courage even emboldened the others to stay by their side. No matter what, they were entrusted with the security of this cavern's confines. They could not let someone force their way in. Among them were a family of Incinelsh.

"Get them!"

As quickly as the rebellion began, it was put down. Both human and Pokemon under their control
attacked with their best moves until enemies could no longer move.

"(We…must protect…this cavern! …The shrine!)

Two of the Incinelsh spread their wings and hovered in their area. Despite the heaviness of their injuries, they could not let them proceed. There was only one thing they could do: block the path. The two Incinelsh and any other able-bodied Pokemon proceeded to unleash attacks at the rocky walls of the caverns, causing stones to fall and fill the path.

"They're cutting off the path!"

"Don't just stand there! Stop them!"

One heavily injured Incinelsh weakly opened its eyes, feeling the intense shaking going on around. It lifted its head, saddened by the sight of fallen Pokemon cradling their wounds. Then, its eyes widened when it saw a human and his Pokemon lunge straight for the other two unsuspecting Incinelsh.

"(MOTHER! FATHER!)

Incinelsh shot up but a sudden pain forced it to lie back on its bed, groaning as unpleasant sensations coursed through its body. Quickly, two Chansey and Jacob hurried to the part of the recovery station that which Incinelsh was kept.

"(Oh dear. He woke up and must have not realized how badly he's hurt.)" The first Chansey stated, watching Incinelsh breathe laboriously.

Jacob approached Incinelsh at his bedside, and his eyes lowered somberly at the sight of Incinelsh getting adjusted to its treated injuries post-unconsciousness. Jacob lifted a hand and placed it on Incinelsh's neck, stroking it affectionately. The Cremation Pokemon slowly reopened its eyes and looked at Jacob.

"It's ok, Incinelsh. You're in the Pokémon Center now. You're in good hands," Jacob said, smiling sympathetically. On the other side of the bed, the Chansey were making sure Incinelsh did not reopen its wounds as well as checking the IV bag and heart monitor.

"(Pokémon… Center? So I made it…)" The Cremation Pokemon gazed at Jacob. "(Human…I implore you. I am in need of assistance.)"

"I figured," Jacob replied, “Anyone with any common sense knew something terrible was going on. A random Pokemon don't suddenly drop from the sky with bad injuries. And, for future references, my name is Jacob.”

"(… we need to go to Ifrit Mountain…)" Incinelsh explained, trying to move again but tensed up when another spike of dull pain coursed through him. Jacob continued to stroke Incinelsh's neck, trying to soothe him as much as possible.

"We'll talk in a moment. Right now, you just need to rest," Jacob insisted, "Don't talk. Just rest. I'll be here until you get better. Then, I'll listen."

Most of Incinelsh’s words came out as croaks but the following, "(But my mother and father…the shrine…)"
The Cremation Pokemon was silenced when Jacob placed a hand on his head this time, continuing his treatment. "I said I'll listen to your story when you're up again. I'm in no hurry. I want to make sure first of all that you're okay, Incinelsh," Jacob said adamantly.

Incinelsh finally relaxed, letting loose a sigh of defeat. Getting from Ifrit Mountain to the nearest civilization was one success, and he supposed getting treatment for his injuries was another plus. If this Jacob was going to follow through with what he said, in due time, his problem would be addressed eventually. At least there were humans that cared unlike those monsters he encountered.

"(Very well then… Jacob.)"

“Silver Wind!”

“Hex!”

Ian’s Dusclops made a ball of black energy with a red eye in the middle, which then released a series of rings that collided with a Yanma’s oncoming attack. Ian himself failed to contain his grin as the moves cancelled out. “What’s the matter? You started off so strong. Where’s that gumption now?” He relished in the girl’s frightened expression so much he licked his lips. Alas, the fun had to end. “Night Shade.”

Dusclops fired a red and black beam from its eyes into the giant one made by Hex. With audible squishes, the eye swelled in size before mutating into a grotesque, fleshy mass of more eyes and blackened flesh. The Night Shade came out in the form of many, thrashing tentacles that swarmed the Yanma, leaving it screaming for mercy as darkness enveloped it.

The attack exploded, sending streams of blackness everywhere. That was the final nail in the coffin; the points of Ian’s opponent was reduced to zero, prompting the judges to buzz in.

“Our winner for this battle is Ian! He’s going to the semifinals!” Cecean announced as Ian and Dusclop’s images appeared on the big screen with the word “WINNER” shining above them.

Meanwhile, Dusclops floated over and shared a high-five with him. They exited together, leaving their enemy and her Pokemon to brood in shame. After giving compliments to his Dusclops and recalling it, Ian found a spot to take a seat in, waiting for when he was called again.

“Ian, do you mind if I ask you about your style?”

He looked over his shoulder to see Zoey standing behind him with two cans of soda. “What about?”

She looked at him as if he asked a stupid question and gestured to the stage back outside. “Like the stuff you did just now! What gave you the idea of using such unique combinations?”

“Oh, that?” Chuckling, Ian thought for sure this would color Zoey’s perception of him, but if she really wanted to know, why not? “I’d have to backtrack and give you some context.”

Zoey tossed him a soda. “We got time.”
Ian caught it with one hand. “Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He waited until she sat beside him to begin. “I grew up in France with my brother and sister. We studied at the Pokémon Academy of Montpelier. I did the worst, and the other students caught on. Even my homeroom teacher liked telling me how much I sucked. Then, I met my then Gastly who scared some of the suckers off. wasn’t long before I did the same thing. When I see someone who is oblivious to suffering, think they’re all high and mighty, I like to give them an education.” He never bothered to suppress his manic smile. “That moment when they discover their first taste of terror is pure bliss! Then, I grew addicted and made it a regular hobby.”

Zoey almost turned blue in the face. “Uh… huh…”

He laughed good-naturedly, hoping to ease the tension he wrought. “Oh, don’t worry. I respect you too much to target you. You intrigue me.”

“Should I ask why?” She said in a cautious tone.

“I’ll tell you anyway,” he replied, “I mean, not many coordinators up and win their first Grand Festival on the first try like you. Heck, I was eliminated in the first round of the Battle Stage at my first. That takes special skill and talent. I admire such qualities”

Zoey looked away for a brief second, took the quickest sip, and sighed dejectedly. “To tell you the truth, Ian, even now, I feel as if there’s still much for me to learn.” Now it was her turn to liven the mood with a chuckle. “But I guess that’s what I get for going all-in for my career. I may never be satisfied, but you know, that’s all right. That means I’ll keep going region to region, meeting more and more rivals. The more experience I get, the better.” He wordlessly nodded back. Then, she said, “But enough about me, back to you.”

He stared at right hard until his train of thoughts returned to its normal course. “Oh yeah, right. Another thing I didn’t like about the school was how cookie-cutter some of stuff they taught was. Performances made by some of the students bored me to tears. So, after I left, my interests bled into my style and profession. If I’m going to win, I want to do it on my own terms using the stuff I like.”

Zoey smiled. “And you should totally keep doing it. I mean, you see the crowd? You got one heck of a reaction from them.”

Ian returned the smile—one of the few people in the world who supported his tastes. “Thanks for the support. I mean that.”

“Also, what do you mean you left?” The redhead asked, “You graduated?”

“Actually, no, I flunked out,” he answered bluntly, watching in odd amusement as her expression dropped, “My sister, Ivanna, was kicked out because of supposed violence to the school owner’s son, but she said lost interest in Contests anyway and she’s now a Pokemon Performer instead. My brother, Irvin, flat out left.”

Zoey’s response had a noticeable delay to it. “Quite, uh, the family you have there.”

He grinned mischievously, leaning in a little. “Want to meet them?”

Zoey leaned back, averting her eyes. “Uh, no. That won’t be necessary.” Then, she locked eyes with him just to show how serious she was. “Ever.”
“With one of our finalists set, we’re going to move on with our next pair of coordinators!”

Semifinalists Drew and Zoey now stood across from one another. The green-haired coordinator was confident while the orange-haired one was focused. “And they would be Drew of LaRousse City and Zoey of Snowpoint City!” The images of said people appeared on the monitor with two point circles and a time bar at their usual spot. “The time of five minutes is set, and we begin!”

“Now, Flygon, let’s go!”

“Maidow, curtain!”

Both Pokemon were released onto the stage, hovering in the air and awaiting for their trainer’s next command. Surprised to see the new addition to Zoey’s team, Aaron pulled out his Pokedex and examined the creature.

“Maidow: The Heartbroken Pokemon. Maidow is believed to be the undead body of the maiden who died of a broken heart and was reborn as a Pokemon.”

"Ghost and Psychic, huh?” Aaron remarked, putting away the Pokedex afterwards. "I'll be watching you carefully, Zoey. You're the reason why I didn't get farther in the Sinnoh Grand Festival. But this is Tenla; I won't settle for anything less than complete and total victory.”

“Flygon, let’s start off with Sandstorm!” Drew commanded. Flygon flapped its left wing and summoned a raging sandstorm.

“Disrupt it with Psywave!” Zoey commanded. Maidow’s pink eyes turned light blue, and she released light blue rings from her body. The Psywave did its job in cancelling out Sandstorm and caused Drew’s score to go from 100 to 91 percent.

Drew, unfazed, flipped his green bangs. “Dragon Pulse and then Dragon Breath.” Flygon created a light green sphere of energy in front of its mouth and fired a gust of lavender wind, launching both moves. The combination alone was enough to drop Zoey’s points from 100 to 90 percent.

“Stop it with Psychic!” Holding her hands out, Maidow telekinetically struggled to prevent the Dragon Pulse-Dragon Breath attack from striking her.

“Figured you’d do that,” Drew proclaimed with a smirk, “Cut through and hit Maidow with Steel Wing, Flygon!” The combination was suddenly bifurcated as Flygon headed right to a surprised Maidow and struck her with its glowing wings.

“Maidow!” Zoey shouted in concern as the Heartbroken Pokemon hit the floor. The Dragon Pulse-Dragon Breath combination dispersed into a mist with light green sparkles inside it.

“And Drew catches Zoey off-guard in order to create a beautiful scene from Flygon’s attacks!” Cecean commentated as Zoey’s points went from 90 to 75 percent.

After Maidow got back up, Zoey steeled herself. "It’s my turn now, Drew! Will-O-Wisp and Psychic!” Maidow created small blue fire balls around her and used Psychic to send them at Flygon.
“Sandstorm!”

Flygon flapped its wings and created another Sandstorm in hopes of countering Maidow's attacks. “Change up!” Zoey ordered. Maidow motioned her arms as the fire balls from Will-O-Wisp escalated into the sky so that the ground-level Sandstorm wouldn’t extinguish them. The failed attempt at a counter caused Drew’s points to fall from 90 to 79 percent. “Now do it!” The fireballs fell from the sky like little blue meteors and scored a successful hit, dropping Drew’s score once again. “Now get rid of the Sandstorm with Psywave!” Maidow emitted Psywave again in order to dispel Sandstorm, scattering the grains of sand across the stage.

“And Zoey pulls off a series of successful counters in order to leave a huge dent in Drew’s score!” Cecean shout over the crowd as Drew’s points stopped at 58 percent.

Drew snarled slightly but quickly calmed himself. “Flygon, take to the skies.” The Mystic Pokemon, recovering from the assault, did as it was told. Zoey and Maidow carefully watched it. “Do multiple Dragon Pulses and give them speed with Steel Wing!” Flygon produced more spheres close to it and then used Steel Wing to knock them down to Maidow at blazing speeds.

“Ominous Wind!” Maidow spun around gracefully as a black zephyr formed around her to block the Dragon Pulses.

“Ah, dear Zoey, you are so predictable. Dragon Breath!” Per his order, Flygon exhaled another Dragon Breath. As the Dragon Pulses collided with Ominous Wind, Dragon Breath added to the workload, somehow ignited all the attacks, and created a series of green explosion. Maidow, having suffered damage, was forced backwards, panting breathlessly.

“And Drew won’t let himself go down without a fight. Now Zoey is the one to suffer a dent to her points!” Cecean announced as Zoey’s point dropped from 75 to 53 percent.

“Man…” Zoey groaned as Maidow got up once again.

“Not out of the woods yet,” Drew muttered, “But nothing I can’t handle.”

Pulling herself together, Zoey pointed forward. “Maidow, Ominous Wind and Psywave!” The Ghost/Psychic-type Pokemon twirled around so that another Ominous Wind was generated whilst simultaneously releasing Psywave. The result was a segmented column of darkness currently heading toward Flygon.

“Fly straight through it!” Drew commanded, intending to disrupt the impressive combination where it would hurt the most. Flygon fearlessly dove into the column and started making its way to the source.

Zoey smirked. “Thought you would do that.” Drew’s eyes widened in surprise as the Snowpoint City resident commanded, “Will-O-Wisp!” Maidow matched her trainer’s smirk as blue flames were suddenly added to the column.

Drew’s eyes shrunk as he realized his error and threw his composure out of the window. “Get out of there, Flygon!”

The column became a black-and-blue inferno and imploded with Flygon still inside it.

The dust settled to reveal a scorched Flygon lying motionless on the ground. Its eyes inside its red
lenses were replaced with swirls. The buzzers on the judges’ podiums sounded off immediately afterwards as red X's appeared on them.

“And Zoey pulls off one last combination in order to knock Flygon and Drew out of this competition! And thus she will be the second finalist!” Cecean announced as Zoey and Maidow’s pictures appeared on the big screen with the gold-printed words “WINNER” above them.

“Man, this bites.” Drew groaned as he recalled his fallen Flygon, but he subsequently shrugged it off. “Oh well, I have plenty of time before the Tenla Grand Festival. That’s where everything matters.” With a calm smirk and a flip of his hair, the LaRousse City resident sauntered off.

“You were astounding, Maidow! Now we just got to take care of Ian and we’ll win!” Zoey stated encouragingly. The Ghost/Psychic-type nodded and the two also sauntered off in order to prepare for the finals.

Back at the Pokémon Center, Incinelsh's condition improved to the point he could lie on his belly, allowing head and neck movement. All it took was some relaxation, a replacement of bandages, and some medicine. Now that it was better, Incinelsh took the time to explain everything to Jacob.

"(In Ifrit Mountain, there is a shrine within a cavern normally overlooked by people going straight to the city at the summit. Most of the Pokemon that dwell there are entrusted with the shrine's protection. Recently, shady people and their Pokemon came and tried to force their way into the shrine. However, we did not back down. Many of us, including me, were injured in our gambit to block off the path by collapsing the roof.)"

Jacob listened to Incinelsh's story and then replied, "So, you want to go back to make sure everything is secure, don't you?"

"(And to check on the welfare of the others.)" Incinelsh added, looking down as sadness washed over its face, "(Although… my parents… I know they're a lost cause.)"

Jacob cringed at the mention. No one child ever wanted to be robbed of their parents by any cause other than natural. As one of Aaron's closest friends, he knew what orphaning did to a person. Even Jacob himself had a personal idea, having never known the identity of his father.

"(And I will avenge them. Count on it. Their sacrifices won't be in vain. Those monsters will pay.)" The Cremation Pokemon declared. Despite the fires in Incinelsh's eyes that represented its resolve, Jacob could tell from the frustrated look on Incinelsh's face that, despite his tough demeanor, he was taking their deaths hard.

"You don't have to face it alone, you know," Jacob reassured. Incinelsh only glanced at him, and he took that as a sign to keep saying something. "I never knew my father. A-And…um, focusing on just school when I was younger has done a number on my social life. And my mother was always busy." Jacob paused to gather his thoughts, showing Incinelsh that some of that statement still held true. "I mean, I was so smart, I was in high school when I was just ten. But just imagine the sheer number of social barriers. A-And how jealous people were too. And I only had one Pokemon! But then I met Aaron, then Ian, and then other people. Now I'm better."
"(It's not like I'm reduced to an emotional wreck. No need to go therapist on me,)" Incinelsh stated matter-of-factly, "(Pokemon are separated from their parents much more quickly and younger than humans.)"

"I know that! But even so!" Jacob interjected, "You still need someone to help fill the void. That's why…" The bespectacled male reached into his bag and pulled out an empty Poke Ball, pressing the button in the middle to enlarge, "I ask of you to please become part of my team when you're healed."

"(Jacob…)" An astonished Incinelsh stared as orange-haired boy set the Poke Ball down by his side.

"Please think about it," Jacob requested in a soft tone.

For the amount of kindness Jacob has shown him, just merely thinking about the proposition would be an insult. At least that was what Incinelsh thought. "(Give me some time to heal first… then I'll join you, master.)"

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we have finally reached the finals of the Aparra Village Night Contest!" When the MC spoke into her microphone, the idle chitchat was replaced with raucous cheering and whistling. "On my left is finalist number one, Ian Darusu from Lavender Town! And on my right is finalist number two, Zoey from Snowpoint City!"

An austere Ian stood with his cape concealing his body. Zoey had with her arms at her sides, paying no mind to crowd right now. She could wave and sign autographs after everything was done.

Throwing open his cape, Ian gawked at Zoey. Hearing most of the crowd cheer for her made Ian truly realize the caliber of opponent he was about to face. Zoey captured the coveted title of Top Coordinator at an early and ripe age, certainly younger than most people – even beating out Aaron when he acquired his first and only Grand Festival victory. Despite that, she had already procured a fast following afterwards, ranging from youngsters who idolized her talent, veterans who appreciated the traditional aspects and not the posh the recent years added on, and teenagers straddling a sort of middle ground between reverence and envy.

Then, it hit him. This was someone well-known, great, and talented. This was an opportunity to show his stuff. Beating someone as widely admired as Zoey would raise his own personal standing. Top it all off, it was on a stage a decently size audience could witness. Everyone would talk about Ian Darusu, the one who bested Sinnoh's number one coordinator.

"Look at the failure crying wolf again. What a joke!"

"I won't be a failure for long," Ian mumbled darkly under his breath.

"Now let's not burn any more moonlight!" Cecean said as Zoey and Ian’s images appeared on the big screen.

"Now, Maidow, curtain!" Zoey tossed out her Poke Ball again. Unlike last time, it was wrapped with a Seal Capsule. When the Heartbroken Pokemon was released from the device, she was accompanied by bright azure stars. No doubt the Seal Capsule was saved for this occasion.
“Maidow again? Your arrogance knows no bounds. Honchkrow, let’s do this!” Ian released said Pokemon. Once Cecean gave the okay to begin, Ian looked at Zoey and offered a “Ladies first.”

“If you say so,” Zoey replied, “Maidow, Will-O-Wisp! Let it circle around you!” The Heartbroken Pokemon summoned blue wisps of flames that circled around her in a ring-like fashion. “Now charge with Ominous Wind!” Maidow whipped up a black gale as it charged at the airborne Honchkrow. The moves combined to create a black fireball that completely encompassed Maidow’s small body.

“And Zoey kicks things off with an interesting combination of Ominous Wind and Will-O-Wisp!” Cecean commentated as Ian points went from 100 to 90 percent.

“Honchkrow, charge at a slow pace,” Ian said. Honchkrow nodded and glided steadily to the fireball-enshrouded Maidow.

Zoey guardedly watched the Dark/Flying type approach her Pokemon. There wasn't much she could without seeing Ian’s plan of action take place, so she kept her eyes peeled and waited patiently.

“Now! Aerial Ace to swerve upward!” At the last second, Honchkrow dashed upward as sharp wind surrounded the bird. Zoey gasped in shock as Maidow missed her target, the Ghost/Psychic-type deactivating her combination and looking up. “Now loop and use Night Slash while still using Aerial Ace!” Honchkrow’s black wings were engulfed in a violet sheen as it gracefully performed a shuttle loop, moving in a complete circle as beautiful dark violet light traced Honchkrow’s motions, leading to the ultimate impact against Maidow.

“What awe-inspiring aerodynamics from the Dark- and Flying-type Big Boss Pokemon!”

Her points deceasing from 100 to 94 percent, Zoey pointed at Ian’s Honchkrow. “Psywave and Will-O-Wisp!” The Heartbroken Pokemon’s fired her attacks at the same time, making a flurry of small but abundant azure flares go straight at Honchkrow.

"And Zoey continues her majestic assault!"

“Quickly! Use Night Slash at a distance!” Ian ordered as his points descended from 90 to 81 percent. The Big Boss Pokemon hurriedly flapped its now violet wings in order to release purple, lunette waves of darkness. Thankfully enough, the Night Slash managed to shred apart the flurry before it could get close.

“And Ian counters back!” Cecean said as Zoey’s point dropped from 94 to 83 percent.

“We’re on a roll now,” Ian said, “Let’s keep it up, Honchkrow.”

Zoey clicked her tongue pityingly while shaking her head. “You lose your guard way too easily. Psychic and Will-O-Wisp!” The Heartbroken Pokemon summoned more blue wisps of flames and then used Psychic to telekinetically motion them toward Honchkrow.

“I beg to differ, Zoey,” Ian retorted playfully, “Thunder Wave, shoot it!” Honchkrow extended its wings forward as electricity sparked in its feathers. The electricity was then discharged in the form of light gold arrows.

“Alter the direction!” Zoey commanded. Maidow, who was still using Psychic, quickly moved the Will-O-Wisp out of the way to avoid the Thunder Wave. Ian’s points were reduced from 81 to 73
percent due to missing. “Now go!” Maidow finally was able to land a hit with Will-O-Wisp on Honchkrow; Ian’s points once again dropped, going from 73 to 65 percent. To add insult to injury, the Big Boss Pokemon was inflicted with the burn status ailment.

While he could certainly do without the point reductions, Honchkrow getting burned had its own merit. “Hey, thanks, now I can do this!” With a predatory smirk, Ian roared, “Psycho Shift!” Honchkrow matched its trainer’s smirk and suddenly transferred its burn to Maidow.

Maidow’s pink eyes shrunk in shock as an aura of fire surrounded her, leeching some of her health. “Maidow!” Zoey yelled in concern as her points dropped from 83 to 71 percent.

“Looks like Ian has finally put Zoey and Maidow into his trap!”

“Aerial Ace!” Ian commanded. Honchkrow then dashed toward Maidow at high speeds as its body was surrounded by white streaks.

“No you don’t! Maidow, use Ominous Wind!”

“Night Slash! Tear your way through and hit Maidow!”

Maidow clapped her hands and released a violent cyclone of purple and black wind, forcing the charging Honchkrow to meet it head-on. Ian yelled out an Aerial Ace command on top of Night Slash, and Honchkrow yelled with its all might as a violet aura covered its wings. Powering through, Honchkrow began to glow a beautiful electric purple color – a reaction from the combination of Aerial Ace and Night Slash overtaking the Ominous Wind.

“It seems to me, ladies and gentlemen, that the Night Slash and Aerial Ace Honchkrow is using against Ominous Wind is causing it to glow an entirely different color!” Cecean explained gleefully. The Dark/Flying type finally hit its mark and caused Maidow to be blown back a considerable distance. “And if you add that to Honchkrow’s Super Luck ability, you have a stunning appeal and a powerful onslaught all in one!” As Zoey’s points severely dropped from 71 to 57 percent, the timer hit double digits. “With less than one minute left on the clock, I’m sure we’re all wondering what either coordinator will use this time!”

“It’s not over yet, so let’s do this, Maidow!” Rewarded with a positive response from her Maidow, Zoey cried, “OK! Use Psywave and Ominous Wind!” The Ghost/Psychic-type Pokemon rotated her body around so that another black gale circled around her. Whilst doing so, another Psywave was exuded, resulting in a segmented column of darkness. The combination itself merited enough appeal to reduce Ian’s points from 65 to 57 percent.

Aaron recognized that particular application. “Uh-oh. That’s what knocked Drew and Flygon out. Zoey is looking to end this right here and now.”

Remembering the act as well, Ian wasn't going to make the same mistake as Drew. Coming into any sort of contact with that tornado would bring about Honchkrow's doom. “Lay low, Honchkrow!” It was better to let Zoey and Maidow do something first and subsequently react, he thought.

Zoey smiled. At least Ian was observant enough to not repeat Drew's mistake; however, she wouldn't be a Top Coordinator if she didn't punish him for choosing pure inaction. "Psychic! Will-O-Wisp!" The Ghost/Psychic-type Pokemon began to compress and split apart the column, eventually forming shuriken-like projectiles around it and throwing then at Honchkrow. Then, Maidow produced ghostly wisps of flames around it and tossed them as well. The flames ignited the shuriken, forging
blazing discs of fire.

"And Zoey fakes out Ian! Man, that Maidow sure can multitask!" Cecean commentated.

"Oh…shoot…” Ian said helplessly, losing some of the color in his face. Honchkrow shared its trainer's expression. It was trapped, and they were coming fast. The Big Boss Pokemon shut its eyes and prepared for the worst as the burning shuriken hit their mark.

"Honchkrow! NO!" Ian cried out, holding up part of his cape to shield his face from the force of the explosion.

Before the smoke and embers completely dissipated, Honchkrow fell from the smoggy cloud and landed on the stage motionlessly. Parts of its well-groomed dark blue feathers were singed off. Seeing its condition, buzzers sounded from the podiums of the judges with red X's accompanying them.

“It was a hard-fought finale, but the results show. The winner of the Open-Air Aparra Village Night Contest is Zoey from Snowpoint City!” Cecean announced energetically as the images of Maidow and Zoey appeared on the monitor with the word 'WINNER' in gold hovering above them.

“Maidow! We did it!” Unable to contain herself, Zoey rushed onto the stage and embraced her Pokemon in a proud hug. Maidow shared her trainer's joy, hugging back while purring contently.

"Great. Now I'm already behind." Ian groused, hiding his disappointment and anger as he stepped onto the stage, kneeled down, and scooped up his Honchkrow into his arms. "But, you did your best, Honchkrow. Don't let yourself think otherwise." He owed that much praise to his ace. It was another missed opportunity today, but Ian remained vigilant. "We'll get our chance one of these days."

"Hey. Ian."

Ian looked up to see Zoey and Maidow standing before him. The redhead smiled and extended her hand. "You keep at it, okay? The Grand Festival is still a while away, so you got time to improve."

"Thanks, Z. I appreciate it." Making sure one of his arms was able to keep a grip on Honchkrow, he accepted the handshake. Everyone applauded at the sight of sportsmanship between the two coordinators. It was something about the loser showing humility and the winner expressing modesty that spoke leaps and bounds about their character. Seeing that with that simple handshake was what prompted the entire audience to clap for an extended period of time.

Pretty soon, Zoey was standing face-to-face with Cecean with Maidow floating noiselessly beside her. Ian stood in the background with a grin on his face, having recalled his Honchkrow shortly before.

“Zoey of Snowpoint City, we kindly present to you the Aparra Village Ribbon. Congratulations!” Zoey smiled as she accepted the forest green and white ribbon from the master of ceremonies. She cherished any achievement like this under her belt. Ribbons like these were testaments to her hard work and long hours of practice and dedication. Everyone began to applaud her as she turned to the crowd and raised the Aparra Village Contest Ribbon into the night sky for the moon to shine down upon.

It was Zoey's night today as the Aparra Village Night Contest came to close. At least everyone would finally be able to go to bed with pleasant thoughts in their heads.
Chapter End Notes

There you are. Introducing more key canon characters and setting up for our next encounter with Team Hectic. We’ll be going back to Ash’s group next one.

The reason this chapter came out as quickly was because it was already made. Just needed more touching up and bam.
Solace and Ease

The difference between the paths to Fimbulvetr Town and Ifrit City was like night and day. Gone were the oppressive bustles of the wintertime and every figure clad in thick duffle or dark wool. Now was the time they walked in airy clothes. Almost every eye hid behind sunglasses, and hair flew freely in the breeze.

“This weather is starting to feel up my alley,” May said, smiling as she used one hand to act as a visor to look out in the distance. Her other hand hung her coat over her shoulder. She and her friends might not have entirely fit the aforesaid description, but they were close – and the people they spotted every now and then certainly fit better.

“Not mine,” a breathless Winter grumbled, fanning herself with her snow cap. “If it’s not too much trouble, let’s stop at the Pokemon Center so I can change.”

“It’s no big deal, Winter,” Brock said. “I can stock up on supplies while you do that.”

Ash took his cap off to wipe off sweat building at his brow, glancing around the surrounding area. Finally, he pointed out, “The weather around here is starting to bug me. Very cold in Fimbulvetr Town? Now hot on the way to Ifrit City?”

Winter went to his side and explained, “The commonly accepted explanation is, according to legend, two Legendary Pokemon battled for 10 days and 10 nights. When the fight ended, the climates changed permanently. Fimbulvetr Town is caught in an endless winter while Ifrit City will forever feel the warmth of the sun.”

Eventually, they reached Aparra Village. As they headed straight to the Pokemon Center, they discovered the roads to be nigh-empty save for the essential stores. They passed a greengrocer with his window full of apples and oranges, a butcher with his bloody lumps of meat on display and naked chickens hanging up, a small bank, then the grocery store and the electrical shop. In between were houses and closed shops, and the Pokemon Center was in the middle of it all. It was equally quiet and peaceful; the lack of work even gave Nurse Joy over at the counter time to read a magazine on the job.

Winter turned to her friends while removing her bag. “I’ll be right out, everyone. Promise.”
“You take your time, Winter,” Brock said as she hurried to where bathrooms were. Then, he laid eyes on the bored Nurse Joy as a grin crept on his face. “I, on the other hand, have something to check off my list.” Before he took another step, a rose flashed into his field of vision, and he stumbled to catch it.

“Make sure to take that with you,” Drew said as he walked up, hands in his pockets.

May, predictably, was the first to react. “Dr-Drew?!”

Drew tossed a small grin at the brunette. “Well, well, great minds think alike. So, you went straight to Tenla too, huh, May?”

May raced up to him. “What are you doing here?!”

“I just told you. I went straight to Tenla,” Drew said matter-of-factly. When she narrowed her eyes at him, he added, “If you want me to be more specific, I competed at the Pokemon Contest held here last night. Didn’t get the win, but there’s always next time.”

“There was a Contest here?” Dawn piped in, tilting her head.

Drew arched a brow in the bluenette’s direction. “That’s right.” He then looked at May with the same curious expression. “I recognize Ash and Brock. You going to introduce me to your other friends, May?”

"Um... uh...” May had been staring vacantly at him and just now got over her astonishment. “Oh yeah! Drew, this is Dawn and this is Misty. I’ve known these two for a while. Dawn, Misty, this is Drew, another Coordinator I met in Hoenn.”

“Oh. Another rival, huh?” Dawn said.

“Nice to meet you,” Misty stated plainly, having nothing special to say.

Drew matched face to name and nodded. “A pleasure.” Feeling the strap of his bag beginning to slip, he shrugged his shoulder to reset it. “Wish I could stay longer, but I got things to do.” He flipped his bangs and tossed a charming smirk at May. “You take care, May. Maybe next time, if you aren’t so slow, I can show your good friends how much better I’ve gotten.”

May rolled her eyes, but a smile slipped through her projected attitude. “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

“So, you do have a soft side.”

Drew cringed and slowly creaked into Zoey’s direction. “Oh. You’re still here.”

Now, it was Dawn’s turn to be shocked at a rival’s appearance. “Zoey?!”

The redhead raised a hand toward her temple in a sort of half-salute. “Hey, Dawn, good to see you here!”

At this point, Ash was no longer surprised seeing these old faces show up. His premonition way back in Zumi Town was coming true, and he loved it. Once another round of introduction happened, a smile ghosted his expression as he adjusted his cap. “You too, Zoey? Man, I’m seeing everyone in Tenla all of a sudden.”
Zoey looked his way. “Really, Ash? Who else?”

“Other than these guys around me, there’s Gary, an old rival,” Ash answered. “I’ve seen Aaron and his friends. Now, you guys.”

His list set off Zoey’s memories. “Speaking of which, Aaron, Ian, and another friend of theirs was at the Contest last night.”

“How’d that go?” Dawn asked, cocking her hip.

“Red here beat Ian,” Drew replied, nodding his head in Zoey’s direction. “I didn’t get a chance to battle him. To test out that weird style of his. Not sure how far that’s going to take him.”

Dawn scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Weird is an understatement.”

A frown firmly etched itself on Zoey’s face as she exchanged disapproving looks at both coordinators. “Look, guys, it’s not weird. It’s ‘unconventional.’ In fact, I’d be disappointed if every Coordinator used the same stuff.”

“All right, Zoey, whatever you say,” Dawn halfheartedly replied. Even her distaste for Ian surpassed her respect for Zoey.

To Zoey’s comment, Drew grunted and brushed past everyone. “For real this time, I’m leaving. There’s a Pokemon Contest in Byzantine Town with my name on it.” At the door, he looked back at everyone and raised his hand in parting fashion. “I’ll catch you guys later down the road.”

“I should head out myself,” Zoey said, heading towards the exit as well and putting on her sunglasses.

“See you later, Zoey!” Brock said, him and the others waving her goodbye.

Immediately after Zoey’s departure, Winter finally emerged from the back. “All right, I’m back!” Retaining her trademark teal and white color scheme, Winter had switched to knee-length Bermuda shorts, sneakers, a top with short sleeves, and a thin but open jacket. Her hair was now done up in a ponytail.

“So, are we now able to leave Aparra Village?” Ash asked. Just in time, he was starting to get impatient.

“Yep!” Brock stated, speaking for everyone else present. He started matching towards the door, “To the mountain!”

Winter noticed Brock carrying nothing that suggested he went a store. “Um, Brock? Did you get your supplies?”

The breeder froze up instantly. “…maybe.”
After departing Aparra Village, the gang continued to stroll through the nondescript valley until they finally reached the base of Ifrit Mountain. There was a large and wide entrance craved into the rocks, and the young trainers could faintly see the inside kept alit by lamps. They stood in awe as the great mountain loomed before them. While the lower passes wore a rug of green, yellow, scarlet, and orange trees, the peak was crowned with a headdress of granite.

"Man, the mountain looks so big compared to when we saw it in Aparra Village," Ash commented, hungry eyes wandering everywhere.

“Looks like we got quite a bit of walking to do,” Misty said, doing a little stretch to get herself ready for the endeavor. “Let’s go ahead and get it done.”

They entered the cavernous maw acting as the entrance. The brown earth was given a reddish hue from the lights all around, granting sight to the tunnels available. However, it was a muggy from all the trapped heat, and the smell of fresh dirt pervaded the air. The group stopped at a sign nearby before they chose to venture farther.

‘Project Ifrit.

The Tenla Government wanted to show the world the Tenlan way. 50 long years of constant drilling, tunneling, and construction later, we achieved that goal. Welcome to Ifrit Mountain.

Visitors, you have two options. Follow the signs and take the long way, see the fruits of our labor. Or, take the lift dead ahead to get to the city on top. The choice is yours.

But, by all means, enjoy your time. Enjoy Project Ifrit.’

“Well! I know what I’m doing!” Ash started prancing to one of the tunnels away from the way to the lift. “It isn’t an adventure if you don’t take the long way!”

No one elected to object. Truth be told, most of them were curious how the rest of the mountain looked as a result of Project Ifrit. Following, the group began their ascent. Lights guided them every step of the way and directories showed them many different paths they could take, including where to catch wild Pokemon housed within the mountain.

After a while, the trail led them back outside and granted an aerial view of the landscape. It was every vivid color, every one of them as fresh as a new painting. The brilliant greens banished every dark thought and the sky lifted the eye in a way that brought the viewers to admire the strands of drifting white cloud. The trees were deep with late spring foliage, and the flowers rioted in the jubilant way that only the most divine of blooms could.

Here, Dawn decided to strike up a conversation for a relevant topic. “Okay, May. Drew mentioned a contest in Byzantine Town. Coin Toss for that one?”

“You’re on!”

Dawn activated the application on her Poketch. "Take your pick."

"Heads!"

Dawn pressed the coin on the screen. It flipped and landed on heads. "Heads. Looks like it’s your turn again, May."
“Then, the one after the Byzantine Contest will be yours,” May said at the slight drop in the blunette’s tone. “It’s only fair.”

For some reason, the higher they went, the hotter it became, a facet Winter again attributed to the myth. Although experts in travelling, time seemed to slow down in a battle against heat.

One of them was losing.

"I'M MEEEEEEEELTING!" Winter whined, clawing at the ground and rock to help pull her exhausted body forward.

Misty deadpanned as she kept up her even pace beside May. “Sounds like someone bit off more than she could chew.”

Ahead of the pack were Ash and Brock. The latter showed off. The strides of his legs and pumps of his arms were exaggerated as if he was letting his friends know he wasn't breaking a sweat doing this. Ash was slightly behind his good friend, having removed his trademark hat so sweat would not completely drench it. It was becoming harder and harder to keep up with Brock's pace.

A frustrated screech resonated from Dawn, who loitered herself between Winter and May and Misty. "Brock, quit bragging!"

Brock smirked over his shoulder and yelled back, "But I haven’t even said anything, Dawn!"

Suddenly, a giant blur soared over everyone and landed feet away from Brock. After her Beartic steadied himself after his landing, a relieved Winter waved at everyone as the Ice-type darted off on all fours. “Bye, everyone!”

May and Misty both twitched, staring on.

Ash jumped up and down, ears blowing off steam. “It’s the journey that counts, Winter!”

“Lazy!” Brock shouted, shaking his fist at her departing figure.

Dawn slapped herself upside her head. "Why didn't I think of that?" She promptly released her Mamoswine, mounted it, and followed Winter’s tracks, racing by her friends

Brock fell to his knees in sheer despair. “You’re all a bunch of pigs in human clothing!”

Misty walked by, taking him by the ear. “Stop being dramatic and come on.”

As it turned out, their hike did not last much longer. The gang caught up to Dawn and Winter, who had stopped at a large sign near the archway at the end of the trail.

*Welcome to Ifrit City*
*A fusion of ageless earth and grand ambition*

Flanking either side of the city entrance were two police officers, who stepped in front of the trainers when they approached closer. “Trainer ID please,” one of them said.

All of them fished out their IDs and handed them over one-by-one. Once they checked out, the
officers let them pass.

Ifrit City was not exactly a small town, but it was not that heavily populated either. After all, a city built atop a volcano could only provide so much. Yet, every inch of the large crater was covered by buildings, residences, stores, and things like medical clinics. Most of said residences resembled Oriental huts or barracks. Ash and company walked around Ifrit City, admiring the contrasting unity between old-fashioned and new age. While it was probably one of the smaller cities, it was impressive nonetheless.

A smirking Brock did not failed to notice the number of Officer Jennys roaming around alongside other police officers. “Officer Jenny to the left and Officer Jenny to the right. I’m liking this.”

“I’m not.” Misty studied the police’s austere expressions and avoided eye contact with their Pokemon. “I got a bad feeling about this. What happened?”

“I hope nothing terrible,” Winter said softly, also worried by the increased presence of law enforcement.

“Maybe we can see the news at the Pokemon Center?” May suggested. A sound idea in all their minds.

The young trainers arrived at the Pokemon Center, which was connected to one end of a two-story inn. When they went inside, they found the Pokemon Center to be smaller than usual with one of one walls having an entrance to the inn lobby. Still curious about the state of the city, the travelers approached the counter.

“Welcome to the Ifrit City Pokemon Center,” Nurse Joy greeted with a smile and practiced courtesy. “Here, you can rent lodging in the inn next door and even wait in its lobby for when you’re Pokemon are getting checked out. Now, how may I help you?”

Misty stepped in front of Brock to demonstrate awareness of his habit. Without skipping a beat, she said, "Actually, we just got here and we wanted to know if anything happened we should know about."

"All the police being around has us a little nervous,” May added in, smiling sheepishly.

Nurse Joy nodded rigidly, narrowing her eyes slightly and her smile disappearing. "There was a disturbance deep in the volcano recently. Shady activity being investigated by the Tenla Police Ops, but they said it's under control and told the public to ignore their presence."

"Well, all right then,” May said.

Just like that, Nurse Joy returned to her sunny, professional attitude. "If you're still anxious, you're more than welcome to enjoy our hot springs to calm yourselves down."

"Hot springs?!" At that, an exuberant expression replaced Misty’s morose face, her eyes shining with radiance.

May hopped in her spot, clapping her hands. "I haven't been to one since Fallarbor Town!"

"Perfect for my skin!" Dawn squealed.
Ash grinned, rotating his shoulder. "I can sure wind down after a hike like that!"

“Nice to hear you enjoyed the trip.”

Turning to the familiar voice, they saw Aaron walking through the doors with his friends Ian and Jacob flanking his sides. He cracked a small grin at them, placing one hand on his hip. “I see it didn’t take long to catch up to you guys.”

Dawn lit up at the sight of the older brunette. “Oh, hey, Aaron!” Her reaction to Ian and Jacob was far less enthusiastic. “And you two.”

Jacob leaned forward, peering at the bluenette with dulled eyes. “OK, I know you don’t like Ian but don’t drag me down with him!”

“I’m far more important than you or J,” Ian said, totally unfazed by the entire exchange.

Brock shook his head slightly. He then noticed Winter quietly standing off to the side and refusing to initiate any sort of introduction with the three. He walked over and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Winter, these are some other people we know.” Brock’s words changed the center of attention. “Guys, this is Winter Isolda.”

“Aaron Shadow,” he greeted, offering a gentlemanly smile and extending his hand.

Winter slowly, cautiously took Aaron’s hand by the finger and gently initiated a handshake. “N-Nice to meet you.”

“You’re not going to break and neither is he,” Ian said, commenting on the apparent delicateness of the gesture. When Winter wordlessly looked his way, he cracked a grin, one hand on his hip. “Ian. Ian Darusu.”

Jacob placed one arm across his midriff and bowed like a butler. “Jacob Forut.”

“So, what brings you guys here?” Brock asked.

“To challenge the Ifrit Gym. Unfortunately, he’s been gone so we’re held up,” Aaron answered.

“How’d you do against Heather?” Ash asked.

Aaron blew out air and looked away out of shame. “Not that good.”

A tinge of sympathy. “You too, huh?”

“Me and Aaron are in something of a slump. We’re looking to bounce back.” Ian’s green eyes fell onto May and Dawn. A normal gesture, sure, but somehow, Ian always made it look predatory.

“Now, if I may ask, how are you two doing?”

May took an unconscious step backwards. “I have one, Ian.”

“None here.” Dawn shot up a finger right as Ian opened his mouth. “And only because me and May are rotating through coin tosses and she’s gotten the last two!”

He changed his tune. “Hm. I suppose I can relate. Me and Aaron have done that before.”
Ash decided to end a conversation going down the boring route. “All right, well, since we’re kicking it for the time being, let’s hit the hot springs!” With a big grin, he marched away. “Time to steam these sacred buns.”

Aaron deadpanned, jaw unhinging as Ash’s crew except Winter waltzed down the associated hall. “Uh. Yeah. You do that.”

As opposed to wandering around town, after their trip to the hot spring, Ash and his gang stayed around the inn and Pokemon Center, setting up lodging and getting their Pokemon routine checkups. Emerging out of the elevator, Dawn and May continued to chat about various topics as they walked into the inn lobby. The moment Dawn looked away from May to see the scenery, something instantly caught her eye and made all her body functions come to a screeching halt.

With pins in his mouth and a focused expression as his fingers worked adeptly, Ian was sitting at the public area using a table to sew.

In a moment of clarity, Dawn hobbled over and blurted out, “Y-You sew?!”

Ian acknowledged the two of them with a brief glimpse and removed the pins from his mouth. “I do.”

Her brain cogs grinding to complete stops, Dawn barely formed words as she pointed repeatedly from the fabric to Ian himself. “B-but... I... Y-You…”

May placed a hand on Dawn’s shoulder. “I think what Dawn is trying to say is you don’t look like the type to sew.”

“I get that a lot,” he responded, still working. “Hey, it saves me money in the long run, and I get to wear what I want. Right size and everything.” A proud smirk graced his face. “Including my suits for Contests.”

May offered him a bright smile. “That’s really impressive!”

Ian stopped and stared at his work long and hard before turning to them. “You two are girls, right?”

Dawn was still in too much shock to give a proper answer. May, meanwhile, narrowed her eyes and pouted. “Last time I checked, yes.”

Standing up, Ian grabbed the dress off the table and held it up for them to see. It was a greenish-blue gown made of soft, satiny fabric, long and loose. A semicircular, high collar made of silk-like materials headed the ankle-length robe. White lace decorated it. “You think my sister would like this?”

May turned starry-eyed. “I don’t see why she wouldn’t! You’re so skilled, Ian! Looks fine to me.”

Ian grinned. “Thanks. Been working on this nights on end.” He folded up the dress and set it back down, gathering his supplies. “My sister, Ivanna, is a Pokemon Performer. I’m making her a new
dress to give her some variety.”

Dawn finally returned to a proper state of mind. Even though she had to admit Ian was indeed a good seamstress, she was not about to let this jerk off the hook that easily. After all, a guy’s body was radically from a girl’s. Cocking her hip, Dawn asked a simple question. “Will it fit? Will she like it?”

“I know her sizes because I’ve made several of her clothes over the years, including the last one,” Ian answered, finishing packing up his sewing materials. “And I’m sure she’ll like it. As long as it looks cute and makes them look beautiful, girls will wear it. You’re that simpleminded.”

Dawn chuckled. “It’s tr—…”

Both her and May did the double take to end all double takes.

“HEY!”

Winter scoured a different portion of the inn, an in-house library. It was rather small, and library policy mandated all reading was to be done inside the parameters. Nevertheless, she spent her time here to sate her curiosity. She stood in front of a bookcase. It was ornate as if carved by a person with a profound love of literature. The engravings were of leaves, autumn berries, and birds on the wing, inviting the fingers and the eyes in the greatest of invitations. Before she reached and touched a book, she heard a voice.

“Hello, Winter?”

Winter squeaked, whirling around and slamming her back against the bookcase in fright.

“S-Sorry!” It was Jacob, who hurried over to check on her. “D-Did I frighten you? Sorry, so sorry!”

“No, no, no! It’s my fault.” Winter said, standing straight and fixing her clothes to buy time to regain her composure. “Um, you’re Jacob, right?”

The redhead offered a charming smile. “Yep, that’s me.” He took the moment to place some books back onto the shelves. “Are you more comfortable talking to me?”

She blinked owlishly at him. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

A knowing glimpse from the corner of his eyes as he tiptoed to reach the top. “You withered under the gazes of me and my friends.” He faced her, rubbing the back of his head. “I, uh, also used to be like that.”

She shyly tucked strands of teal hair behind one hair. “Not good with talking to people?”

“Yeah. It’s a little embarrassing.” Jacob stood straighter, placed his hands on his hips, and stuck his chest out. “But! I’m better at it now.”

A bemused Winter silently wondered if he practiced that pose to make himself seem cooler. “Oh, I
see.” At this point, the two exited the library, talking and walking. “W-Well, to be honest, I do have a little trick that helps me talk to strangers until I get used to them.”

“Really? Do tell.”

“…Carrots.”

Jacob took a moment to process her answer. “What?”

“I would imagine people as carrots,” she explained. “It happens to be my favorite vegetable, so all of a sudden, looking people in the eyes and gathering myself to talk to them becomes much easier.”

“Really? How’d I look as a carrot?”

Winter’s and Jacob’s nerves frazzled, making them both jump. They turned to see Ash standing behind them, oblivious to their surprise. “Ash?!” Jacob shrieked, “Where’d you come from?!”

“From my mom, pal of mine,” he replied facetiously. Ash then looked Winter, who fanned herself. “You really do that kind of stuff?”

“U-Um, yes?”

“You ask me, just take it as you go,” Ash said, “Most people are good folks, so it’s not like you have anything to worry about. Even Ian can be a nice guy.”

Jacob pushed his glasses up the incline of his nose. “That’s a little insensitive to suggest, Ash. Not all of us can be go-getters like you. I mean, I grew up unable to relate to anyone because everyone was so much older, my mom was always busy, and I never knew my dad.”

The Pallet Town resident mumbled under his breath. “Your dad left you too, huh?” Ash’s voice harbored a meekness unknown to his speech pattern.

“Not exactly, it’s complic—” Jacob stopped himself in realization. “What?”

Ash quickly covered it. “Uh, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Winter pretended she failed to coherently hear him, but she was observant enough to see the weird sign. “That was oddly ominous of you, Ash.”

May headed into the Pokemon Center. Despite what the inn offered, all of the video phones were still in that part of the establishment. She waited a total of ten minutes before one was available. Sitting down and punching in numbers, the blank screen eventually showed her little brother. “Hey, Max, how are you?”

Max lit up at the sight of his big sister. “Hey, May! Good to see you!” A Shroomish and Ralts suddenly appeared in the screen, and Max had to placate them so as to share it. “How’s Tenla?”

“It’s great so far!” She replied, “First, I bumped into Dawn on the one stop my ferry had. Second,
before we went to Morwenna City for the first Contest, some crooks caused trouble, so we took care of that. Third, turns out Ash, Misty, and Brock are here too!”

Max pouted. “Aww, you’re lucky! I should’ve came!”

May grinned a little at her brother’s lapse in maturity. “Now, now, Max, you’re taking this time to learn and become a trainer. We can’t stay glued together all the time.”

He released a heavy sigh. “Yeah, I know. Where are you now?”

“Ifrit City. It’s one of those places that remind you every region has its own tourist attractions.”

“Sooollllooo?” Max raised an eyebrow, egging her on. “Tell me all about it. Don’t get vague on me, May!”

May laughed to herself. Somehow, she expected him to want to know everything. He was an excitable little boy. She spent the time going over what happened in Zumi Town, Morwenna City, Fimbulvetr Town, and now. By the time she finished, it was almost evening. May shooed Max off the line. That done, she went back into the inn. Then, May found Aaron nestled on the couch in front of one of two televisions for guests. His eyes were glued to the box, and after the scene played out, he blurted out, “Oh, come on! Don’t go back to him! You’re making a mistake!”

May walked over, wondering what brought out such a reaction from a guy like him. “Aaron? What are you watching?”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “A soap opera entitled ‘Pride and Pokemon.’”

“I love that show!” She hopped over the couch and sat beside him. “Are you up to date? Can you believe her sister is with her man?!”

“It’s outrageous. Disgusting.”

Once the show hit a certain point, it took a commercial break. This was the perfect opportunity for May to inquire something. “Say, Aaron? You remember our talk back at the Wallace Cup?”

He nodded. “I certainly do. It was a very important one.”

She turned to fully face him. “Well? You figure something out?”

He flashed a rigid smile as if it the muscles didn’t want to. “I did. I want to be the ultimate.”

“Oh, you want to be the best there ever was?”

“No, listen closely. I said I want to be the ‘ultimate.’ Being the ‘best’ is bland to me. I want something grander than that. Being the ‘ultimate’ means you have no equal, that you stand above whole generations of trainers. I’m striving to be better than the best.”

His ambition left May gaping and awed. He went from no goal to one like that. “That’s… Wow.”

Aaron’s lips stretched into a more genuine, relaxed smile but didn't quite reach his dark eyes, but May still felt the glow of his happiness and gratitude. “And I have you to thank for helping me reach that conclusion. Well, you and maybe one or two, but mostly you, May.”
It would be remiss of May not to return the smile, feeling slight heat pool in her cheeks. “It’s no big deal.”

“Can I ask a favor?”

“Yes?”

“Help me train my Lucario,” he said solemnly. Despite himself, his hand snaked over and placed itself upon May’s. “Your Blaziken knows Blaze Kick, right? Teach it to my Lucario; it’s for my rematch with Heather.”

“Okay!” Once the commercial break, the discussion came to an abrupt halt over as May sat properly and brought her knees to her chest in anticipation. “Riiiight after we see what Michelle is going to do here.”

Under the moonlight, Ifrit City lay still. The heat of the day had been replaced by a mere temperate breeze, an ephemeral break from the oppressive eternal heat. Most people remained inside, for in addition, the city was not known for liveliness. Ash and his posse plus Jacob ambled to the halls to retire for night. The silvery melody of their drawl drifted through the hall up until they passed the floor’s public kitchenette, where the distinct smell of chocolate stopped them cold.

Inside, Aaron preheated the oven for a tray of dough. The rest of counter was a rather messy with flour, sugar, and other stuff strewn about. “Whoever stepped in, I’m going to clean it immediately,” he said as he crouched down and placed the tray inside.

“What’cha doing, Aaron?” Ash asked, a little too eager, getting the brunette’s attention.

Aaron looked at them over his shoulder as he shut the oven. “I’m trying to make some Hershey’s chocolate chip cookies. I couldn’t get rid of this sweet tooth of mine.”

May started salivating at a mere thought of a treat. “Oh, food! Can I have some?”

“Me too!” Ash was under the same spell, so eager he even cleared the table in one bound to grovel up to Aaron.

“Sure,” Aaron responded, removing the apron and the mittens. “I’ve made plenty. What about you, Jacob?”

Jacob’s eyes shifted away in a suspicious manner, slinking away to the entryway. “Um, I’ll pass. Besides, sugar’s nasty.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “Your taste in food is nasty.”

As the fresh dough baked, its aromatic fragrance overwhelmed every other scent that lingered in the room. Its delectable aroma pervaded the air – a mélange of honey dew, orange preserves, and dabs of crackling nuts. A great, decadent pleasure to merely inhale the gorgeous scent emanating from the warm oven.
Like a moth attracted to a flame, Ian waltzed in, taking big whiffs of the scent. “I smell something nice. I’m quite famished.”

Aaron looked at his old friend with a gleam in his eye. “Good! You’ll enjoy these treats.”

The color left Ian’s face, making him look paler than usual. “Um. I just remembered I had a snack a minute ago.”

Aaron frowned. “But you just—”

“I said I’m not hungry!” Ian roared, speeding out and taking Jacob with him by the hand. He stopped right outside the entrance to the kitchenette to speak to him. “He’s sucked them in. I don’t think there’s any saving them.”

Jacob spotted Winter coming up ahead. “We can save her.”

“Good evening,” she said as she approached. She sampled the scent in the air and hummed in satisfaction. “Is one of you baking cookies?”

“Aaron is, but you don’t want any.” Ian said grimly.

She titled her head quizzically. “Why’s that?”

“He’s terrible.” Jacob grimaced, placing a hand over his stomach and gripping the cloth of his shirt. “Like obliviously, positively terrible.”

“Winter Isolda, take our word for it.” Ian took the Fimbulvetr Town resident by the hand and guided her to the entryway’s threshold. He, she, and Jacob poked their heads around the corner to watch. “Lay low and see for yourself.”

Jacob shook his head pityingly at the people inside conversing. “You’ll thank us later.”

“O-Okay.”

Once the wonderful ding of oven’s timer went off, Aaron put on the mittens, opened it, and extracted the fresh platter of cookies. The topmost layer an incredible, buttery shade of amber—the surface cracked like a dry desert ground thanks to the rich, dark brown chocolate. They looked innocuous enough and smelled sweet. Winter looked at Jacob and Ian, and they gestured her to stay alert.

“If you’ll excuse me, the bathroom is calling me. Enjoy.”

Not even three seconds after Aaron left, there were several thuds prefaced by choking and whines of pain. Winter, Ian, and Jacob immediately hurried inside to Ash, Brock, Misty, May, and Dawn were all sprawled prone on the floor. Their natural colors were replaced with a nasty, gangrenous shade of green. All of them, ill and groaning like zombies after one, maybe two, bites of Aaron’s cookies.

Winter put a hand over her mouth, eyes bugged out. Jacob placed a hand on her shoulder. “Thus is the reason why we eat out a lot.”

Chapter End Notes
This one and the next chapter will be breather chapters meant to either character- or world-build because we'll be heading right back into the action afterwards.

Also, I'll be vanishing for the month of November because of NaNoWiMo. So don't expect an update. Then again, if you follow this story or others of mine, that's hardly surprising. Lol.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!