Savoir-Faire: To Know and To Do

by la lunatic scribe

Summary

Nearly nine years ago I stopped Team Flare, and I met the legendary Pokémon. I gained a wish that activated when I was on the brink of death from Lysandre; I wished to live. I have been sixteen for nearly ten years, due to the aforementioned legendary Pokémon.

I am Marguerite Linden du Bois. Tomorrow, I begin a new career as a Pokémon professor. Tomorrow, I begin my rebellion.

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This will be subject to my own interpretations of the Pokémon world, including that the ultimate weapon was only the start of dismantling Team Flare. It's more on worldbuilding, but I promise to write as I can!
Chapter Summary

I spat into the faces of the Legendary Pokémon who had plagued Kalos since time immemorial, the pain incredible. “I am the latest of the Kalos Champions, the princess abandoned by her people. If you wish to stop me, try, if you can go beyond my despair. Begone!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A constant repetitive beat echoed my running footsteps, merged with multiple layers of instruments that made it disturbing and discordant, echoes of a single song being played over and over again on different instruments at different speeds.

Beside me, Delphi screeched, glowing white with power, bright and great as a million-watt light bulb, especially after our defeat of Malva, the traitoress.

I heard the pattering of footsteps, and I laughed. “Well, Altair?” I heard my own voice, feminine and pitched low.

“Both wings have been evacuated and cleaned, Altair nodded. I had no need to be present, not with Madame Drasna on hand.”

“I got it,” I nodded. “Shall we, then?”

“Yes.”

“Delphi, let us,” I ordered, turning on one foot to set off at a brisk jog. I must have turned many corners of darkened hallway before I came across the grunts of Team Flare. They posed, then they let out their Pokémon, howling for blood and an ideology that was never real. None of it was real, but an elaborate masquerade, after all.

“Go, Liepard!” they released the purple-and-mustard feline Pokémon,

“Altair, Swords Dance!” I ordered.

“Fake Out!” the female Trainer with the Liepard called as the purple and yellow leopard leapt forth to stop Altair.

“Good,” I praised with the sure certainty that Altair was already awaiting the next order. “Aura Sphere!”

A glowing ball of light was shoved up its nose. This probably had the effect of breaking cartilage, since I heard a crack of bone and the Liepard flew off into the distance.

“Bisharp!” the Trainer now called, releasing a living menace of blades. I just snapped my fingers. The skylights overhead crashed, a curtain of glass descending with the speed, colouration and claws of a Flygon.
“Delphi, Future Sight,” I ordered as Vega growled. “Vega, these Flare administrators. You're the fastest one here. Well?”

The dragon grunted in acknowledgement, a sphere of light charged within its maw.

“We're counting on you,” I nodded. “Dragon Claw at close quarters. Earth Power at far quarters. Anything in between is up to you, as long as you don't use Hyper Beam or Sandstorm. Altair, Delphi. The Legendary Pokémon still needs to be freed.”

The Delphox and Lucario murmured in acknowledgement, running as we took off for the next room.

Soon, we arrived at a circular vault, wires trailing from the ceiling sparking and showering us in stray bursts of heat and light, and there six Flare grunts took us on at once, falling prey to the various Future Sight attacks Delphi had long readied.

“Found them,” I breathed a sigh, approaching the platforms where the sleeping forms of the two Pokémon were. “I'm going to let you two out, alright? It's over.”

I stepped back. “Altair.”

Understood. He broke a steel cable.

Sparks scattered over the metal casing, and yet the Lucario did not flinch. Not as the tree shook, not as the egg began to crack. Not as pink and white light merged with red and black. Not as the branches of the tree began to shake, as the trunk splayed out into spindly legs. As the eggshell cracked, wings spread, and a beak formed to cry out.

As auras mixed, then he flinched.

Both Legendary Pokémon, began to scream, the walls shaking with their mirth and something larger and undefinable. The horns of the cervine Pokémon grew larger, the jewels upon it glowing with the colours of a rainbow that it swung as Delphi used his wand to defend me.

I screamed as my first Pokémon, the one that started this all, was beheaded in an instant.

The other, aquiline Pokémon, bellowed, the dark red aura flying out to strike that Altair and I dodged. “Everyone!” I screamed, unleashing three more Pokéballs.

Sealeo began to attack the Pokémon of Destruction with Ice Ball and Icy Wind. Deneb stood as my defence, and Banette was laughing at the ensuing carnage.

“Use Phantom Force!” I hollered at him, to which he complied. I then raised my arm. “Deneb!”

The Venusaur bellowed in answer.

“We're going to have to chase the Legendary Pokémon away from this town,” I called. “Understood? Altair, Sealeo and you, double team the other with ice and fists. Banette, you're weak to darkness, you're going to support Deneb with Will-O-Wisp.”

“Ne, ne!” the Marionette's mouth unzipped to show its teeth in a sharp grin.

The Venusaur cried out again, but there was no time, not since one of my Pokémon, no, my first Pokémon, had died, and then now... now I had a town to protect. I had a region to safeguard.

I raised my arm, and around my left wrist, I saw the jewel upon it begin to glow. “Evolve, Deneb! Venoshock!”
The flower on the back of the Venusaur expanded, glowing purple before it spat a mass of poisonous smog at the cervine demonic monster glowed with a pearlescent light before it jumped, lightning-fast, and then a pink Moonblast knocked Deneb back before it charged. The Venusaur bellowed as the flower upon its head was gored through, and the Banette was little better, the ghostly fire it used barely scratching at the true monster, the one shrouded in pink and waving its horns and then it attacked me.

I screamed as the pink blast nearly got to me, but Deneb had tanked most of it. My Venusaur was suffering, because this Pokémon didn't understand-

Sealeo backed slightly, its breath whistling.

“Icy Wind!” I called to the seal, who blew a spiralling gale that enveloped both shadowed, legendary monsters.

The horned one growled, as it lowered the proud arrangement of horns that glowed with the colours of the rainbow. I recognised the move as Megahorn. It was going to hit Deneb.

My Venusaur charged a Solarbeam, aware that this was going to be its last attack. Aware that it was defending its trainer to the last. He was going to die. My Venusaur bellowed in defiance, but could not move within the vortex created by the Solar Beam it was about to fire. Around it was the mangled remnants of some of the Flares' Pokémon, Delphi amongst them.

“Deneb!” I screamed, swinging out. I stumbled, landing in front of the charging Pokémon. The horn stabbed through my spine and came out in the other end.

I looked straight, into Deneb's dying face where the pointed end of the horn had breached his skull. “Fire!”

The Legendary Pokémon tried to move, but I held it down. Venerated Pokémon, or even infamous companion of Jeanne d'Arc, it could barely do anything but dig its heels and tug. Compared to holding onto a dying Venusaur for support, the cervine Pokémon was going to stay.

“I...” I began to cry. “Banette. Can you create a Destiny Bond between people?”

It nodded solemnly. A zip pulled across its face in a broad, jagged grin that belied its panic.

The deer screamed, trying to rip its horns out, but the many points it held proved to be its downfall. Especially as I clung onto them in my stomach, in my stained hands.

“Why did our comrades die?” I whispered. “I don't want this. All of this... Delphi and Deneb-”

Across the room, the bird was glowing a reddish-black. It threw a glowing red wing out, Sealeo throwing herself in Altair's path, tackling the Lucario off course but taking the brunt of the attack. Her empty eyes greeted me as the thick, fatty body slapped the floor.


What are you thinking?

Deneb cried, too tired to do anything but watch. The deer-like Pokémon, perhaps sensing death or the Banette's power in linking destinies, began to cry.

“For every wish these Pokémon granted, an additional curse was inflicted,” I gasped. “Altair... go! This is our best chance!”
“When you get back...” I whispered. “If they’re still alive, Flash Cannon. Flash Cannon everything. Steel is the only way to kill the immortal. Now!”

The bird-like Pokémon screamed at the deer and I, trying to move if not for that one of its wings had broken under one particularly vicious attack.

“I gave you fair warning,” I growled as Altair hurriedly left. “I... do you think yourselves as gods to rain judgement upon humans? Just because you rule life and death? You lost responsibility the day we gained free will.”

It screamed some more, a low, musical cry of rage.

I saw the ghostly chains of fate intertwine in Banette's hands, and I fell down, leaning against the wall, half-dangling between Deneb's corpse, the horns, and the wall. I could see the bird Pokémon try to attack, move, do something, but I guessed that its bones were broken since it could barely do more than lift its head and bellow in impotent rage. Blood spattered on the ground; Altair must have drawn blood, and since arteries composed a major part of a bird’s wings-

“I'm sorry our time is so short,” I whispered as I patted its head. “Thanks, Banette.”

Altair entered the room again, perched on Vega's back just as the bird managed to get off an attack to me. As I saw the Oblivion Wing approach, I reflected, how ironic that the immortal shall die with me.

A second chain fell, and my Banette embraced me. For once in my life, it was smiling, really and truly smiling. I held it close, like a doll. Just a girl, prepared to fall asleep with her favourite doll, knowing that she might never wake again.

“Banette love their Trainers,” I whispered towards her. “Banette bear a grudge, not for being discarded or how they are created, but love their Trainer so much to despise anyone who stands between their Trainer and the goal. They will not be alive... to enjoy this.”

The horned one screamed, along with the cries of the winged one. An Oblivion Wing shot at me, a Moonblast found its mark directly overhead. I laughed as I raised my head to stare into crossed eyes and slanted pupils in front of me.

I spat into the faces of the Legendary Pokémon who had plagued Kalos since time immemorial, the pain incredible. “I am the latest of the Kalos Champions, the princess abandoned by her people. If you wish to stop me, try, if you can go beyond my despair. Begone!”

I awoke.

Eternal life and eternal death. One is silence, stretching beyond the grave and to the next world.

I don't know it. It's not restful, life. Years ago, I wished to live, and the wrong legendary Pokémon heard it. I've lived as sixteen years old for nearly nine years now.

The only other person like me, AZ, he's lost somewhere. The last time I saw him was at the Honour of Kalos ceremony, after the Lysandre business.

It was six years ago that I buried them. Whatever that legendary Pokémon had done, it had not seen fit to gift them with the same gift.
Tomorrow marks the start of my proposal as a professor of anthro-Pokémon sociology; particularly, interaction with humans. Tomorrow, I present my paper to the highest of Pokémon academia.

Nearly nine years ago I stopped Team Flare, and I met the legendary Pokémon. I gained a wish that activated when I was on the brink of death from Lysandre; I wished to live. I have been sixteen for nearly ten years, due to the aforementioned legendary Pokémon. I am a living example of being careful what you wish for.

I am Marguerite Linden du Bois. Tomorrow, I begin a new career as a Pokémon professor. Tomorrow, I begin my rebellion.

Chapter End Notes

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She's insane. That's got to be the only reason why I'm here facing a powerhouse, a tiny fairy and a sentient chandelier. The Prof is insane.

“It's not just one Ghost, though,” Dr du Bois blithely continued. “It's three.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Today is the day I receive tenure as a Pokémon professor. Today is also the day I began my journey for the second time.

I stand in Lumiose City, Kalos, facing five screens connected to the regions of Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh and Unova. Each of the august personalities I face bear solemn expressions. Behind me is the leader of the Sycamore Research Centre, Professor Augustine Sycamore. He had not been very supportive, either of my claim or of my chosen field of research.

“Erm...” Samuel Oak swallowed. “Erm... your thesis was of... well, a different nature than most other researchers. Personally, I am interested in the claim that Dr Yung's infamous research on Mirage Pokémon could have been adapted towards beneficial fields rather than its original purpose of creating a perfect species of Pokémon. This is counter to Dr Yung's original intention...”

“I have here the outpatient data over the past ten years gathered from the Pokémon Centres by Magenta Plaza, North Boulevard and South Boulevard,” I replied. “Lumiose City is home to the Lumiose Gym, which specialises towards Electric-Type Pokémon. In that sense, the Gym sees the output of many Pokémon facing static discharge, nerve damage and, in some cases, necrosis of cells. Operations become complicated due to the inability to use Magnetic Resonance Imaging, as Nurse Joy has informed me. Dr Yung's Mirage Pokémon system is capable of creating virtually any Pokémon, assuming data on those Pokémon has been acquired. Despite its original purpose of battle, there stands reason that the Mirage Pokémon system could be redeveloped to provide an anatomically accurate model of Pokémon. This system could not only allow us to specify the internal systems of a Pokémon within a 3-dimensional model, it could also be used for training prospective surgeons, and thus ameliorate the under-staffing of Pokémon Centres.”

“But the paper questions the decision to expel Dr Yung for ethical decisions, Professor du Bois,” Professor Utsugi Elm volunteered, as I spotted him diving off-screen, presumably to rescue a precious scribble from the floor.

“Firstly, I have elaborated upon the speed at which the Pokémon Institute's decision was reached,” I replied. “Even if the Mirage System's purpose was cruel, it was a work deserving of consideration for other purposes. Pokémon by themselves do not recognise moral decisions; they recognise bullying, death threats, starvation, and living well, but the subtle moralities are not their sphere. Before expulsion, that research should have been licensed by the Institute, which would not only leave Dr Yung barred from his own research as well as liable to copyright violations, but also allow other students of the Institute to build upon that knowledge.”
I took a deep breath. “We are, however, diverting from the original point. My thesis addresses the ethics of Pokémon treatment, and how the current system of society interacts with Pokémon. We are not here to debate on the extraneous case study I have detailed to explain how in some cases, our devotion to Pokémon have reached the borders of irrationality.”

“Well, it’s an interesting case,” Odamaki Birch submitted, grinning.

“Evolution and the effects upon infrastructure and necessary lifestyle changes, I found relevant,” Nanakamado Rowan admitted. “Wouldn’t you say, Professor Juniper?”

“Agreed,” Aurea Juniper admitted. “Well, Associate Professor du Bois, your work is truly deserving of tenure. Everyone, don’t you agree?”

“Of course,” Professor Oak sighed. “I just feel that Dr du Bois has not fully understood the relationships between humans and Pokémon, if she is about to enter my field of study.”

“I will be embarking on fieldwork once my proposal has been cleared,” I admitted. “During that time, I shall undertake travel around the Kalos region as a trainer to cover the routes of travel the average Kalos Trainer covers throughout their travels from Vaniville Town to the Kalos League.”

“Alone?” Professor Juniper frowned. “A girl walking alone...”

“Furthermore,” I continued. “I shall be expanding my research to include human factors in the Trainer journey with respect to Kalos.”

“I see,” Professor Rowan rumbled. “The decision is conclusive.”

“However,” Professor Oak interrupted gravely. “I must add a condition.”

I paused. A conditional acceptance to tenure should be unacceptable. I should protest. However, if Samuel Oak was making that sort of announcement, I should be listening... right? “Proceed.”

“By the end of the report, I wish to see a complete log of your fieldwork,” Oak stated.

“A log?” I echoed.

“A log, Dr du Bois,” Professor Oak replied, with such severity that I could feel it even from the screen. “I realise that, as a researcher specialising on the anthropological side of Pokémon relational research, the subjectivity-objectivity argument would be against you. To that end, I require you to take a research assistant along from Vaniville. A new Trainer to serve as a case study for your research. Should you wish, you can take part in the journey such as through battling, but the majority of your report should come through this subject. Yes?”

I considered the argument, and relented. “Yes. Thank you very much.”

“The assessment is complete.” At this, the screens shut off, one by one, leaving me to stare as Professor Juniper waved and cheered before her screen shut off.

Augustine sighed theatrically. “That went well.”

“Of course. There was never any doubt.” I answered him.

“What will you do, Marguerite?” Augustine asked. “Are you really going to start on that study? The Pokémon League won’t like it, you know.”

“They must. My field combines all the knowledge of the six regions,” I answered. “My subject is
humanity and Pokémon. What other field is there for me?”

“For the Lady Marguerite Linden du Bois?” Augustine laughed.

“I'm not a lady,” I sighed. I brushed my dark hair out of my eyes, cursing my barrette.

“Grand Duchess, then?” Augustine joked.

“There is only one Grand Duchess of the Battle Château,” I replied. “That is not me.”

“You were that, once,” Augustine replied, no longer smiling. “You still have that Lucario that Korrina gave you, right?”


“So, maybe during this journey,” Augustine said, “It might do you good to remember that, while we are researchers, the subjects of our research are living beings, too. Then maybe you can recall what it's like to battle.”

“I would rather not,” I whispered. “All of them...”

“Hmm?” Augustine smiled, the laugh lines crinkled and worn. “From the Honour of Kalos? About ten years. By this time, you should’ve been married with a baby, I think.”

“Ah,” I echoed. “Instead I have a household of Ghosts and a body of eternal youth. I- I think he knows.”

“Who?”

“Samuel Oak. I think he knows me.”

Augustine sighed. “You're not doing yourself justice, hiding out in the Trail. You won't even hang out with the Hex Maniacs along Brun Way and Mélancholie Path. Just... go on that journey. Bring a nice young Trainer along. It's been ten years since Lysandre, you can't just... float along.”

I stared at him. “If you're telling me this, then...”

“Yeah,” Augustine nodded. “They accepted it. You set out to Vaniville tomorrow.”

I felt empty as I left the Laboratory, the sun setting over Lumiose right as the lights came on at the Centrico Plaza's Prism Tower. Tourists could be spotted by watching the spectacle they made. I paid no attention to the pretty lights, having seen them for twenty years or so.

My feet took me along North Boulevard – with a stop to collect mice – to walk by the Lavarre Nature Trail by memory, along to the scary house. I lived there rent-free, ever since I gambled with the storyteller for a room there. I forgot which story I told him, but then he patted my arm and told me to stay as long as I needed. I think my story scared the wits out of him.

The dark blue shadow landed beside me, walking along until it suddenly threw out a paw. I dodged, and it hit a tree.

“I told you to stop that,” I told the Lucario severely.

Altair nodded, still grinning.

“Jerk,” I muttered, but allowed Altair to lead the way back to home. Home in this case being my
ramshackle little house. What, you thought being a Trainer paid much?

The screech of steel met my ears as I beheld Aegislash raising its sword- to behead the trout I had stored. By the by, Ghost-type Pokémon were the easiest to feed; just let them out on the moor and leech the fear out of terrifying passers-by. They also made good helpers, assuming that you didn't mind adapting to their needs.

Overhead, Crystal, my Chandelure hissed, its will o'wisps tinkling against each other, throwing eerily blue light over the kitchen. Altair growled lowly as the glorified chandelier lit several candles placed around the place; it was very familiar with fire hazards. I tried to have the place fixed up for electricity once, but the nature trail's high rain output and Pokémon population made that decision untenable.

As Aegis threw the slices of trout into the air, Crystal blew a will o'wisp that lightly fried it, which Aegislash then caught onto its shield and threw onto the giant plate. There was a lot of trout; today was their weekly ration of meat. I once told her I wanted a Ninetales; after that, she had set herself out to make herself useful, despite my – very rare – protests. Beside it, Liz, my Floette, hovered sleepily.

Yes, I keep a Fairy-type alongside Ghost-Type Pokémon. I won't be the first Trainer to do so.

I grabbed a pair of tongs, dividing the trout into five plates. As the trout's fragrance reached that corner, Floette began to look more alert. “Guys. Dinner. No stealing.”

Altair assisted me. Crystal tried to steal from him; Altair blew a raspberry at her, and Liz ignored hers in favour of the beancurd and croutons I dragged from the icebox to mix into a fresh salad for her. After serving the salad, I brought one plate and the box with the mice outside to the swamp, to the reason why I had to live in the bayou.

Gingerly, I floated the box out on the surface. “Jelly. Time to eat.”

The box abruptly disappeared below the surface. One tentacle tried to reach for me, but I shook my head. My Jellicent obediently disappeared back inside the lake, the dark place I had found for the last member of my team to luxuriate.

I held the trout out, and whistled. Three, two, one-

My barrette came loose as Vega hurtled out of the air, grabbing the plate and hoisting it up.

“I'm calling a meeting.” I told the empty air, knowing that my team's dragon would get the message. “You guys are coming. It decides who keeps house.”

I went back into the house. The old man was out; he tended to be out when Jelly, Aegis and Crystal were all within proximity. I ate part of the salad and part of the trout; Liz floated about the table, eating honey with that calming scent that I knew was going to attract the Vespiqueen next door. My house was the dream of most Pokémon Rangers, assuming they could live in a Barboach-infested, Ghost-haunted, earthquake-prone area.

It had been home for five years, and now...

The door swung open. Jelly floated in, pink and miffed as the queen she is. Vega poked in after her while I was making a cup of tea.

I snatched the honey from Liz, checked for Durants, and took some with my tea. I drank it, before I faced my family of seven.
“They’ve cleared us for fieldwork,” I began. “We’re supposed to set out tomorrow. So, I will choose, amongst all of you, a team of six to go with me. The remaining one, I will arrange for facilities in Lumiose or Vaniville itself with Augustine.”

That was the easy part. Now was tough. “Obviously, the ghostly trio are coming along, since bad things happen with Ghost Pokémon when supervision isn't provided.”

Sword and shield clanked, before Aegis stopped his celebration. Jelly whooped – an unusual mix of bubbles at high pitch – and Crystal hissed. I wish I could say that my Pokémon were perfectly behaved, but even the likes of Morty and Fantima, never mind Agatha and Phoebe, could not discipline a team that half consisted of Ghosts.

“You know what Ghosts are like,” I reproached. “Then, I need Liz to handle dragons, and Altair to alternate with the trio for night watch. And Vega...”

Altair snorted, Vega sniffed; the two of them seemed to have some rivalry since the start. Over what, I don't know.

“This trip might not require flight, rocks, or psychic power.” I continued. “Delphi, I'm well aware that you like being settled, so I'm prepared to put you with Augustine. Vega... I might have to ask someone for a favour, but I will make sure you are taken care of, and I will come back for you. Since Deneb and Delphi, I... I...”

I found myself pushed into the squishy chair with my tea, Liz gingerly holding onto the saucer with its remaining hand. Lucario started rifling through the drawers of the bureau. Vega went out, giving a cry that Jelly signalled was his way of taking care of himself.

Altair brought out my outfit; a little black dress, green fedora with black sunglasses, green thigh-high socks and black laced riding boots. He held up the ring, the one that connected with the stone Lucario held... Deneb had held a different one until his dying breath.

On the return of my career as a Trainer, on the day of his death, and on the start of my time in the field, I found myself pulling on the bracelet, the key stone winking in the eerie light.

I then realised that I had forgotten to tell the old man.

“Get me a phone!”

Living in Kanto, the worst thing isn't the Johto Trainer next door. It really ain't the Gyms, Indigo Plateau, or Team Rocket's dregs. If you're like me, unfortunate enough to be born with the surname Oak, it's the questions. Are you related to...? being the king.

Well, it's not really the questions. It's the expectations. The necessary battle knowledge. The ease at which we pick up Pokémon training. And, if you're thirteen and yet to set out on your journey anywhere, despite holding a perfectly valid Trainer's license, the strange looks.

It lessened, I detected, as I spotted the lack of strange looks given to the family name-plate, but it won't. Because Professor Samuel Oak's shadow would be right there, hovering about. Plus, apparently I'm supposed to be shadowed by a Pokémon professor for some case study.

“Isn't that great?” Mum said as she started cooking up a storm. “Donar's going to be famous!”

I was about to answer that when the wok broke. Because my mum slammed it too hard. Onto the table. Reason number one why no one should ever pick a fight with any Fighting Gym; because they
most likely have people that can smash iron to bits. I kept silent on the matter.

The professors were supposed to be in Aquacorde Town. There were five trainers, me included amongst them. One amongst us were going to be selected as the research assistant for the Sycamore Institute's newest brainchild. No Trainer would've liked a Pokémon prof tagging along, until it came out that the prof was going to pay for food and lodging. Then people were all over it.

I started out to Vaniville Pathway, and found two girls and two boys. What was important was that currently, the pathway between Aquacorde and Vaniville was blocked by a thick mist that clung to the ground, and overhead was swinging a Ghost Pokémon. It looked like a sentient chandelier; striped, round head, and round, pupil-less yellow eyes, a ring of small, black spikes on top of its head with tall, purple flame in the middle. From a black spike below its head, black arms curl upward, tipped with purple fire.


“C- Chandelure, the Luring Pokémon,” Trevor stuttered. “Chandelure's fires do not burn its victims physically, instead burning their spirit... After hypnotising its opponent by waving these flames, it absorbs the victim's spirit...”

“Why the hell is there such a dangerous Pokémon around?!?” Tierno squeaked. For such a large guy he sure sounded terrified. Then again, a Pokémon that could burn your spirit...

It was waving its flames in loops. I felt stupid.

“Oh, pretty,” Serena mumbled. I looked at her; she was looking elsewhere.

As I looked back up, the glass head bobbed, and the purple flame burned brighter. It was... welcoming. Eerie, too. But welcoming.

“What do we do?” Shauna whispered. As she spoke, the Chandelure blew a plume of smoke that shrouded it.

“The smoke,” I said as it disappeared, and the Pokémon saw us again.

It blew another plume. I charged. I ran into a brick wall.

I stumbled, crashing onto the ground, and I realised that the human-sized dark blue Pokémon was just standing there. It wasn't moving. It was... assessing?

A Lucario, my inner fan-child squeaked. I could identify a Lucario by sight, mainly because of Mum and because she had suggested one for my starter. A Riolu, at least. I had shot it down at the time, but if most were going to be built like that, I wouldn't mind.

A woman stepped out of the mist, which petered off to form... a flower? No, the flower was held by a figure, a tiny humanoid. It was blue; the flower, that is.

“Thank you, Liz,” the woman – the Trainer? – murmured, as the Floette floated to her side. The mist died off, as the Chandelure lingered by her. The woman... she was definitely young, only slightly older than us. She wore a green fedora with sunglasses, with a black dress, green thigh-high socks and laced riding boots. Over her shoulder dangled a backpack, and at her belt were four more Pokéballs. “You too, Chandelure.”

We stared at her. Serena was the first to reply. “Are you crazy? That's a highly dangerous Ghost-Type Pokémon and you let it wander around like that?”
“Well, you needed to get used to it if we are travelling together, right?” the woman spoke, placing one hand on her hip. The Lucario growled, and the woman shushed it. So it was her Pokémon too?

“Get used to it?” Shauna screeched next. “I don't want to be next to a Ghost Pokémon! I don't even know you!”

“Oh, that,” the woman snapped her fingers. “I'm Professor Marguerite Linden du Bois, call me Dr du Bois, I suppose. I am the professor who is going to choose, from the five of you, my next case study. In exchange, that lucky person will have his or her food and lodging sponsored by me, as well as nominal safety looked after. However, my team has a few... unusual members, hence I needed to see if any young Trainer could handle facing a Ghost-Type Pokémon for the first time, even a dual-type like Chandelure.”

She's insane. That's got to be the only reason why I'm here facing a powerhouse, a tiny fairy and a sentient chandelier. The Prof is insane.

“It's not just one Ghost, though,” Dr du Bois blithely continued. “It's three.”

Chapter End Notes

Mirage Pokémon here.

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
I have met five children, have isolated two potential subjects from them. A girl, Serena, and a boy nicknamed Don in the group, with a Fennekin and a Froakie respectively.

As Dr du Bois glanced down to the paved ground, I thought, hey, so this is what social awkwardness looks like.

Perhaps it was too early to show Chandelure to them.

I really didn't want to take this up with Altair now. I was hot and sweating in the dry, arid Kalos summer. Even Aquacorde wasn't spared from l'été. Aside from my late Pokémon and Vega, Altair had been with us since after I began the journey. Since Shalour. Maybe since even earlier, before the Santalune Forest. Altair was far more level-headed than what I credit him.

“Maybe,” I mumbled. Mixing a Misty Terrain – a Fairy move – with the intimidation factor of a Chandelure had been overkill, but it was necessary that whoever I followed didn't become too affected by their fear of Ghosts, particularly of my ghostly trio.

If I had a Gengar, I could back the claim that Ghost Pokémon were technically 'harmless'. The Kanto region's second-most dangerous Pokémon was sort of cute and cuddly, like a Minion from that movie with the reformed villain. Once upon a time, I wanted a Gengar to call Mignon. That was before the ghostly trio took up too much of my time.

“This is going to be hard,” I echoed his sentiment.

You don't say.

I rolled my eyes, and Altair smirked, aware that he had touched upon a relevant point. Well, as far as I could tell, it smirked. “What do you think?”

Of the five, the large one, the small one and the girl in pink would not survive. They might actually get themselves killed with you. I am... undecided, between the girl and the boy. They are not afraid of Chandelure, but whether it was due to honest bravery or mere ignorance remained to be seen.

As I discussed this with Altair, I kept watch as Augustine soothed ruffled children and showed them a few starter Pokémon. “And Dr du Bois started out with a Fennekin, too!” Augustine was trying to sweeten my potential victims, I see.

“Fire-types are some of the hardest starter Pokémon,” I slowly stated as the girl in red, Serena, went for the Pokéball with the Fennekin.
“Shall we, Serena?” Shauna challenged. “Battle!”

I had the luxury of watching a tiny Chespin lose against the Fennekin. It was really no contest. But I watched as the boy, not the large one or the small one, lean over to Shauna and whisper to her. Shauna turned to face Serena and the Fennekin, seriously considering. “Chester, use Vine Whip on the ground!”

I glanced down at the stone-paved path, the vines lashing down at it as Serena ordered a Tackle. Dust rose in the air – and from within Chespin used Pin Missile.

“Unusual strategy,” I decided as the Fennekin dodged the blow. “Using a convection current to set up a strategy to distract and attack.”

The Fennekin doubled back, snarling as it spat an Ember, which ended the battle decisively and made sure that the girls got their starters. It also left the boy with the Froakie.

“I'm going to make a team of dancing Pokémon!” the large boy declared.

“I'll aim to complete the PokéDex,” the smaller one confessed.

Both were automatically excluded, and Shauna had proven that she could not handle Ghosts. So Augustine turned to the two remaining, and asked: “Well, as Dr du Bois might have explained to you, she is going to follow one of you as part of her fieldwork. Of course, she can hold her own in any battle, so as a new Trainer you will not be expected to protect her. However, in exchange, your food and lodging, excluding that of your Pokémon, will be cared for.”

“Why doesn't she tell us herself?”

I had not expected the boy to speak up. I cleared my throat. “Professor Sycamore has informed me that showing you the issue at hand may have exacerbated the situation. I am... allowing him to run damage control.”

“Can you even battle?” the boy retorted. “Or are those ghosts only for show?”

“What do you think?” I asked, smiling. He reminded me of myself. I was distinctly aware that that way lay madness. I pulled a Pokéball and unleashed Liz. “Try.”

“Froakie, go!” the blue frog appeared on the field, facing Liz. Many of the passers-by were stopping to check; Pokémon battles might be rare, but a Floette vs Froakie battle seemed like a foregone conclusion. Froakie seemed larger and could take on a Floette, but Liz was not an ordinary Floette.

First mistake: the boy ordered a Quick Attack.

“Liz, Grass Knot,” I called. Liz whistled up a knot of grass that tripped the frog and sent it skidding into the nearest wall.

“Froakie!” the boy called in concern as the frog leapt back up, before calling the second mistake. “Growl!”

“Misty Terrain,” I ordered, as the field was shrouded in a thin mist.

“Froakie, Bubble!”

I could have laughed. I nearly did as bubbles popped inside, barely touching Liz's silhouette. “Energy Ball.”
The blast was refracted by numerous bubbles, blinding the Froakie and leaving it blind as a sitting Psyduck.

The boy stared as his starter was down for the count. “That... that's a Type advantage-”

I snorted, as Liz bristled. “Nice try.”

“That's the newly discovered type, right? Fairy?” the small boy I had dismissed asked.

“Yes, and you'll do well to remember it, since it's the sixth Gym on the Kalos circuit,” I answered, reaching over to give the Froakie a Revive. It bristled, hopping to its Trainer with some reluctance. Absently, the boy patted the Froakie on the head; good. “Does that answer your question? I might be participating in a few Gym battles alongside of you, hence it was imperative that I know how to defend myself and battle. Since I am attempting to observe the life of a battle Trainer, I would like to know who would be interested to volunteer themselves as a case study.”

“A battle Trainer?” the boy gaped.

“That's a great idea, Don!” Shauna nodded eagerly; I filed the name away. “You and Serena would go well together! You'll make a great battle team!”

Unfortunately, the Elite Four and the Champion are fought alone. “I see. Although power is not everything in battle. Altair.”

Altair handed me the letters, which I handed to all five children. “Fill this in if you're interested. And if you think you can handle three Ghosts.”

“Erm, I'd rather focus on my PokéDex...”

“I'd like to train Pokémon to dance...”

“I just remembered, I should get started soon, I want to reach Santalune quickly...”

Only Serena and Don were left by that café Augustine had arranged we meet at, both of them staring at me, obviously trying to get my measure.

“What do we get out of this?” Don asked.

“I'm paying for food and lodging, and you're still asking for more?” I asked. “It's a very good offer, I assure you.”

“I mean... you're obviously a great Trainer!” Serena took his stand. “You could start on that journey yourself... you don't need us.”

“I must be objective when studying,” I replied. “This means that myself is automatically excluded. Besides, there is no point to critical study if the only perspective available is my own. A trainer's journey is often a solitary one, undertaken rarely with another human. One of you will provide your own story to tell here.”

Serena challenged the professor after that little talk.

“I fail to see why you can't,” Serena offered. “I bet I can roast that Floette before you can blast Elmo.”

Dr du Bois looked mildly... amused, was the best way I could put it. “Very well. Liz.”
The Floette floated on its blue flower, smiling vaguely. Serena’s Fennekin, now named Elmo, shot an Ember at it that collapsed.

“Protect, obviously,” the professor dreamily whispered, eyes closed. “And... Dazzling Gleam.”

I never caught what that was, but the light blinded me and when my sight recovered, Elmo was down for the count. At least I had lasted three moves.

“A Fennekin is not meant to remain standing to shoot its embers,” the strange female Professor ignored Professor Sycamore tugging at her arm. “A Fennekin, and its entire evolutionary line, Braixen and Delphox, is speedy and burns very well. Your Pokémon has mobility. They are not static. They are not cannons to be directed. They are living beings just as much as we are.”

Serena gulped, shying away from the professor. “Y- Yes, ma'am.”

“With that subject decided... have any of you given considerable thought to where you are headed?”

“S- Santalune City, right?” Serena volunteered again.

“Without supplies or a spare Pokémon?” came the arch reply.

“I'll... stock up on potions.”

“Pokéballs?”

“I'll buy some!” Serena hotly replied.

“Why bother when the salesman over there is giving them out for free?” Dr du Bois pointed towards the west side, where, indeed, said salesman was. She was definitely screwing with us, I reflected as I went with Serena to grab a sample. Serena agreed when I told her my theory.

“Yeah, that professor's insane,” was her reply. Sounds like a unanimous agreement.

Professor Sycamore was giving Dr du Bois a sort of kicked-Growlithe expression, amongst shouts of 'why can't you leave them at home' and 'you can catch more, right? Really, Marguerite' when we came back to the table. Dr du Bois took a look at our catch, and nodded, flagrantly ignoring the man who gave us our PokéDexes in favour of inspecting the Pokéball we got. “It'll be a start. Do any of you know how to catch one without wasting the ball?”

“Yeah,” Serena answered through gritted teeth. “You know, Professor Sycamore, I'd rather not stay if she's going to be like this, always.”

“No!” Professor Sycamore sounded heartbroken. “Please, Serena, Marguerite's just... awkward. She's been living by the Lavarre Nature Trail for five years alone with only her ghosts, it gets... weird.”

As Dr du Bois glanced down to the paved ground, I thought, hey, so this is what social awkwardness looks like. “Well... let's just go through the Santalune Forest first, okay? Then we can decide who is Dr du Bois going to follow.”

“That's a splendid idea, Donar!” I winced as Professor Sycamore shouted my name. “Marguerite, go! If you three set off now, you could reach the Santalune Centre by nightfall!”

“Or we could go camping,” Dr du Bois loftily added.

“That sounds... dangerous,” Professor Sycamore deflated. “Marguerite...”
“Unless you count Pikachu as a predator, then there is nothing much to fear,” Dr du Bois replied.

Serena fidgeted as we were sent on an errand to buy a beginner's trainer kit from the mart. “Why are we listening to her?”

I shrugged. Personally, I would rather that the professor abandon the mindset of Trainers as a species unto themselves. Come see the Pokémon Trainer in their natural habitat, as they wander the Kalos region, catch Pokémon to train and pit in battle!

So, it was the three of us that got started on Avance Trail. Somehow, I ended up taking the lead; the Lucario silently led Dr du Bois, who seemed more interested in studying the waterway by Aquacorde than walking. Serena was more interested in looking around for more Pokémon to sic Elmo on.

“Are you intending to name your Froakie?” Serena asked me, shifting to one side as she finger-combed her hair.

“...No,” I shortly replied. “Why?”

“No reason.” Serena then turned to Dr du Bois. “Erm, professor... where did you get that Floette?”

“Kalos Route Four, Parterre Way,” Dr du Bois answered tonelessly. “I found her as a Flabébé, and trained her to a Floette. Orange and white Flabébé can also be found along Rivière Walk, along Camphrier Town.”

“Orange and white?” Serena echoed dumbly. “Are there alternate colourations of Flabébé?”

“Flabébé live amongst the flowers that grow wild in Kalos,” Dr du Bois replied absently, her green eyes lidded, almost dream-like. “To blend in and hide from predators, even as Floette, their colouration matches the region they are found in. To date, there are five known normal colourations of the Flabébé evolutionary line, as well as a uni-gender line. All known Flabébé, Floette and Florges are female.”

“That's gotta be tough,” I muttered. “How do they...”

“How do they what?” Serena asked.

I paled, suddenly aware of what was going on, and then made an imploring glance at Dr du Bois. A flash of something crossed her face... before she turned away, leaving me to the cruel and merciless torture of Serena attempting to get questions.

“Professor Kudzu's textbook on a beginner's guide to Pokémon sums up Pokémon breeding,” Dr du Bois finally took mercy as Serena began giving me a fist-bump on the head. “Each species belong to one or more Egg Groups, or can breed with Ditto. The Flabébé evolutionary line belongs to the Fairy Egg group, so they can mate with others and reproduce that way.”

“That's... erm...” I swallowed. “Too much information?”

“You don't even know what I'm talking about,” Dr du Bois simply replied.

“So... the first Gym is just in Santalune, right?” Serena murmured, changing the subject. “Do you think Shauna might beat us to winning the Bug Badge early?”

“No,” Dr du Bois replied before I could bury myself further into the subject of Pokémon breeding. “She has a Chespin. Even allowing for evolution, Bug Pokémon hold the advantage. Even with a
Flying-type Pokémon, it's more likely that- she will be standing right outside and waiting.”

I followed her sight-line, spotting Shauna's hopeful expression.

“Donar, Serena! I'm so glad you're here!” Shauna nearly leapt at Serena. “It's- It's horrible in there! Bugs and monkeys and... and... and birds! Can I follow you guys?”

“Might as well,” I sighed.

“If there are Flying-type Pokémon within, then it is for the best that we camp out.”

“Professor...?” Serena hesitated. “I thought Professor Sycamore said not to.”

“True,” Dr du Bois considered. “It will still be taking a dead run, assuming that we do not stop at all. We might as well train for the upcoming Gym in Santalune. Furthermore, I invite the two of you to consider your strategies to defeat Bug-type Pokémon.”


“Because, the Santalune Gym specialises in Bug-Type Pokémon,” Dr du Bois blandly replied. “Consider this while we walk.”

“Bug-type?” Shauna shivered. “Erm... what did Teach say at the Training School...?”

“Bugs eats leaves,” Serena growled. “So Elmo is gonna be fine, since he can set them on fire.”

“Yeah!” Shauna's exclamation was missed by me, as I spotted Dr du Bois shaking her head. Never mind what I felt, that was just... odd.

The forest was very dark, the canopy overhead thick enough that it was hard to see. “How do Trainers get through this?” I grumbled, pulling my shoe-clad foot from a pile of mud by the side. At least, I hoped it was mud.

“Some bring a torch,” Dr du Bois replied. “Some chose Fennekin, and then proceed to light a dry branches on fire to light their way.”

Serena stopped. “Let's do that!”

“So you intend to take on the Santalune Gym with only one Pokémon?” Dr du Bois asked.

“Why not?” Serena asked. “My Elmo can take on anything, including the first Gym!”

Laughter rang out, and I started; but Dr du Bois remained impassive as ever. I then realised that the laugh came from a passing Trainer.

“Well, if you're so keen on taking on Viola, then try me out for size!” The young Trainer offered.

“It's a battle, then!” Serena pulled out her Pokéball. “Elmo!”

The Trainer pulled his own, strangely blue Pokéball. “Go, Savvy!”

He released a butterfly-like Pokémon with wings of blue-and-green streaked with yellow. Its main body had an elliptical shape divided into three segments, each with a different shade of grey. Its black and grey legs were also elliptical, and it had two black, circular hands, but no visible arms. A round, greyish head with large black eyes and a pair of skinny antenna cooed at us. It was a surprisingly girly-looking Pokémon, but as a citizen of the region with the highest proliferation of
Butterfree, I had no excuse.

“‘That’s so pretty!’” Shauna cooed. “Dr du Bois, what is it?”

“A Savannah-pattern Vivillon,” Dr du Bois supplied. “The wing patterns of Vivillon depend upon the climate and habitat it lives in. There are eighteen known patterns of Vivillon wings.”

“Elmo, Ember!” Serena called.

“Too bad,” the trainer snickered. “Savvy, use Poison Powder!”

A purple mist fell from the airborne butterfly’s wings, coating Elmo. It sneezed and fell down, sweating.

“Elmo!?” Serena exclaimed.

“Savvy, use Draining Kiss!” the Trainer called as the Vivillon glowed pink with Elmo, Elmo getting more drained as the butterfly grew more healthy.

“Elmo!” Serena hurriedly returned the wounded Fennekin to its ball. “Fine, you win!”

“And?” the trainer held out his hand. “Half your purse.”

“Huh?” Serena echoed.

“Battle rules state that Trainers wager half the money they have on hand as the prize,” Dr du Bois explained. “That is absolutely correct.”

“That's unfair!” Serena exclaimed. “What about Elmo? He can't continue like this!”

So this is the power of an experienced Trainer, I realised. I then saw that if this was how that Vivillon overcame its Type advantage, I hadn't a prayer of taking on Santalune.

“It is the rules,” Dr du Bois stated, and that seemed to settle it. “Even though the other Trainer was also wrong for not explaining to clearly novice Trainers, you should have known the rules of battle. The winner's purse from the Gyms are as much an attraction compared to the Badges themselves.”

“I'll-” Serena sputtered. “This is unfair!”

“Life ain't fair, missy,” the Trainer dismissed. “Leader Viola’s got a Vivillon too, and it’s way stronger than mine!”

“Case study; rash, violent and defensive,” I heard Dr du Bois mutter. “New Trainers are not always acquainted with the rules of battle.”

“And you, missy?” the trainer suddenly leered as Dr du Bois. “Name’s Zachary, up at the Santalune Gym. You got the skill to take it on?”

“I have no money to gamble,” Dr du Bois flatly replied.

He leered. “Well, we can always find a means of payment, if you know what I mean.”

“So you promise that you will give up the winner's purse from that farce of a battle with Serena if I win?”

“Sure, why not. If you can.”
“Altair,” she ordered. The Lucario nodded, staring at the Vivillon as if to seize it up.

“Savvy,” Zachary smirked. “Quiver Dance—”

“Flash Cannon.”

A thin beam of light had gathered, shooting through Savvy. The butterfly gave a thin screech as part of its wing was torn loose, falling like the petal of a dying flower.

Zachary paled, diving to catch the Vivillon while still watching Altair and Dr du Bois in no small amount of terror. Serena gaped. Shauna looked like she was about to faint. As I watched... the Lucario raised a paw, showing a curved claw on its... forefinger? Thing? And blew.

If his battle was one-sided from the start, then this was a deliberate slaughter and incapacitation.

“Abundant sunlight increases the light energy present in Flash Cannon,” Dr du Bois answered. “Hence, an otherwise mildly effective move on your Vivillon becomes more powerful. It looks like it is our win.”

Those three Ghosts? They can't be the worst. I mean, what's worse than their apparently sadistic owner?

...we were thus escorted, with the help of the Santalune Gym Trainer, to Santalune City, where all four of us proceeded to secure quarters at the Pokémon Centre just as the sun began to set. I hope that subsequent days would produce fruitful results.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois.
Have narrowed down potentials to two; a girl and a boy. The girl, Serena, tends towards overpowering her opponents, though she does give consideration to strategy. The boy shows more promise, but a definite inexperience, I diagnose as because of his inexperience.

I gaped, wondering at the strength of those two Pokémon, and then I realised... there was no way I was ready for this. No, absolutely not.

Day 3: Have narrowed down potentials to two; a girl and a boy. The girl, Serena, tends towards overpowering her opponents, though she does give consideration to strategy. The boy shows more promise, but a definite inexperience, I diagnose as because of his inexperience.

Kalos Trainers of the XXI century tend to follow the core tenets as set by Professor Samuel Oak of Kanto; that Pokémon are humanity’s friends, and should always be treated as such. The implications are that Pokémon are natural disasters and should be accommodated, at its most extreme the phenomenon known as ‘Poképhilia’. This paradoxical approach towards the dangers of Pokémon training as begun by ten years of age, as has become the custom of relatively safe Kanto, has also led to countless deaths; particularly in the case of the Sinnoh region, where the ineffective Sinnoh League required much reform after the threat of Team Galactic and the subsequent political upheaval.

Though cultural spillover from Kanto may be regarded as inevitable, Kalos should nonetheless strive to develop a semi-rational approach to Pokémon, recognising the true dangers as well as benefits that Pokémon has brought, rather than follow the blinkered, lax view of Pokémon as companions without recognising that Pokémon abilities and moves could turn against the inexperienced Trainer...

The proud arrangement of horns lowered, glowing with the colours of the rainbow, but predominantly green. I recognised the move as Megahorn. It was going to hit Deneb.

My Venusaur bellowed in defiance, but could not move within the vortex created by the Solar Beam it was about to fire. Around it was the mangled remnants of some of the Flares' Pokémon, Delphi amongst them. She had been the first hit when I freed the Legendary.

“Deneb!” I screamed, swinging out. I stumbled, landing in front of the charging deer. The horn stabbed through my spine and came out in the other end. looked straight, into Deneb’s dying face where the pointed end of the horn had breached his skull. There was time. “Fire!”

The Legendary Pokémon tried to move, but I was so tired and angry and spiteful, that even if it shrugged it off I was going to make sure it remembered taking Deneb’s Solar Beam straight up. It was the humans at fault, the humans who had trapped its sleeping form there. Why kill the Pokémon? Why kill Delphi? What kind of Legendary Pokémon would share eternal life, and yet deprive its own kind of the very thing it represented?
I hate it. I hate them all. As I died, I spoke a Curse-

I awoke. The dream was horrible; I needed to consider getting a Drowzee, or teach one of the trio Dream Eater. I needed to replace a Psychic, anyway.

Altair stared in concern. A mug was already in hand, filled with water. The mystery of how he did so without opposable thumbs was solved when I spotted Aegis wave, gingerly balancing his Blade Forme.

“Nightmare,” I gasped once I finished the water. “W- What happened?”

Altair hung his head. It is ten years to the day.

I nodded, still sick. Ten years to the day, I had expected to fall with them. Delphi, Deneb, Sealeo and Banette... instead, I awoke to unchanging life and the awful truth that my team of six had lost four. “I miss them.”

We have honoured them. They stand as the first Pokémon of an experienced Trainer. Even the Life Pokémon had seen fit that they be immortalised in you.

“But none of you will be,” I told it. “You know that, right, Altair?”

I have long guessed it. Pokémon have no need of personal glory. It is the way it is.

I relented; Altair was clearly waiting for an appropriate response. “I think a walk in the Santalune Forest would be good for everyone.”

It was coming to daybreak when I entered, but day and night made no difference to the Forest's deep canopy. I stayed to the well-worn paths, wary of strange Pokémon. As I passed, I spotted sleepy would-be Trainers and their partners stream towards a blocky building I interpreted to be the Trainers' School, and from there I got a rough demographic of the paths.

Altair lingered as I found a lake, checked and found an Oran berry tree, and released everyone. Jelly dived for the lake, and I heard a few murmurs that sounded like unfortunate Pokémon being eaten. I frowned as Jelly flew out, but then she flew back in to do battle with the Milotic there. It was clearly old and powerful, sleek and deadly; no experienced Trainer would have it easy catching it, never mind novices.

Altair gave me a boost up to the low boughs, where I leaned my back against the trunk. A passing Caterpie paused, almost considering as a stench released from its osmeterium. I gave it a branch of leaves, and it left.

I had no idea how long passed in complete silence. Altair and I were masters of the trance, and during that trance I had decided on a course of action, down to choosing a subject, getting the subject through Viola and back on the road. It was not hard, on reflection. It would be Camphrier Town next, where I would drop by the Shabboneau Castle, maybe discuss the local fauna, and consider adopting a stray Pokémon from the Day Care or catching one at the Connecting Cave...

They have taken your words to heart.

I looked up from the berries I picked to see both Donar and Serena walking along the paths. They were making noise, too much that the nearby birds would have long escaped. I leaned back; they were going to train.

I had trained Delphi here, once upon a time. I ignored that pang of pain. Even Legendaries had a
right to life, no matter how unfair they were.

After Dr du Bois's Lucario took down the blue Vivillon, we made it through the Santalune Forest for the Pokémon Centre. The day after that, Serena went back to the forest.

“"I need another Pokémon,"” she stressed, dragging me along. "Dr du Bois is right, I need to train Elmo and get another Pokémon, as backup."

“"He was scaring you,"” I sighed. Zachary had apologised, especially after Dr du Bois hinted at lodging a complaint to the Pokémon League regarding the Santalune Gym. “You don't actually have to win against the Gym Leader, you just have to prove yourself worthy!”

“"That's the point!"” Serena shortly replied.

“"Anyway,"” she said after a deep breath that expressed exasperation far more than any bodily injury ever could. “"I'm thinking of getting a Flying Pokémon."

“"Then why am I here?"

“"That..."” Serena paused, her eyes widening. “"I'm going to beat you at the League, so you need to shape up, of course!"

I could have argued about the lack of logic with regards to that, but what came out of my mouth was, instead: “"What about Dr du Bois?"

Serena stopped. “"What about her?"

“"Where is she?"” I frowned.

“"Dunno. Her Lucario was around, I guess she went to study the Pokémon around?"” Serena shrugged.

We found the curiously youthful-looking professor by a Berry tree in a clearing, picking at the blue fruits hanging from the low boughs. Her Lucario stood by, clearly meditating in the tree's shade.

“"Oran Berries?"” I asked.

“"Yes,"” Dr du Bois replied quietly. She was slim, rather petite, but more solid and real than even Serena. I guess it was a Trainer's maturity and a professor's intellect in one body, but it was mysterious anyway. “These Oran Berries are first harvested by students of the Santalune Trainers' School, obviously to compensate for a lack of pocket money for potions. This also leads me to conclude that a large majority of graduates would have as a starter or second Pokémon a Scatterbug, Caterpie, Weedle, Bunnelby, Fletchling, Pidgey or one of the elemental monkeys, with the occasional Pikachu."

“"Erm... course,"” I swallowed. The good doctor was surprisingly prescient in summarising the demographics of the Pokémon at the Trainer's School compound we just passed.

“"You guessed that, didn't you?"” Serena stared at her. “"How?"

“"Barely any ripe berries from a tree of this size indicates that a man-made agency, and one unaccustomed to rationing, has been taking them,"” Dr du Bois waved to the low bough of green, unripe buds. “Pokémon tend to leave some berries, since these have mild healing properties; ergo, humans. Oran Berries grow fast in a pot, so why take all of the ripe Berries? Someone can't afford a
pot to grow them, or soil, or time to care for the plant. Hence coming out here to take them from the tree. Now, this is a comparatively sleepy part of Kalos, so which Trainer would take the trouble to get the cheap Oran Berries of low quality? A Trainer who can't afford it, and has Pokémon who want them. That includes students, right there. And Pokémon who want Oran Berries tend to have tasted them before, ergo, they were caught in the Forest itself or within Avance Trail. Panpour, Pansage and Pansear markings can be found around the trunk — here she pointed to scratches in the bark, “and I saw the distinctive scorches of electricity by a horde of Pikachu.”

“That's amazing,” I admitted.

Her lips twitched.

“Anyway, I need them,” Serena walked over to one of the low boughs, plucking a handful. “And I'm going to catch a Pokémon!”

“Good luck,” Dr du Bois dreamily replied once more.

I lingered as Serena left. “Do you think I have a chance at the Badge?”

“Not if you don't get used to your Froakie.”

Point taken, I released Froakie and got it started on Water Gun. “I think I might have gotten lost if I walked through alone.”

“It's a straight line.”

I shrugged as I got soaked. “Good job, Froakie! But let's work on your aim.”

The amphibian hopped, head-butted me, and stuck at the nearest tree. It blew a raspberry.

I sighed, looking around. “Fine, let's set you against a Weedle and see how you match.”

I found a Caterpie on the Oran Berry tree and set Froakie on it. Froakie tried to eat it, but the caterpillar's String Shot tied it up. Dr du Bois just stared as I put Froakie through the motions, pieced together strategies with the help of the PokéDex, and I had the feeling of being assessed as a test subject or something.

“Altair,” I heard Dr du Bois say.

The Lucario suddenly dived, whacking behind me. Earth and soil threw up into the air where the Lucario's fist impacted, forming something like a small crater.

“Are you insane?! I yelled, panting. “I could have died! Why the hell did you do that?!”

She pointed down. My eyes followed her finger towards the fainted Weedle there. “So? So what?”

“You would have died,” she tonelessly replied.

“Come on, it's a caterpillar,” I grumbled.

She didn't answer, but I got the feeling of being vaguely disapproved of. “What?”

“Check your PokéDex.”

I got out the thing, flipping it to the Weedle entry. “Yeah, Weedle, Hairy Bug, found in forests and grasslands, has a two-inch... toxic barb on its head...”
I deflated, suddenly realising that if the Lucario hadn't moved so quickly, I'd have been dragged to the Pokémon Centre screaming bloody poison right now. Instead, I had just gotten a fright. I had assumed that Kalos was harmless, that there wasn't a predator around.

I hadn't recalled that all Pokémon were dangerous. Some were just more obvious about it.

“ Weedle were used by the criminal organisations of Kanto as silent assassination tools,” Dr du Bois continued. “Those were fully grown men, their usual victims.”


The Lucario huffed. I hope you are.

It took a moment, but then I jumped back and away from the talking jackal-like beast. “Y- You talked?!” I stared at Dr du Bois. “He talks!”

Dr du Bois made a sign with her hand, towards the PokéDex. I looked for the Lucario entry, pausing. “Oh, it reads auras... understands human speech... reported to communicate via telepathy. Seriously?”

I am communicating with you. I think we have gone beyond the realm of possibility and into fact.

“A Lucario with a smart mouth...” I muttered, before my interminable curiosity poked at me. “Erm... Dr du Bois?”

The professor stared at me.

“Why are Lucario in such high demand at the Indigo League?” I hoped Altair wasn't going to punch me. “I mean... it's a Fighting-type, right? They have weaknesses too.”

“Lucario are a dual-type Steel/Fighting Pokémon, able to communicate telepathically due to their knowledge of auras,” Dr du Bois answered after a pause. “The weaknesses of the Fighting-type are balanced out in the Steel-type, and the weaknesses of Steel are covered in Fighting-type. Not only is it well-balanced, silent communication between Trainer and Pokémon becomes possible, and Lucario are amongst the most loyal, if proud, of known Pokémon species. To be able to command a Lucario means a lot amongst Trainers, to put things delicately.”

“O- Oh,” I awkwardly replied. “Erm... could you help me train for the Gym battle?”

“No.”

Well, at least I asked. “Why?”

“Because I must see if Serena will win against Viola, and thus decide upon the individual subject at hand that I shall study. Until then, I shall influence neither subject.”

“But until then, you're free. So why not?”

“You will not be able to handle any of my partners.”

I opened my mouth, but she inclined her head towards Altair, who wordlessly raised his claw. I suddenly remembered the fate of the partially dismembered Vivillon, and decided that Froakie needed to go for the Little Leagues before the high leagues. “A- About yesterday...”

“Hmm?”
“The Pokémon battle,” I clarified, more firmly than I truly felt. “Y- You didn't have to tear the Vivillon apart. That Trainer, Zachary... he's irritating, but what you called... that was just cruel.”

“He knew the risks,” Dr du Bois replied. “All battles bring the possibility of injury. Training is merely to decrease the chances of debilitating injury.”

“Professor Sycamore—”

“-has never known war,” Dr du Bois replied.

“There can't be war here.” I said, though I felt unconvinced myself.

“I saw the fight against Team Flare, you know.” Green eyes studied me. “Living in Kanto, you should be familiar with the Rockets. I can tell you that the Flares and the Rockets, while they hold different aims, employed much of the same methods.”

“F- Fine,” I admitted. “But that guy wasn't a Rocket or a Flare.”

“He was a Gym trainer, a representative of Viola,” Dr du Bois pointed out. “His Vivillon was prepared to poison and drain the life out of Serena's Fennekin. Does it matter? All that was different was speed.”

“The Vivillon didn't deserve it.”

“No, it didn't,” she agreed. “Flash Cannon was just the most expedient way to go about handling the situation without subjecting the Vivillon to further dilemma. It cannot battle under an unscrupulous trainer if it is injured, after all.”

I wanted to yell at her, that it was wrong, but then I was distantly aware that she'd turned off from the conversation immediately. Sure, it was cruel and unusual punishment... but it had taken Zachary down a peg...

“Jelly,” I heard Dr du Bois order for a moment.

I spotted the pink spectral menace staring at a nearly red-plumed bird with a sort of expression universal to the Pokémon world; hunger. It, apparently named Jelly, floated, stalking the tiny Pokémon so quietly that it was freaking eerie.

The bird blinked, also still before it tried to dash for it. A cold wind blew from the menace of the seas, sending the bird careening over. The monster would have made a snack if I hadn't flung what I had on hand in time.

The Pokéball bounced, capturing the bird as it let out a terrified squeak, aware that the menace would have eaten it. It blinked, shook once, twice, thrice...

… and I heard a click.


I scowled, scrolling my PokéDex for the information about Fletchling and its evolutionary lines. “It evolves into a dual-type Fire/Flying...”

“Talonflame, the final evolution of Fletchling, and the second largest predatory bird of the Kalos region.”
“What's the first?”

“Pidgeot, of course.” Dr du Bois replied, still dreamily. “Jelly, no eating the wild Pokémon.”

The Jellicent relented, bristling before Dr du Bois gave it some berries.

I let the Fletchling out, the terrified bird giving a squawk as it spotted the murderous Jellicent.

“It's safe,” I told it and my rather surly Froakie. “Erm... I accidentally caught you while saving you from death by stomach, I'm very sorry-”

It pecked me.

“Prone to be physically abused by own Pokémon,” I made notes, watching the boy, Donar, get pecked by the Fletchling he tried to save from Jelly. “Attributed to lack of control at current stage, especially this early in the Trainer journey, when he has yet to bond with his own starter much.”

*If you told Jelly to stalk that Fletchling right in front of the boy, it shall not be amusing, Altair communicated.*

Crystal floated past, hissing as her flames grew slightly. Jelly just burbled back, chewing on its berries thoughtfully.

*Shriik. Shriik.*

Donar jumped, and the Fletchling squealed again as he turned around, spotting Aegis performing another attempt at self-sharpening. “W- What's that, a freaking sword?”

“He is Aegis,” I replied. “My partner Aegislash, also known as the Royal Sword Pokémon. Dual-type Ghost/Steel. A fascinating species evolved from Duoblade with a Dusk Stone, native to the region. The Sycamore research laboratory places its origin along the time when the AZ Empire ruled Kalos.”

“Does it have to do... that?!” Donar pointed as Aegis slammed its shield against its main body with the purple appendages it used for arms.

“Metal Sound unnerves the opponents that listen to it,” I answered. “Aegislash is suited uniquely for battle, thus it needs to sharpen itself.”

Donar scowled, but left instead of picking a fight.


I did not have a Psychic on hand – note to self; look into a Pokémon with Teleport – and hiding in the shadows were the domain of ghosts. A move that even the fearsome Gengar could not do had established the dominance of these unique Dual-Types from Gastlys and Haunters. It was little trouble to spot the boy training his Froakie and, apparently, Fletchling. Then again, Fletchling were simple creatures; it was the Fletchinder and the Talonflame that made them a credible threat. The Fletchling on the whole was a small creature, without the ferocity of Taillow or the hardiness of Pidgey, but they deferred their power to the likes of their later evolutions.

I watched the simple creature try its Peck against a passing Caterpie. It avoided the resultant String Shot and hit well enough.

“A flier,” I murmured in approval. “It will be powerful. Against Viola...?”
The Fletchling pecked him once more, but Donar just sighed and talked to it, cooing quietly. I suppose he realised that the Fletchling was female, after all. It looked like he had training under way.

“Hi!” Serena came back. She was not alone; behind her trailed one of the Pikachu, its tail flicking and a happy smile on its face. Most Trainers liked the Electric Mouse Pokémon, but they were a pest this close to Santalune. “How's training, Don?”

“Fine,” Donar shortly replied. “I caught my second Pokémon. Well, I technically saved it from our dear professor's murderous Pokémon, but it counts.”

Serena looked up, just as Aegis made a particularly grating screech. She took in Crystal blowing smoke rings, Jelly lingered by the berry tree, and Aegis obliviously sharpening its sword. Just then, one of Aegis's hands swung its main body in a vaguely threatening gesture.

She screamed, of course.

“I kind of imagined my journey with less Ghosts,” I stated once Dr du Bois had recalled her Ghosts to within her Pokéballs and we walked to the Santalune Gym. It was a surprisingly elegant building. “You know, I thought it'd be more... natural.”

“It is, inside,” Dr du Bois replied. Beside her, Altair lingered like some protective, silent bodyguard, but the Professor looked more animated than she had been yesterday. “Viola is a photographer by trade, after all. She has an excellent eye for lighting, especially since the building faces south.”

“Can we get this over with?” Serena murmured, grouchy. “I want to start training my Pika!”

“You already named it?” I muttered.

We walked to the bored receptionist and presented our requests, and were duly shown within, where it felt like we stepped into a different geological epoch. The entirety of the interior resembled a jungle clearing; two elevated wooden platforms faced each other, while below them extended a treacherous net of spider-web, presumably done by an Ariados. I was impressed.

Viola herself was there, a camera slung around her neck. She was blonde with dark green eyes, her bangs curled inwards at the ends like antennae. She wore a white vest and dark green corduroy jeans, and sneakers. Serena left us to stand opposite of Viola, as the referee read the rules out.

“This will be a two-on-two battle. Each Trainer may use one Pokémon at each time. The battle lasts until one forfeits or both Pokémon are knocked out.”

Viola raised her arms to form a frame around Serena's face. “That determined expression… That glint in your eye that says you're up to the challenge… It's fantastic! Just fantastic! Is this your first time challenging a Gym?”

“She does have a way with people,” Dr du Bois murmured. I agreed.

“Now come at me!” Viola cried, choosing a Pokéball. “My lens is always focused on victory – I won't let anything ruin this shot!”

“Elmo, I choose you!” Serena called, as Elmo hit the field.

“A Fennekin, then?” Viola squinted at the tiny fox. “Well, I'm quite aware that this Gym has one glaring weakness... but I'm prepared! Go, Surskit!”
I blinked as the blue water-skater thing appeared, dancing on the field of web. “That's...”

“Surskit, a Pokémon native to the Hoenn region.” Dr du Bois supplied. “Most of the Surskit in Kalos are descendants of the Masquerain that ended up here after the last tussle of Kyogre and Groundon in the Hoenn region. They are also the only known Bug/Water Pokémon within the six regions.”

I turned the choked laugh into a hacking cough; no wonder she had advised for Flying-Types.

The Surskit opened with Quick Attack, and being able to dance over the webs, it was fast. Elmo shot an Ember at command, but couldn't make it in time as the Surskit slammed into it and then hopped back. Water spouted from the tip of its hat-thing.

“Water Sport,” Dr du Bois murmured.

One Bubble and Quick Attack later, Elmo was down, and Serena pulled out Pika, which took the Surskit down with Nuzzle and Quick Attack.

“Well, my Surskit is down,” Viola recalled it into its ball and then picked another. “but I have one more! Go, Vivillon!”

This Vivillon bore pink wings with blue spots, and seemed much larger than the one Altair nearly decimated. It kicked off with Infestation, a move that had Pikachu running from a swarm of insects. So distracted was Pika that it didn't notice the Vivillon tackling it off of the platform and onto the sticky web until it was stuck.

I gaped, wondering at the strength of those two Pokémon, and then I realised... there was no way I was ready for this. No, absolutely not.

“Oh god, I need help,” I muttered.

“Why?” Dr du Bois asked.

“I want to beat Viola, and to do that I gotta train my Pokémon,” I replied, confused.

“So why do you want to beat Viola?” she dreamily asked.

“I want to be a good Trainer,” I replied, feeling the rush of something that, under all of that cynicism and fear and loathing, kept there. “I'm not saying... I'm not saying that I want to be Champion. But... I'm tired, I guess. I just want to connect deeply in the rush of ambition. I want to make this unforgettable, to make something of my life. So... I will take Froakie and Fletchling to the Pokémon League, I will battle the Elite Four, and the Champion, so that my Pokémon... my friends, now, and I, we will finally find a purpose.”

“So you are aimless,” Dr du Bois murmured. “Why not aim for the Pokémon League? That is your reasoning?”

“Lady, I'm thirteen. I don't plan that far ahead.”

She paused, considering as Viola patted Serena and escorted her off with advice. “Trainers with new Pokémon challenge Gym and gain rude awakening in their first Gym battle. I suppose this calls for further observation of the results of failure.”

I groaned. “Dr du Bois...”

“Yes?”
“Will you please train me?”

“Why should I? You are the Trainer, not I.”

“I'm an inexperienced Trainer,” I explained. “So shouldn't I get some help here?”

“The Gym Leaders exist to provide help.”

“I need help on birds, not bugs,” I groaned quietly.

“That is the first mistake. Thinking that the answer shall be given so easily,” Dr du Bois murmured. “Do you know the secret behind those who succeed?”

“Erm... guts?”

“No,” a small smile played around her lips. “Partly, yes, but no. Guts do not help Trainers survive Victory Road, nor the Elite Four, nor to face Diantha. It is something all Pokémon have, that your Pokémon feel that you lack, that children substitute as blind faith in the omnipresent and omnipotent Arceus, that they will reach the stars of the Pokémon world.”

“That is...” I reflected. “Deeply philosophical.”

“...Yes,” she replied faintly. “And it is a philosophy only you can answer.”

Beginning Trainers feel confused; part of them realise, perhaps unconsciously, sooner or later, that not everyone will make the Kalos League. Fewer still will make the requirements, trek through Victory Road, much less collect the eight badges necessary. Their Pokémon feel that confusion, that uncertainty, and rebel.

It takes much more than just setting out on a journey to find it successful; to start on a quest, you must first be finding something. Then, and only then, will the journey of a thousand miles begin.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois
Chapter Summary

…the end, Donar Oak has become my case study.

I looked from Serena's retreating back towards the tired-looking Dr du Bois. “You know that she's aiming for the Pokémon League, right? You didn't have to insult her dreams.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 5: Serena managed to win by a nose against Viola's Vivillon with a sudden Flame Charge. She is waiting for Donar to battle Viola, at which the decision shall be made. The boy has thrown into his training with full determination, such that I believe that his battle lust would awaken only when facing a battle. He is quite rational otherwise, much unlike Serena...

“Okay, guys,” I heard Donar say. “Our aim this time is on Viola. We saw that Surskit's moves, so I think it's best that Fletchling goes first. Fletchling can frustrate it from the air and possibly knock it out, before facing Vivillon. Vivillon is probably going to try for an Infestation attack, which can be avoided more easily by you, Fletchling. We're going to depend on speed here to hit that thing hard and fast. If you can, take it down with a Quick Attack after a Peck, and if not, make it chase you around the field. Froakie, you're going second here. Not that there's anything against you, but you saw that Infestation. We're going to have to exhaust that first before you can use Water Pulse.”

His Pokémon croaked, rolling its eyes. Fletchling chirped in agreement, her breast swelling with pride.

“Are you going to be fine?” he asked. It nodded immediately. “No pressure, alright? You guys are great help.”

Fletchling preened as Froakie looked vaguely pleased with itself.

“You do know Vivillon's ability, right?” I mentioned as she followed me to the Gym the next day.

“Erm... yeah?” he paused.

“Shield Dust is going to ensure that Water Pulse doesn't confuse it.”

He gaped at me. “Okay, I'll bite. Are you psychic?”

“I possess ears,” the reply was swiftly delivered with a side of sarcasm. “When someone talks in the main lobby of the Pokémon Centre, I will hear it. Wear this.” I handed the bundle to him.

He gingerly unfurled the hat. “What for?”

“The Kalos sun has ensured many Trainers fall to sunburn,” I replied as he put it on. “They are cheap in Santalune.”
“Erm... thanks, then.” he swallowed, clearly nervous. “Do you have advice?”

“I should not give any. It is your battle.”

“As you say,” he shrugged.

“You seem to have the matter well in hand, anyway,” I continued. “But if you can, tell Froakie to tackle that Vivillon when it falls.”

We made it to the elegant Gym building and declared my challenge. Stoically, I waited by the sidelines, scanning the field.

“This is the Santalune Gym Battle between challenger Donar Oak and Gym Leader Viola for the Bug Badge!” the referee called. “Each Trainer can use two Pokémon. The battle ends when both Pokémon are out of commission! Begin!”

“Go, Surskit!” Viola called, unleashing her water-skater first.

“Fletchling!” Donar rebutted as he flung his own Pokéball. “Use Quick Attack!”

Fletchling dived down, giving a sharp scratch before drawing back up on its wings, circling Surskit's head.

“Bubble,” Viola tersely replied, clearly annoyed at having lost the first move.

“Double Team!” Donar rebutted as several copies appeared. “Then Peck!”

Surskit's bubbles popped harmlessly against the copies, before Fletchling pecked it and then dodged back up to the air, curving into a Flail against the Surskit as it descended in a circle. Surskit fell off of its feet, and remained down.

“That determined expression... That glint in your eye that says you're up to the challenge...” Viola recalled her Surskit. “Very well. I shall use this Gym's pride; go, Vivillon!”

The Meadow-pattern Vivillon appeared, smiling.

“Use Gust!” Viola ordered.

“Fletchling, follow it!” he called. I sat there, watching the tiny robin follow the winds to curve around the walls the perimeter of the field... and building up speed.

Viola also caught on, clearly aware that if Fletchling unleashed Peck at that speed, Vivillon would be in a bad place. “Vivillon, use Infestation!”

Bugs escaped, gathering around the curling Fletchling as it turned another corner and headed... straight for Vivillon... then it turned up and away. The Bug was too large to move quickly before its own attack hit it. Unfortunately, it also meant that the Fletchling was caught in the bug infestation, and it ended up trapped on the field and hopping about.

Donar recalled the Pokémon, immediately releasing the grimly determined Froakie. “You did good, Fletchling. Now, Froakie... bring the house down.”

Froakie croaked.

“Vivillon,” Viola tersely ordered. “use Solar-”
Froakie spat a pulse of water at it. The Flying Pokémon shrugged the blow off easily, but was nonetheless soaked. Water weighed on its wings, adding further weight as the Froakie launched itself into the air with grim determination, its light and strong build allowing it to launch directly at the Vivillon like some Pokémon cannonball. Its head collided with the glowing Vivillon, and the butterfly Pokémon screamed as the Froakie held onto its body and then licked it.

“Oh,” I said as the Vivillon drooped, clearly depressed between disgust and the ghostly energy of the licks. “Lick.”

“Erm...” the referee stared as Vivillon gently floated down, Froakie riding it like a conquering knight. “Vivillon is unable to battle, challenger wins...”

“That was...” Viola gaped. “Well, that was... a novel strategy... wait, Vivillon's Shield Dust!”

“Dust implies that it's gotta be dry first,” Donar replied. “Erm, Ma'am.”

“Viola is fine,” Viola insisted. “Magnificent! You and your Pokémon have shown me a whole new depth of field! As you have proven yourself worthy, I hereby present you with the Bug Badge. And here! This TM commemorates your win against a pro photographer like me.”

“Technical Machine?” the boy echoed as he recalled Froakie.

"Using a TM like that one there lets you teach your Pokémon some new moves quicker than a shutter set to 1/1000 can snap shut!” Viola animatedly replied. “TMs are some of the best gear around. They're point-and-click easy, and you can use them over and over again! Now, the TM that I just gave you is for a move called Infestation. Use it, and it'll be impossible for your opponent to flee from battle. ”

I saw Donar blanch, gingerly putting the disc away into his bag. “Erm, thank you.”

“So you're going to Cyllage, yes?” Viola asked. “For the next Badge?”

“Yes,” I answered for him at the same time that he replied “No.”

His face blanked. “I thought the next Gym was at Lumiose? We're going to Lumiose after this, right?”

“Erm, Donar...” Viola giggled. “In the Kalos circuit, the next Badge is at Cyllage City. The Lumiose Gym doesn't allow anyone with less than four Badges in to battle the Gym Leader.”

“What?” he groaned. “That's... that means... how far is it?”

“From here to Cyllage?” Viola frowned. “You'll have to walk Parterre Way to Lumiose, then switch to Versant Road to Camphrier, then walk through Rivière Walk and the Connecting Cave that opens at either Ambrette Town or Cyllage City. But, I heard that the Cyllage route is often blocked, so you could take the straightforward Ambrette route and walk the Muraille Coast.”

“Routes four through eight,” I clarified for the confused boy. “Route numbering is a Kanto tradition meant to guide Trainers along to Victory Road and the League headquarters. That's why, on a Pokémon journey, most would choose to start around Santalune, both to begin with the first Gym in the Kalos circuit and to make later navigation easier.”

“So why name all the paths?” he complained. “Kanto just uses route numbers. Is this a Kalos tradition or something?”
“The world you see through a lens, and the world you see with a Pokémon by your side...” Viola reflected. “The same world can look entirely different depending on your view. Of course, only time will tell, isn't that so, Professor?”

I glanced towards Viola. So far, she had not aged seemingly, but ten years had passed. It would have taken her only a moment to recall that face, and wonder...

“You...” she asked, her brow furrowed. “Did you know Daisy Linden?”

I nearly winced at the mention of my old name. “The former Kalos champion who left ten years ago?”

“Ah, I see...” Viola frowned. “A coincidence...?”

I silently thanked fortune that I had never allowed Viola to approach with a camera. It would have been awkward to explain why a former Champion had switched career paths, never mind about the decimation of the team. Nevertheless, it was with reluctance that I led the boy out of the Santalune Gym with his shiny new Badge, resolving to decide on a test.

It was going to be extreme. Augustine was going to flip out. I might lose both subjects.

It was still a risk to take.

I won. I had won. My first Gym battle, and I had won. If that was so... the Gym Leader didn't go easy on me, did she?

I voiced my concern to Dr du Bois, and was met with a secretive smile. “She did. Even as a Gym Leader, she has the right to award the Badge based on how any Trainer performs. Winning is just one way to go about it. Other Gym Leaders do it differently, but they do try to encourage Trainers to stay on this career path. Though why, when the truth is often hard to accept, is questionable.”

Even so, it was exciting, watching Fletchling put that strategy we concocted into practice. Froakie got a Berry candy from Dr du Bois for his strategy, and he spent that time chewing the softened bonbon.

Quietly, Dr du Bois followed me out of the Gym and to the Forest, where Serena was already waiting, arms crossed.

“Finally!” she exclaimed. “So, result?”

I grinned, holding up my case. “Bug Badge.”

“How?” Serena gaped.

“Froakie made like a Poké-cannonball.”

We went to the Pokémon Centre. As I waited for Nurse Joy to finish checking on my partners, Serena was given a full analysis of how the battle went. Fletchling chirruped as she fluttered to my side, rewarded with an absent path on the head.

“So, Dr du Bois?” I asked the hitherto silent professor as we stepped out of the crowded foyer. “Have you decided?”

“I don't know,” she replied quietly. “Neither of you seem capable of handling Ghosts.”
Serena bristled. “Well, why'd you have to catch such weird Pokémon?”

Dr du Bois glared back, the gesture surprisingly fierce and violent. “You will meet Ghosts, especially in the Winding Woods of Snowbelle on the way to Victory Road. I recommend you refrain from offending any Ghosts lest they take offence to you. I also recommend that you get used to Ghosts in dark places, since Victory Road has a surprisingly large population of Haunter.”

The mention of Kanto's second-most populous ghost – the most populous being Gastly – was enough to draw a wince.

“Kalos is home to Ghosts such as Honedge and its associated forms, along with the Pumpkaboo and Phantump,” Dr du Bois elaborated. “The latter two are Ghost/Grass dual-types useful for battle, and the former is the only known Ghost/Steel combination. I recommend you get over any aversion to Ghosts.”

“Well, I can get over it when we're battling them!” Serena retorted. “I'm just not used to things jumping at me from the dark! Besides, aren't Ghost-type Pokémon supposed to be credible dangers to inexperienced Trainers? You're placing us at risk!”

“I am a competent enough Trainer,” Dr du Bois frostily replied. “The fact that you fear what you do not understand does not bode well for you.”

“Fine,” Serena glared. “We battle. If I win, I can choose to veto your choice to follow me. If you win, you can choose.”

“The fact that your wager is on this suggests many things. Least of all that you have no inclination of being followed.”

“Serena, enough,” I persuaded, hoping to separate her before things got ugly. “Dr du Bois, I think... errm, well, none of us had a good first impression of your Ghosts, you see. Serena doesn't feel safe.”

Green eyes stared at me, calm and placid, and I realised in that look of acceptance, that Dr du Bois had intended for us to fear her Ghosts all along. “She is not meant to feel safe.”


“Does it matter?” Dr du Bois wondered. “If you don't want me to follow you, then leave. This is not compulsory. You always have a choice.”

Serena drew herself back, glaring at me as if I had dared to speak a word before sauntering off with Elmo at her heels.

I looked from Serena's retreating back towards the tired-looking Dr du Bois. “You know that she's aiming for the Pokémon League, right? You didn't have to insult her dreams.”

“Why does anyone?” Dr du Bois pondered.

“Years ago, a young girl seized the championship, beating the record for Champion Iris of Unova and Kanto's Lance.” I explained. “The legendary champion might have disappeared in the last major
strike against Team Flare, but people are sure that she would appear at the Kalos Conference. Heroes inspire Trainers to follow their paths.”

“Daisy Linden was a failure as a Champion,” Dr du Bois replied. “And it was thankful that Diantha took over from her. She would have driven Kalos to destruction. What else could you expect from a young girl who effectively rules Kalos’s answer to the old monarchy?”

I didn't reply, though her words made sense. Under my hand, Fletchling chirped, nuzzling itself before affectionately pecking my hand. “It's just a desire to be the best. Even without ambition, I can understand that feeling, you know?

“Hmm...” Dr du Bois did not move. “It looks like we will be travelling alone here. Donar.”

“Yes, Doctor?” I asked. Behind me the doors of the Centre opened, and Froakie hopped out, affectionately nuzzling my leg. The Nurse Joy about to grab Froakie took one look and left.

“Remind me to ask Augustine why all of his starters seem so close to evolution.”

“Er, yes?” I gaped as Dr du Bois actually plucked Froakie for a closer examination. “Y- You're not serious?”

“Always.” Dr du Bois glared at Froakie critically as she hefted it gently in the crook of one arm, the other hand reaching to smooth over Froakie's head and check its belly. Froakie squirmed and giggled as she did so. “It should not have been that fast in that Gym battle. Furthermore, a Froakie weighs about seven kilograms on average pre-evolution. This is definitely heavier. If it evolves at this rate, you might have problems. Frogadier can throw bubble-covered pebbles with precise control, hitting empty cans up to a hundred feet away, and amongst the Water Pokémon of Kalos, its swiftness is unparalleled. It can scale a tower of more than 2,000 feet in a minute's time.”

“T- that's good, right?” I asked. “I mean, the next Gym is Rock-type, isn't it?”

“Yes. I am surprised,” Dr du Bois looked at me. “How did you know the speciality of the second Gym, but not of the first?”

I looked away.

“Well?”

“I... I watch Gym Freaks,” I admitted sheepishly.

Dr du Bois sighed, although more with something close to fond exasperation rather than any disappointment. “Not often enough, I see. Very well, so you caught the segment on Grant, but not enough to catch his location.”

I whistled aimlessly.

“Are your supplies ready?” she archly enquired.

“Ye- Hang on!” I grumbled, mentally tallying the contents of my backpack. “We're good.”

“Très bien,” Dr du Bois nodded, before she lifted her fingers to her lips and whistled. I spotted her sleeve fall, revealing a gleaming black bangle with a rainbow jewel set in the centre. Yet, before I could ask about it, the blue-black blur arrived upon the pathway leading from the Santalune City First Pokémon Centre to form a Lucario. Her Altair, then. It was wearing a red and yellow scarf.
“Shall we go?” Dr du Bois murmured. “Or shall we stay, Donar?”

“Erm... I think I'll stay first,” I hesitated. “I mean, there's no rush, right? And Dr du Bois... you look kinda tired. Are you sure that you don't want to go back to the Pokémon Centre?”

“Perhaps... I merely possess a different view,” Dr du Bois reflected, as mysterious as the people of Johto in that respect. “Yes, perhaps I do. I appreciate the sentiment, Donar, but I am not tired. Altair will be on hand to help me.”

“But he's a fighter!” I insisted. “And... and since my partners won against Viola with his support, I'm sure Altair deserves a break!”

At this, Dr du Bois slowly considered her Pokémon. “His support?”

“If Altair didn't kick away that Weedle, I wouldn't be alive,” I insisted. “That gave me a respect for Pokémon I wouldn't have gotten in Kanto. I won the respect of Fletchling and Froakie because of him. That's why he deserves a break too, Professor!”

Slowly, Dr du Bois nodded. “True... but, what about his training? I was intending to take him along Parterre Way. Ah!”

I blinked as Dr du Bois reached for her travel purse. “Y- Yes?”

“Tea,” Dr du Bois insisted. “One experience in Santalune is to sit by the Roselia Fountain and drink tea. And since you won your first badge with Altair's help, then I should treat my Pokémon as well.”

Tea turned out to be a wide spread of tiny desserts that Froakie and Fletchling immediately launched themselves at. Altair accepted a wide saucer-like cup meant for paws and insulated to prevent burning, into which Dr du Bois poured him a cup. In contrast to the coffee I opted for, she took her tea without sugar or milk. Beside our table, the fountain burbled as jets of water shot out of the stone Roselia's roses. It was the late afternoon, and the weather felt clement and calm, rather like Kanto's constant sunny climate brought about by the Legendary Birds.

“Is that... alright?” I mumbled at my partners fighting with my hands for a macaron. “I mean, it's human food...”

“Why not?” Dr du Bois murmured. “Well, even though chocolate is not part of Altair's natural diet, honey is a treat, and this tea contains what must be an entire hive of Combee honey.”

Fletchling dived for the teapot at that, squawking in shock as Altair merely took a paw and shifted its tiny form away from it. Froakie croaked as I gave him a saucer of the apparently honey-saturated tea to share with Fletchling; they seemed satisfied enough.

A group of musicians set up a band, led by a Kricketune and its Trainer, plus an accordion. The haunting melody, echoed by its masterful conductor's singing, echoed around the square and the Roselia fountain, so much that my quarrelling Pokémon actually quietened in the face of such art.

“What are they doing?” I echoed quietly as dancers congregated.

“Oh, it's the time of the year,” Dr du Bois checked her watch. “May Day. That song is performed in the Kalosian valse-musette style, meant for dancing slowly with partners. This is just the beginning dance; there would be more later as night approaches. However, there is a history behind this celebration. For example, you noticed that the Santalune Gym looks like a palace, correct?”

“Yeah!” I realised. “Now that you mentioned it... it looked very elaborate.”
“That is an old palace,” Dr du Bois related. “It existed even before the statue of the Roselia was placed. In the XVI century, the Kalosian king's hunting lodge was placed in Santalune. The forest existed for the king to hunt. The king was very rich and powerful, but he was very alone.

“One day, all the humans and all the Pokémon of Santalune gathered for May Day and celebrated. Within that dance, a Roselia climbed to the top of that fountain and began dancing. Surrounded by the leaves and forests, its power over nature inspired the king to reward that Roselia with any gift in his treasury. That Roselia's Trainer took it back, and the king fell for her in that instance when moonlight shone upon her in her plain gown, her inner strength beyond that of the court's decorations. The Roselia attacked, and it escaped the dance with the jewel of the king's crown, towards the forest, never to be seen again. That's why till today, people seek the blessing of that Roselia by dancing its circular, floating dance around its statue.”

“Oh,” I frowned. “Erm, are you pulling my leg? The statue doesn't look that old.”

“The architecture is even older than you are, than even I am,” Dr du Bois reflected amidst the masquerade of dancers. “Cities in Kalos all have their own festivals that celebrate or involve Pokémon. Pokémon have become icons of human life, that we construct our beliefs around them, that we think that they think like us, and vice versa. Yet, it is not the Alakazam that rules the food chain, but humans. Life is, in the end, infinitely stranger than anything the modern mind can invent.”

…in the end, Donar Oak has become my case study.

Before we were to set out, the May Day celebrations began in Santalune, including waltzes around the Roselia stone. The boy's Pokémon, lured by the performing Kricketune, began dancing, and Altair, my Lucario, followed.

As Trainers, we were naturally lured to participate, and as our Pokémon led us into a waltz, I could sense that, once the harsh start of the first Gym battle was over, that the hope of young Trainers would begin to rise once more from the falling rush of victory.

Chapter End Notes

I will try to blend the animé and game rules; Pokémon can have more than four moves, and the danger will be highlighted.

This fic is also aimed to solve that version of the Yu-Gi-Oh! Problem that the Pokémon franchise has; world-building. I will be referring to the Pokémon XY fanfics already floating around, plus the fanfic Pokedex by birdboy, to write this out. Also available on Tumblr

Reference may also be made to A Beginner's Guide to Pokémon by Thanos6 mouthing as Professor Kudzu.

On that note, I hope readers enjoy reading!
Chapter Summary

... today, my past was beginning to catch up with me.

Here, Viola looked at me for effect. “Son Altesse sérénissime. Her Serene Highness, the Champion of Kalos.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 8: As a favour to Viola, we set out to catch a rare shiny Caterpie for the Santalune Gym. Hence, it was not until Day 7 that we set out towards Parterre Way. Young Trainers, I analyse, do not seem curious about the unusual shape of the parterre gardens that give the Way its name, but rather more preoccupied with the Gardeners that challenge them for disturbing said jardins. I cannot blame them; it is to be expected...

The Pokéball opened, revealing Liz with its tentacles waving about and pinkish form heated in the sun. It grumpily glared at the two Corphish that the two gardeners used to team up against us. Beside Liz, Donar's Froakie looked terrified.

“What's that?” Donar was about to say, but I was pondering about my next move.

“Would it be more important to give Froakie training, or to win the match?” I questioned Liz, who giggled and waved her flower towards Froakie. “Very well. You are to provide support then.”

“What do we do?” Donar mumbled.

“In a Double Battle, both Pokémon support each other,” I replied. “In this case, Liz shall restrain those Corphish while Froakie attacks them. Use Pound; Lick might not do much to these crustaceans.”

“Okay... how is she going to do that?” Donar blinked. “I mean, she's too light-”

“Liz!” I called. “Grass Knot!”

My Floette giggled as it lifted her flower. The grass rippled, knots of grass tangling their legs together.

_Deneb roared, the Ivysaur tangled in the Grass Knot as we battled Ramos's Gogoat, the old goat that would outlast anyone_-  

“What, Froakie, now!” Donar called, having clearly caught on. Froakie dashed forward – or, rather, leapt forward – and pounded one of them. The other Corphish moaned, stumbling into its fallen partner and tripping flat.

I shook my head, realising that it was not a hectic Gym battle, but rather a casual interference of two gardeners. “We win.”
Having collected the purse from the two gardeners, we then proceeded down Parterre Way.

“Is this a glorified garden or something?” Donar frowned. “Cause I’ve been to Celadon, and this is way too manicured compared to the Celadon Gym.”

“A parterre is a formal garden constructed on a level surface, consisting of planting beds arranged to form a pleasing, usually symmetrical pattern, with gravel paths laid between,” I recited. “The beds are edged in stone or tightly clipped hedging and need not contain any flowers. The jardins of Parfum Palace near Camphrier Town are held to be the height of Kalosian landscape architecture. This is a remnant of that history that Santalune City maintains yearly.”

“Why?”

“Tourist attraction.”

“I can't imagine why would anyone want to just... walk through these gardens,” Donar mumbled as we passed the gold fountain featuring a Clampearl and four Horsea set in the middle of Kalos Route 4.

“The point is symmetry,” I argued. “Fliers from above can spot the symmetrical patterns of the mazes formed by the hedges. It is also within this garden that the extremely rare Ralts linger, hence it is also a form of nature reserve.”

The boy had the audacity to yawn as we passed by another young Trainer setting camp. “People camp out in the gardens?”

“It's illegal,” I replied as one of the draconian gardeners spotted the camp and went over. “Hence the phrase I have just used, nature reserve.”

Yelling in Kalosian became our accompaniment for a brief moment before we came upon the exit of the Way into Lumiose, where two students in white were waiting for us.

“Dr du Bois!” Both girl and boy screamed.

For Augustine's students who were also Trainers, I thought of them as surprisingly cowardly. Sina cringed as I approached, and Dexio turned surprisingly pale. From the Trainer supposed to be taming that Garchomp, he was really going to have to work on that. Both of them tried to recover, but the boy caught them.

“Guess you inspire fear wherever you go, Doc?” Donar asked.

“Sina and Dexio were at the laboratory when I was in my Pokémon voyage,” I replied. “I suppose they’re wondering about Serena. She should have arrived in Lumiose right before us.”

“That's about right,” Sina replied. “Erm, you look as malevolent as always.”

“There's no need to stand on ceremony, Sina,” I said. “We are all part of the Kalos academia, are we not?”

Dexio stepped back. “Erm, Professor Sycamore got us to escort the both of you to the lab! Please, come along!”

“Dexio is a Pokémon voyage veteran,” I commented. “You could ask him about the Kalos region and sites to see.”
As we set out to Lumiose and the Laboratoire de recherche Pokémon, I distantly heard Dexio comment: “So, you're the poor chap that got stuck with Dr du Bois?”

“Erm, I don't know about poor, but yeah, I am,” Donar answered as we entered the capital of Kalos, the Dazzling Metropolis, Lumiose City.

“Figured out why she's going to be tagging you yet?” Dexio asked. “Cause you should shake her off before her Chandelure roasts you.”

“Dexio,” Sina interrupted them. “Hi, I'm Sina! It's a beautiful name for a beautiful lady! This is Dexio. We're Professor Sycamore's research assistants, which means that we train Pokémon for research purposes! We're still trying to match up how does the Fairy type perform against others, you know.”

“That sounds interesting,” Donar agreed. “Do you guys work with her?”

Silence.

“Not... per se...” Sina answered, her voice strained.

“Dr du Bois only just got her professorship,” Dexio explained. “She's definitely higher than us who are just associates, but she still reports to Professor Sycamore, though she calls him by his first name.”

“We also work in different fields,” Sina continued. “Professor Sycamore specialises in Kalos's regional secret of Mega Evolution. Dr du Bois takes Pokémon and human sociology; basically branching out in Oak's speciality, but in a more theoretical field.”

“Ten years ago she entered the lab under mysterious circumstances,” Sina agreed. “And she looks so much like her.”

“Her?” Donar blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“The Kalos Champion,” Sina whispered. “The heroine of Kalos, Daisy Linden! She won against Diantha at only sixteen years old!”

“She disappeared after that last major strike against Team Flare, right?” Donar asked, frowning. “What does Dr du Bois have to do with anything?”

“We don't know,” Sina imparted.

“But she's terrifying,” Dexio continued.

I left for my apartment when Augustine was talking to the new generation of Trainers for my house. My landlord was out again, so I let myself in with my keys. I rifled through my mail – nothing outstanding – and cleaned a bit before I left for Lumiose, where I dropped into Coiffure Clips for a trim and style, if only to keep my bangs out of my face for the next year of fieldwork.

I snorted at the latest Looker Bureau leaflet. Its founder was gone, but it looked like Emma, or rather, Essentia, was still going strong. The layout of the leaflet was atrocious, though. Probably Nix.

I dropped the mail, checked through my computer, and paused at one. Then I signed out, checked through my house, locked up and left for the Sycamore Research Laboratory. Since Augustine probably had a script for the new generation, I estimated that it would take him about half an hour to amaze the new Trainers with the Kanto starters and run through everything of importance.
The five Trainers were not around when I arrived, but Augustine was, and he looked nervous as he dropped the cordless phone back into its cradle. “Marguerite... it's Bertie.”

“What?”

“It's Bertie,” Augustine repeated, his eyes dancing to either side of his head. “He... Parfum Palace.”


“Down for the count,” Augustine swallowed. “Marguerite-”

“Say no more,” I huffed, turning around. “I'm going to Camphrier.”

Much unlike the systems I knew of Kanto, Kalos's Professor Sycamore tended towards the busy side of life. Thus, the few times he and I – or rather, my mother and he – had communicated, it was via Holo Caster, the Kalos region's hot new method of communication that was now League property due to the Lysandre mess, apparently. This would become relevant in the next bit of my life.

It was being surrounded by the rumours about Dr du Bois that I met Professor Sycamore face to face for the first time. The youngest of the regional Pokémon professors gave me a bright grin that seemed to disappear about ten years off of his face, and he was the consummate flirt, if Dr du Bois's expression was any indication as she left me to attend to other business regarding her Lumiose house. I hadn't been aware that she owned a house.

“So, anyway, we've met in Aquacorde Town before, but... welcome to Lumiose City!” Professor Sycamore began. “Many thanks for coming all the way from Vaniville Town, all of you! It's a real pleasure to finally meet all of you when I'm not busy. Have you met many Pokémon?”

“We've seen thirty-nine different kinds,” I volunteered. “But I've only got two Pokémon, and well...”

“Well, both of you have a certain je ne sais quoi,” Sycamore was giving us a sly look. “At first, I was going to only choose one child from one town when I was giving out Pokémon. In Vaniville, it was going to be the daughter of a veteran Trainer I know.”

Serena, my mind supplied.

“Certain events, though...” Professor Sycamore looked down, suddenly reflective. “I made that mistake once, to underestimate the wrong child. I wouldn't want to make it again.”

“Hi Prof!” Shauna arrived with Serena in tow.

“Très bien,” Professor Sycamore exclaimed. “Now, let's all have a Pokémon battle! Your opponent shall be me!”

I looked around. Serena was the first to step up, smiling.

“Just so you know,” Professor Sycamore mentioned as he led us to an indoor field, “I'm not that tough! Go, Bulbasaur!”

I saw Dexio stare, unblinking as a small, quadruped Pokémon with bluish-green skin and dark patches appeared. Its thick legs each end with three sharp claws. Its eyes have red irises, while the sclera and pupils were white. A pair of small, pointed teeth were visible as it gave a battle cry, the bulb on its back flashing.

“Go, Elmo!” Serena called.
Instead of the tiny fox, a bipedal, fox-like Pokémon appeared. While the majority of its fur was yellow, it has black legs, white arms, face and neck, and a dark orange tail tip. The fur on its cheeks was longer, and a small mane of white fur covered its shoulders and chest. Long, wavy tufts of dark orange fur grew out of its large ears, and its eyes and small nose matched. Above its legs, the fur swept out to either side like a skirt. A stick in its tail poked out.

“Oh, it evolved!” Professor Sycamore whistled.

I immediately pulled out my PokéDex. “Braixen, the Fox Pokémon. It has a twig stuck in its tail. With friction from its tail fur, it sets the twig on fire and launches into battle.”

“It's a Fire/Psychic dual-type,” Serena commented. “Bulbasaur, in comparison, is a Grass/Poison dual-type, rendering him doubly vulnerable. Elmo, Psybeam!”

Rings of energy surrounded the tiny creature, putting it out of its misery soon enough.

“Bulbasaur is unable to battle,” Sina declared as the Professor recalled it. “Braixen wins.”

“This next one won’t be so easy!” Professor Sycamore warned. “Go, Squirtle!”

The famous turtle Pokémon appeared next.

“Elmo!” Serena snapped. “Psybeam again!”

The Charmander that came out got this same treatment again, prompting Professor Sycamore to laugh. “You're too much! You're really something, aren't you, Serena? I think I've figured it out!”

“Figured what out?” Shauna gaped.

“It'll be interesting if Serena were to take along another Pokémon,” Professor Sycamore said. “Here, pick one!”

Serena's hand automatically reached for the Squirtle, releasing him to cuddle immediately.

“You two, pick one too!” Professor Sycamore volunteered.

“There's too many choices!” Shauna exclaimed. “What do I choose?”

“You'll be together for a long time,” Professor Sycamore replied. “Best you choose one you get along with.”

Being a gentleman, I let Shauna choose first, thus leaving the Bulbasaur in my hands.

“Because you guys chose their respective Pokémon, you can have this Mega Stone,” Professor Sycamore volunteered, giving me a stone that glowed momentarily.

I put the stone away, before releasing Bulbasaur. The Seed Pokémon gaped at me as I opened my PokéDex. “For some time after its birth, it grows by gaining nourishment from the seed on its back.”

I looked from the entry to Bulbasaur, who squealed. “Bulba, bulba!”

I knelt down to be level with those large, trusting red eyes. “Bulbasaur... listen. I'm a new Trainer, so I might not know too much about the care and feeding of Pokémon, but I promise... I will try. Will you be my partner?”

“Bulba!” it cheerfully replied in a way I took as yes.
“I've got a feeling everyone might show us soon.” Professor Sycamore mentioned as Tierno and Trevor entered.

“Hi, Professor Sycamore,” Trevor greeted.

“Look, everyone's here,” Tierno said.

“Self-fulfilling prophecy,” Dr du Bois dismissed.

“Très bien,” Professor Sycamore said. “Everyone's here. So now that we're all gathered here, allow me to say a few words. Be the best Trainer that you can be, and remember to have fun travelling with your Pokémon! Also, I'd like to ask for your help in solving the Kalos region's biggest secret; the secret and potential of Mega Evolution, a new kind of evolution that occurs in battle! That Mega Stone holds an important clue!”

“Mega Evolution?” Trevor gaped. “What should we do about the PokéDex?”

“Trevor, my boy,” Professor Sycamore explained. “If that's what being the best Trainer means to you, then I want you to go out there and complete that PokéDex!”

“Mega Evolution sounds really interesting!” Shauna commented.

“If you're so interested in it, why don't you check out Camphrier Town?” Professor Sycamore suggested. “That town has a lot of history; you might just find it! But I'll caution you first.”

“Caution?” Serena echoed.

“Mega Evolution has been mastered by the Champions of Kalos since the phenomenon begun,” Professor Sycamore stated, completely serious. “The power that can be reached through Mega Evolution is how Daisy Linden took the Elite Four by storm. And even before her, Diantha is a master of Mega Evolution. Lysandre of Team Flare, even as he did terrible things, he amassed great power through Mega Evolution. That power is one that deserves respect and is accepted by the best.”

“Now listen,” the Professor finished his speech at last. “If you visit many different places to complete the PokéDex, you will probably see Pokémon with many ways of living and people with different ways of thinking. First, accept the ways of living and thinking that sometimes conflict with your own, and think about what's really important – this will truly broaden your horizons!”

The Professor held me back for a private speech as the rest left, Serena with a vague mention of meeting up at Café Soleil. “How are you getting along with Dr du Bois, Donar?”

“I'm fine,” I replied. “Dr du Bois is just... a bit strange, but she's nice. She gets along with Froakie and Fletchling.”

“I see,” Professor Sycamore looked nervous. “You're fine with being her case study, right?”

“Yeah,” I nodded in trepidation.

“Well, erm... maybe...” Professor Sycamore hesitated for only a brief moment before he plundered on. “As you might have noticed, the researchers are all rather nervous about Dr du Bois.”

I nodded, silently waiting.

“Dr du Bois... Dr du Bois survived the Geosenge implosion caused by Team Flare,” Professor Sycamore cringed. “She is not completely... intact, though she has a marvellous mind. And her
Pokémon... they're monstrously strong, even if half of them are Ghosts she adopted from outside Lumiose. I hope you can understand that... if you don't want to continue, I understand. I'll pull Dr du Bois's fieldwork right away. I have your Holo Caster number, and you can always give me a call. Alright?"

“‘Yes, Professor,’ I nodded quickly. ‘‘But, Dr du Bois... she needs this work, right?’”

Professor Sycamore fixed me with a very serious look. “‘It is not worth your life, Donar.’”

A- Are you serious? Really? “‘She's been helpful. She's a genius in battling, she could probably give any Champion a run for their money.’”

“That girl...” Professor Sycamore sighed. In that light, he looked very tired. “‘It's not my story to relate. Just know that... please look out for yourself. Dr du Bois can take care of herself, but she frequently ignores the safety of other humans.’”

“And?” I asked. “‘Does she hate them?’”

Professor Sycamore shook his head. “The opposite. But, even the love of people won't save her from heartbreak.”

Professor Sycamore's warning haunted me all the way to Café Soleil, where Serena's declaration of rivalry was nearly lost on me until Elmo blew a stray Ember.

“Ow!” I screamed. “What?”

“Are you even paying attention?” she demanded, her blonde hair a mess under her red hat. “I said, we're going to be competing to be the best, so let's have a battle some time!”

I was about to open my mouth to refuse, but then a thought occurred to me. Shauna was, to put it kindly, a tourist with a Trainer's license. Tierno was more obsessed with the PokéDex, and Tierno the same with Pokémon dances. Plus, there was the fact that Serena had trounced all three Pokémon, one with a type disadvantage, and her starter had already evolved. “Sure. But... I need more Pokémon first.”

Serena gave me a grim smile. “First to the Coumarine Gym? That's the fourth one,” she added, almost remembering that I was new to the Kalos region.

“I think Dr du Bois might know the way, but thanks.”

Her smile immediately dropped off of her face as she looked at me. “She's not... threatening you, right?”

“What? No!” I shook my head. “She's been nice, really. Bit odd, but nice.”

“She's creepy,” Serena hissed. “Are you sure?”

“I'll... I'll watch out,” I lamely finished, aware on some level that Dr du Bois would be very aware of what we discussed.

My Holo Caster beeped, and the contents of the message was about to become very relevant to my life in the next few seconds.

Meet me at entrance to Route 5. We're setting out now.

That wasn't it. It was what came on the heels of the first message:
Bring your friend along.

Bertram Wooster was one of the silliest Trainers I had ever met; that air of someone whose head was so far up in the clouds that he had forgotten that the ground existed was dangerous for him. Luckily, fate had given him an inherited Granbull that did its job as attack dog, and a devoted retainer Gallade who could put any human butler to shame. His main priority in joining the Château, taking the inherited seat of Baron Yaxley, was meant to attempt to distribute his millions in as exciting a manner as possible. He told me once that his losses would go to feed hungry Trainers; I have studied his win-loss record, and concluded that against the well-to-do, his valet was absolutely ruthless, while the Granbull was content with just lying down to take the attacks on the battlefield, or even slow its reflexes.

Either way, in the times that followed Team Flare, I found a friend in Bertie, and when he acquired partial ownership of Parfum Palace I almost looked forward to seeing him on a regular basis. He is not a reliable man, but he tries, and Jeeves makes it possible. That Gallade was a mean butler, a terrifying valet, and he knew Psycho Cut and could use those skills with great prejudice.

Augustine told me that Parfum Palace and Bertie were under attack. I could barely think.

“Are you psychic?” was what greeted me as I turned to face the two young Trainers. “How’d you know that I was with Serena?”

Altair growled lowly, daring the boy for disturbing our reminiscence. I huffed, reminding him via telepathy that the boy did not know that we had met here when Altair was still under Korrina's training. My assurance might have lacked strength, distracted as I was.

“Good, you're here,” I began. “To that end, I have an errand to perform in Parfum Palace, hence us leaving Lumiose post-haste. You'll have to return for your Voltage Badge, so no harm done, really. This route, Versant Road, will take us to Camphrier Town. I will leave you at Rivière Walk while I perform this errand.”

“Why?” Serena demanded. “Aren't you supposed to follow our schedule instead of the other way around?”

“There is a major conference to be held in Parfum Palace, and I need to notify the new proprietor,” I informed her, leaving out a few minor details. “If you do so, I will sponsor your team to receive Super Potions.”

Serena hesitated, her desire for better-quality healing tools winning out. It was open bribery, but my investment accounts could take it, and the shortfall could be won at the Battle Château nearby. Hence, we ran along Versant Road, only stopping here and there for a Trainer battle that, to my surprise, Donar took to easily.

“That's... interesting,” Serena finally pronounced as Donar finished his fifth battle. “How did you train?”

“Huh?” Donar blinked. “I just pitched him to play a prank on Altair.”

I looked towards my Lucario, who looked awkwardly contrite. The battle-honed instincts of Lucario used to train a Froakie would make-

Serena made a brief shout, but it was no ambush; rather, Froakie gave an abrupt croak and began glowing. Light enveloped its lengthening and increasing form, before it gave a startled shout and then... the light died.
“Frog?” the blue Pokémon gave a croak. It looked more humanoid, the dark blue skin over its face, back and paws shaped like a hood, a cloak and gloves on a Koga shinobi. A length of white cotton-like substance was wrapped around its neck, and as part of it broke off to pop, I realised that it was, in fact, a wreath of bubbles.

“Frogadier, the Bubble Frog Pokémon,” Serena had pulled out her PokéDex. “Its swiftness is unparalleled. It can scale a tower of more than 2,000 feet in a minute's time. Froakie evolved!”

“Alright!” Donar dived, giving the stunned Frogadier a high-five that was reluctantly returned. “Frogadier, have a Galette!”

The regional delicacy won out, the frog taking the treat with relish.

“Now we can have that battle!” Serena offered.

“Frogadier needs to get used to its new form,” I corrected hurriedly. “The process can take up to two days. No intense battles until then.”

“Y- Yes, Dr du Bois!” Donar answered, before turning to Frogadier. “Let's try walking, partner!”

“Frog!”

We reached through the gates of Caimphrier Town in a flash, and then I turned to the two of them.

“Do you see that?” I pointed to where the river flowed, emptying past the tree-line of Camphrier and towards the ocean. “You may go as far as the end of Rivière Walk, but no further. Donar, find the Hotel Camphrier; there shall be two rooms under Linden, already paid for. Serena and you will take those rooms. Most likely, I will be delayed as Parfum Palace. Call me at ten pm. if I have not found you, understand? Serena, your money. You can buy your Potions at the Pokémon Centre.”

“Dr du Bois?” Donar gaped at me. “What's wrong?”

“A Pokémon,” I replied, before turning away and setting out for Palais Lane with Altair in tow. Palais Lane was shady, trees growing on either side of the walkway that led to Parfum Palace. As I ran with Altair, I unleashed the Ultra Ball on my belt, letting Aegis have free reign. “Shadow Sneak!”

I closed my eyes as the familiar cold wash of shadow shrouded Altair and I. The shadows passed for an indefinite moment, before they vanished and we dropped on the lawn of the pathways to Parfum Palace.

I remembered this building; after two years of litigation, the owner was brought up on charges of illegal property holding and affiliation with Team Flare. Since that was a guaranteed lynching right there, on top of a bankruptcy, he packed up and left with his stupid Furfrou. Parfum Palace was reclaimed by the Pokémon League, and was partly acquired by the Kanto millionaire Wooster, who paid for the entire reclamation in exchange for a few conditions. Parfum Palace shouldn't have been attacked-

“Aegis!” Purple sash wrapped around my hand, the shield easily detaching to my left arm as I hefted Aegis's main body with my right arm. “Good. Altair, come in from the fences.”

I went for the direct approach, charging the gates that featured Serperior and other serpentine Pokémon I had no interest in identifying at the current moment. The gold gates fell as I swung Aegis, cutting through the bolts. There were no guards about as I ran up the paved driveway; that was my first clue that there was something very wrong here. If there was no sign of a struggle-
My sword met a near-identical shield, more battered and dented than should be possible, and I leapt back, brandishing Aegis. An Aegislash, even its corpse, made for a surprisingly useful set of weaponry even after the original possessor had gone; this was the reason why Dusk Stones were rewarded as weapons for the princes du sang of the Dynasties era. Honedge were the companions of the soldiers, Doublade the squires of swordsmen; Aegislash were the weapons, compatriots and followers of knights and kings.

There were only two people I knew who had the ability and interest to befriend an Aegislash long enough to swing its body around so easily. I was one of them. Therefore...

I straightened my posture. “Why is the Elite Four here?”

The gates slammed shut, and a female Pyroar gave a small hiss behind me.

“This Parfum Palace is a precious memento, isn't it?” my armoured assailant replied, shifting. His armour clinked as he walked, but otherwise he was completely silent. Overhead, a large, bat-like Noivern squawked as it guarded the surrounding airspace.

“What about Bertie? Jeeves?” I retorted. “This is their home! They paid for the restoration of the whole castle, in exchange for one wing!”

Water pumps broke, their spray enveloping the walkway. A huge Pokémon, presumably the Barbaracle to complete the bunch, ran its claws on the gravel path about ten metres behind me. I surreptitiously checked the reflective surface of Aegis's under-shield. Nine metres. Yes, it was the Barbaracle.

“All four of you just for me?” I glared at the brown-haired man in armour. “This is overkill.”

“I told him that, princess,” a familiar drawl echoed by my right as the red-haired Holo Caster star, Malva, appeared.

She was joined on my left by a sighing, masculine voice. “Ah, the memory of you remains as fresh as the spring that feeds the thirsty.”

“Goodness, hello again!” the older, feminine voice sang from above. “I'm sorry for the ambush. Rest assured that Bertram is fine, as is Jeeves. We wouldn't want to offend either them or McIntosh now, would we?”

“Given that McIntosh is a Granbull, I can see why you would be reluctant to piss him off,” I bit back in reply. “The blade of the Elite Four, Wikstrom. The raging spectre, Malva. Dragon mistress, Drasna. First-order Chef of the Water, Siebold. Just need one more to complete the set, I see.”

“That title is not mine to accept. You should know that.”

Slowly, I turned to face the woman in white. Age had not diminished her beauty in any respect, from how her greying hair still curled into that bun, to how her skin seemed free of wrinkles and she floated along life as if suspended from a breeze. She was still the elegant, cultured and learned icon of Kalos that she had been when Lysandre tried to destroy everything with the power of the Legendary Pokémon of Kalos. Beside her floated her signature Gardevoir, the one that all Trainers that had fought the Elite Four and lived through to see before she destroyed their ambitions until the next round.

“You look good enough to accept the Ditto Awards,” I spat back at the current reigning Champion of Kalos, who had continued reigning after the disappearance of Daisy Linden. “Which you did, in full view of the Prism Tower. Congratulations on another milestone in your career.”
“Thank you,” Diantha replied, toying with the charm on her necklace. The light kept flashing at me. “But you know as well as I do that, in the eyes of the Pokémon League, the Kalos throne is no longer mine to award. Even though you have resigned, and even though I have retaken it, to much of Kalos, their champion remains the heroine who destroyed Team Flare, Daisy Linden. Ten years ago, after the destruction of Team Flare’s Geosenge base, the Champion disappeared.”

“I gave you my reasons and resignation-”

“I may have burned it,” Malva commented.

“How dare you.” I then looked up at the smiling Drasna astride her Noivern. “What about you?”

“Oh, dear,” Drasna waved a hand. “I forgot. To me, it just felt like Her Serene Highness has not stepped into the Crystal Palace for a long time. Ten years long, in fact.”

“The skill of your sword has yet to stiffen with time,” Wikstrom offered, smiling fondly.

“Daisy Linden disappeared from public life ten years ago,” Diantha continued her narrative, her clear bell-like tone surely a factor of her success upon the silver screens. “But her Trainer license remained active, her Training progress logged via Holo Caster, and her location known to certain personnel.”

I was reduced to helplessly gesturing with Aegis in hand, the blade dangerously wavering.

“Augustine told you, didn’t he?”

“He was... concerned,” Diantha replied. “For your welfare as much as that of the Kalos League.”

“The traitor,” I snapped, but without heat. “So after ten years, it looks like you haven't found Daisy Linden. Looks like you'll have to wait for someone else to title themselves SAS.”

“I admit, it took a while before we realised that Wikstrom taught you Kalosian,” Diantha nodded in acknowledgement. “Linden du Bois... that wasn't very thorough, hiding your middle name as your family name.”

I could feel my breathing quicken.

“Furthermore,” Diantha continued. “You have just confirmed my thought, Dr du Bois. The Kalosian name for the daisy flower is Marguerite. Linden du Bois, the lime of the woods.”

My fingers tightened around Aegis's hilt.

“By returning to the woods, you destroyed your own identity, and by the blessing of Xerneas is reborn,” Diantha pronounced. “Daisy Linden... no, the-”

“Shadow Sneak!” I screamed, throwing myself into the shadows.

The Noivern shrieked overhead, before I dodged the Pyroar that latched itself to my calf. Wikstrom sent his own Aegislash into true battle against Aegis. Altair leapt down, finishing the Pyroar off and beginning to do battle with the Barbaracle.

“Aegis, Shadow Sneak!” I called as I backed towards Altair. My partner Lucario looped a paw around my elbow as both sword and shield somersaulted and wrapped around us.

“Gourgeist!” Diantha released that irritant as we disappeared. “Phantom Force!”

I could not see anything, but Aegis was ducking from shadow to shadow, trying to shake off the spectre of Samhaine that was tailing us. We reached the entrance of Palais Lane before erupting from
the shadows, and I let go of Aegis's hilt to use its shield and whacked the pumpkin over its head. Using any other weapon, it would not have worked, but Aegislash were part Ghost. “Aegis! Night Slash!”

Dark as night and twice as black, the attack sent Diantha’s Pokémon away and we ran. Before long, Altair skidded to a halt as a Noivern bellowed overhead before landing before us, a Chandelure appeared from the shadows, and Wikstrom had taken me down from behind by the application of a jump and full-body pin.

An armoured man is a heavy burden, and Wikstrom was no lightweight to begin with. He crashed down on my back, and we rolled down the path until Wikstrom had gained the upper hand to weigh me down by sheer application of mass. I tried to knee him, but that armour was authentic in the extreme that it carried a groin guard.

“Let go,” I hissed towards the self-proclaimed remainder of the Kalos chevaliers. “If you value me as a Champion, you will let me go now.”

“Ah, you remain as independent as the girl who challenged the elite of Kalos and won.” Wikstrom rumbled as he reached down, undoing the buckle deftly with a gauntleted hand. “This is not a fair, or honourable battle, it pains me, sooth. Yet I am but a blade, and a blade will find any way to succeed for its master. You have mastered your Aegislash well, as befits your majestic dignity.”

“Wikstrom,” I whispered as the belt came free, and with them the rest of my creatures. That was right as Diantha Teleported to the scene with an anti-climatic pop, her Gardevoir’s arm hooked by her elbow.

“At least listen before you must return to the woods, Pucelle,” the Steel Master persuaded as he got to his feet, holding the belt up. I felt my body lift, imprisoned with Psychic forces and held at the will of Diantha’s Gardevoir. Altair and Aegis quietly followed, aware that one side had won and our side had lost. For the moment. Always for the moment.

I was somewhat pleased, though, that the commotion had disrupted Drasna’s serenity, had given Malva a split lip, and that somehow Siebold had been drenched by his own Barbaracle – the reason that he did not give chase was apparently because he was drying out. Even Diantha was not unscathed; her iconic white outfit bore singe marks and other assorted markings that made it a casualty of the Pokémon battlefield.

“I apologise,” Diantha sighed as we moved up the driveway of Parfum Palace. “I kept seeing the girl I spoke to in Lumiose City and Coumarine City so long ago. I kept seeing the Trainer that excelled far more in battles, far more than Augustine could predict, far more than anyone could foresee. With no one your age to share this burden... with no one who could possibly comprehend, we turned a girl into a weapon, alone, friendless and cursed. Daisy- No. Marguerite Linden du Bois. Please listen to us, before you escape once more.”

“Let me go,” I struggled futilely. “I quit. I feel silly and stupid, you know? Everyone is older than me. It’s even more obvious now.”

“You still look yourself,” Diantha persuaded. “Fresh as a daisy flower, barely sweet sixteen. Will you listen?”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?” I admitted. “Wikstrom has the rest of my team.”

“Very well,” Diantha motioned for Gardevoir to bring me towards the main entrance of Parfum Palace. “Let us talk. At last.”
In the half-hour since Dr du Bois took off at top speed towards Parfum Palace, Serena and I had found a Smeargle, challenged Tierno and Trevor to a double battle and won, especially Frogadier, and become covered with paint near a fancy building, only to come face to face with Leader Viola while being covered in paint.

As to how these series of events came to be unfolded, kindly attend.

Serena recalled how Flabébé gathered along these quarters. Well, now that we were here at Route 7, she was hunting high and low for the elusive Fairy-type Pokémon before Trevor popped up, challenged us to that double battle, and revealed that he had caught one.

Needless to say, Serena set it on fire with Elmo, declared that she could find other Fairy-type Pokémon, and then stepped back to accidentally find a Smeargle by virtue of having stepped onto its tail.

They were, though rare in the wild, were the staple Pokémon of the Artists that littered Rivière Walk. Hence, the owner of that Smeargle thought I was attacking it, and threw his paints at us.

To cut a long story short, we ran, got into the Battle Château, and then realised that not only was the interior of the unassuming stone building too posh, that Gym Leader Viola herself was looking at us. “If it isn't Donar and Serena,” Viola greeted us, camera in hand and clearly itching for that shot. “What's your title in the nobility?”

“Nobility?” I echoed.

“What?” Viola echoed in dismay. “You don't have a title? That's a surprise. No one could doubt that a kid as strong as you should have one. See, your title at the Battle Château reflects how strong you are.”

“Really?” Serena brightened.

“Only a handful of Trainers can join the ranks of the nobility and earn those titles!” Viola agreed, clearly enjoying showing off.

An older man stepped forth, so silently that he may as well have oiled over. “Lady Viola, are you acquainted with these young gentleman and lady?”

“Mademoiselle Linden was a fine Trainer, excelling even Duke Calem,” Hennessy agreed.

“Hey, that's my dad!” Serena excitedly told me.

“Donar Oak.” I stiffly replied.

“Serena Calme,” Serena offered.

“Fine names, one and all,” Hennessy replied.

“I will gladly recommend them, so could you grant them beginning titles?” Viola enquired. “They have the makings of wonderful Trainers, and I'm sure they will both contribute to the Battle
“If you are willing to speak for them, Lady Viola, then that is more than sufficient.” Hennessy declared with a grand wave. “Sir Donar, Lady Serena, you are hereby granted the titles of Baron and Baroness!”

“So... what's the point?” I asked after that declaration, waiting for maybe Ho-Oh to swoop down and carry me to heaven on rainbow wings.

“Trainers with noble titles can do battle against other Trainers with titles here at the Battle Château,” Hennessy stiffly explained. “The title of barony places both of you at the lowest rank of nobility, nobles though you may be. Continue to battle here, and your victories will increase your rank and your title. Then, higher-ranking members of the nobility might appear to do battle with you, good sir. If you have any enquiries, the two clerks at the main entrance shall be delighted to receive them.”

I pondered it, thinking the most ridiculous thing about what seemed to be a high-ranking circle of the Kalos region’s most powerful Trainers. “It sounds like a super-secret clubhouse.”

Viola giggled as Serena gave a hoarse choke on empty air. Hennessy looked like he was about to have a real, full-on conniption fit. “Very well, Sir Donar. I shall take my leave now.”

“I’m a Marchioness, so let’s battle again when you reach my level!” Viola offered cheerfully, showing the gap in her teeth.

A passing butler handed up hot towels that made short work of the Smeargle paint, even on clothes. It was as I was dabbing off that I looked at the entrance, and I was struck by the papers that hung on the notice above the main counter. Silver, gold, red, blue, white and black, all bearing writings and names and dates, dotted the counter, heaped upon each other. As an irate woman in a furisode passed, I saw a passing maid fill out a silver paper and paste it over the stack.

“Those are Writs of Challenge,” Viola informed me when I asked. “They’re papers we fill out for a small fee amongst the nobility of the Château. Depending on the colour, over the course of the day they will have an effect on the type of Trainers we pair up against each other. For example, a normal and Silver Writ would invite more battles, Gold Writs increase winnings, Blue Writs make battles easier but cost a bomb to fill, Red Writs call for a more demanding battle rotation, and Black increases both the difficulty of the battle rotation and increases winnings. You can fill in more than one Writ at a time, but all will expire at midnight.”

“Then what happens to that pile?” I motioned.

“They set it on fire.” Viola replied. “The ash is recycled to fertiliser to grow the Berry trees at the nearby farm that we make our paper from. They also keep the Château warm throughout the year. The only thing worse than a Sinnoh winter is the Kalos winter.”

I absently agreed, staring at the entire stack of paper that was stuck onto that wall with spit and prayer, that was apparently incinerated each day for the warmth of an entire castle.

Over the top, I spotted that there were no Black Writs, and asked.

“The Black Writ is limited to the Grand Duchy.” Viola frowned. “I don’t blame them. It’s basically a challenge to the entire Château, a battle royale against the best Trainers of Kalos.”

“So who’s that guy?”

“Diantha was, until Daisy Linden unseated her.”
I whistled. “So if the Champion is equivalent to their Grand Duchess, that means that whoever becomes Champion also becomes Grand Duke or Duchess, right?”

Viola shook her head, motioning to the very top of the wall, where a single white square hung. It hung wide enough to see visibly, but time and age had rotted it until the gilt edging and letters were barely visible.

“That's where my name comes from!” Serena pointed towards the banner at the apex, the topmost that could still be read, in faint gold gilt: SAS.

“Special Army Service?” I asked, earning myself a punch on the upper shoulder.

“It's an old style conferred amongst the nobility ofKalos under the Dynasties, along the equivalent of royal princes,” Viola explained as I was beginning to get weird looks. “Donar, you were born in Kanto, right? You might not know this, but these letters represent the highest office in the Kalos League.”

I stared from the faded banner, only just realising the implication. “You mean...?”

Viola nodded. “Compared to the other regions, the Kalos League was born in human conflict. The surrounding regions that attacked Kalos invaded, and a hundred years of conflict was born. The climax of the conflict took place at the infamous Route 13. The siege of Lumiose was the worst event in Kalosian history. Even the Destruction Pokémon, Yveltal, took to the skies of Kalos, ravaging the land until nothing could grow and the storm winds tore through. Today, that mark outside of Lumiose City is called the Lumiose Badlands, and it is a stark reminder of the War.”

“Route 13,” Serena whispered. “It's the only desert in Kalos. A mar against the face of Kalos.”

Viola gravely inclined her head. She did not look bubbly or serious; she sounded honestly... respectful. “Within this chaos of war, a girl with an Eevee became a Trainer.”

“What?” I blinked at the sudden change of subject, earning myself a jab in the kidney with Serena's elbow.

“The Eevee evolved into a Pokémon unprecedented in history, a Pokémon that was known only to this region,” Viola related, ever more solemn. “Taking it as a sign, that maiden took her Sylveon, donned armour, took on training, and she led an army of Trainers and Pokémon alike to lift the siege of Lumiose. Legend had it that the Life Pokémon, Xerneas, appeared that time to do battle against Yveltal to buy time for the maiden.

“The army continued onwards, eventually sweeping through the Kalos Alps and landing in Snowbelle. There, on Île-de-l'arc, Jeanne established her fief of Notre Dame, with her castle at the end of Victory Road. The king crowned her as Princess of Notre Dame, and her companions as knights.”

“Hence the SAS,” I supplied. “So what does it mean?”

“Today, Notre Dame might not be a fief. Its name might not even be known to Trainers. Charles Goodshow has assumed the Pokémon League to the Kanto model. However, Notre Dame remains as the building that houses the Kalos Pokémon League, and the letters SAS represent the style and title all future Champions take to honour the maiden who first established what would be the Kalos League.”

Here, Viola looked at me for effect. “Son Altesse sérénissime. Her Serene Highness, the Champion of Kalos.”
... today, my past was beginning to catch up with me.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

For those who played X and Y, they might have noticed that the Elite Four are fought in a church. There are several famous churches in France, I acknowledge that, but the most famous would probably be Notre Dame, literally 'Our Lady'. Add that in the Radiant Chamber – where Diantha is present – there are several feminine-looking knight figures. I leave it to you to figure out what I'm referring to.

On the part about the siege of Lumiose; the Tearjerker notes in TV Tropes states that Kalos was the subject of at least two major wars, which makes Kalos the region with one of the bloodiest histories in the Pokémon world, short of perhaps Sinnoh. The first one featured AZ, and was the driving force of the Pokémon XY plot. The second one was probably their equivalent of the Hundred Years' War, with probably Unova taking the place of England. Though the Kalos League building was supposed to be based on the Château de Chambord, it was never named as anything other than Pokémon League. I mean, at least Hoenn named theirs Ever Grande City. So since it was never named, and its origins never specified, I made something up that was shamelessly based on French legend.
It must be a horrible dream, but the fact remains that I am here. The Elite Four, and Madame Diantha require the mask I discarded a long time ago. They require Her Serene Highness once more...

Even as she turned away, walking down the Rivière Walk with her head held high and Altair a silent dark sentinel, the dancing Volbeat and Illumise seemed like glitter to the shining jewel, leaves to a flower, the servants of a queen that deigned to let them free reign just for the summer night.

Parfum Palace remained as overdecorated as always; gold walls, gold pillars, statues of knights and the Bisharp general of the Empoleon contingent dating from the War of the Hydrangeas that led to the Last Dynasty.

The main palace itself, consisting of the old king's living quarters, were up for display, but two wings were cut off from the public. One was the permanent residence of Bertram Wooster, the Kanto millionaire. The other wing was used by the Kalos League to receive delegates. The previous owner had had not a choice in that matter.

I was brought to a sumptuously decorated room, psychic bonds linking me to an ebony straight-backed chair. Wikstrom laid my belt on the Louis XV table before them, the Elite Four spreading out to surround both former Champions of the Kalos region. I noted wryly that they seemed more tense about my capitulation than anything else.

“Augustine said that you were studying the sociology of Pokémon and humans,” Diantha began as an opening comment.

“I have a doctorate to prove it,” I replied quietly.

“A new field of Pokémon study is always good.”

“It's a combination of Oak's and Birch's work, with influences from Augustine.” I said. “I was hoping to find answers. Why do Trainers set out to do battle? Why do organisations like Team Rocket, Team Flare, form? There must be forces in society that could account for their valid rise.”

“I wasn't aware that deviance could be studied,” Diantha frowned lightly.

“We could argue about this matter all day,” I replied. “Get to the point of why I have been caught by the Elite Four.”
“Not very pleasant, are you?” Malva commented on the sidelines.

“I’ve been living alone for the past four years or so,” I shrugged. “No need to practise social skill on anyone but Augustine, and Augustine has met virtual hermits. I’ve never been the most congenial Trainer, anyway.”

“So charming, though,” Drasna sighed. “Even that Lucario loves you.”

“I know,” I sourly answered. “Yet, earning the love of a Pokémon is not a unique skill-set. Augustine had better have a reason to sell out.”

“He did,” Diantha softly replied. “You know that Team Flare did a wrong to Kalos, but that Kalos is not unique in this respect. Rocket, Aqua, Magma, Galactic and Plasma has, at one time or another, sought to overthrow the existing order. What happened ten years ago was the catalyst of a... movement. A movement that has started since the Gym Leaders of Unova stood together against the Seven Sages of Team Galactic.”

“The idea that the Pokémon League could be subsumed into any system of government is laughable,” I murmured in understanding.

“But it is an idea that gains merit,” Diantha gave a brief shudder. “And in a move that emulates La Pucelle, you have defeated Lysandre. Trainers hold the power, and many seem to believe so.”

“I gave my resignation,” I replied, trying not to shudder. “I am not an inspiration.”

“The Kalos League will be holding a conference here tomorrow,” Diantha continued. “We will be discussing this... problem. Representatives of the Indigo, Hoenn Sinnoh, and Unova League will be present. The general consensus is not promising.”

“You mean that the Leagues are convinced that these ideas have merit,” I clarified. “Or some of the Leagues.”

“Dangerously so,” Diantha agreed. “Needless to say, you are a symbol to the amorphous them. La Pucelle of the new age, the heroine of Kalos... you can either help or harm us.”

“I can't help anyone but my Pokémon,” I reflected. “Did you know that Augustine found new students? Three of them are named after the ones I knew, and Serena is Calem's daughter. When did that happen? It's been ten years.”

“... They did well for themselves ,” Siebold volunteered at last, as the rest were silent , “ Ma chère , there is no need to be guilty.”

“I don't want to be a n ideal ,” I shuddered. “ I just... I just want my answers.”

“To immortality,” Drasna conceded. She was not smiling at all. The Elite Four and the Champion were the only ones privy to the reason why Daisy Linden suddenly disappeared in the wake of the decimation of her Pokémon.

“I'm supposed to be twenty-six,” I said . “Not sixteen. I've been sixteen for ten years. About four years before that, I was twelve and Team Flare started to fall , and then I took the Championship. I was only there for four years, there's no way I could have made any credible impact. I am not going to be Champion and spend the rest of eternity wandering the globe. My team... my old team, has proven as the best of a generation. Leave that to be said in the Hall of Heroes. Daisy Linden does not wish to give any more. Dr Marguerite Linden du Bois will compile her work to be done, and then we will set out.”
Diantha's expression shifted, eyeing me, and then slowly moving towards Altair, who had begun to move to a cross-legged position across of me but on her other side. “A final journey, then? For whose sake?”

I did not answer her, even though I saw her Gardevoir give a moue of distaste.

Diantha's expression fell. “I see.”

Slowly, she looked at the coffee table. No one, not even Malva, seemed keen to break the silence.

“I asked Augustine to get you to us for a reason,” Diantha finally said. “This... idea. It is infectious. Mr Goodshow has told me of his fears, that soon the League would be mired in politics. Already we are involved with diplomacy, regional pride, competing industries, and the quality of our local research, if that could even be said. As the acknowledged Champion of Kalos, even despite your... tragic loss, you can combat this. You could lead another Kalosian Revolution.”

“I am not a revolutionary,” I replied, a touch harshly.

Diantha smiled, but it did not reach her eyes. “Neither was the maiden of Notre Dame.”

“I cannot talk politics.”

“You can talk about how Pokémon should not be involved in human politics. That seems to be your field of study.”

“My field is ever more expansive than that,” I chuckled, although without amusement. “Unhand me, Diantha, and then tell me directly what you wanted so badly that the entire Elite Four has crashed into a public facility to restrain me.”

The psychic bonds disappeared as Diantha nodded. “As Daisy Linden, I want you to take the Parfum Conference, and tell the representatives, along with any Trainer that might have stumbled by Camphrier Town, exactly what you think. From there, I believe the unrest might prompt the rational to abandon sponsorship of any... insurrectionists.”

“So you found me,” I slowly echoed, “for the symbolic, if not charismatic, power of Daisy Linden to cause enough strife between Indigo Plateau, Mt Silver, Ever Grande City, Lily of the Valley, Vertress City and Île-de-l'arc until the combined idiocy of a horde of Trainers hopefully causes any anarchist pro-Trainer governmental movements to lose rational momentum.”

“That sounds about right,” Malva nodded. “Can't be too bad for you, eh? The heroine who took down big, bad Team Flare.”

“There's the flaw, though,” I answered. “None of the Teams were rational, nor were they supported by the public. If you are hoping that the Leagues can discredit themselves by collective retardation, that would not happen globally. Each League is respected in their respective regions, even for the five of you. In fact, such a move would be more likely to have any legitimacy of under-age Champions like Iris of Unova questioned, and most likely removed, not to mention make the Kalos League look like a collective fool.”

“Verily,” Wikstrom agreed as Siebold nodded. The fact that the chef has yet to make any artistic declarations was... well, it belied the gravity of the current state of affairs.

I shook my head. If Siebold and Wikstrom could spot the errors, then so could I. “You just want me to get together and turn Kalos somewhere, rather than mired in nowhere.”
“Glamour gets people nowhere,” Diantha conceded. “You have the symbolic power to make a statement. We desperately need to make a statement as a united entity.”

“Because ambiguity encourages deviance,” I murmured, standing up to snatch my belt and clip it around my waist. Almost as one, Altair stood up, Aegis clinking behind him.

“Where is Bertie?” I asked, taking my bag.

“At home,” Drasna placidly informed me.

I nodded, turning my back to go.

“What about the Conference?” Diantha called as I left.

I never answered, though I continued passing the glided hallways of the Parfum Palace. Occasionally, a servant or maid would spot me, and then hurry along their business quickly, leaving me to my thoughts. The Conference obviously contained more people than just representatives if even the participants of the Battle Château looked nervous. Who benefited? If Trainers were in the government... greater controls on Trainers. Tighter Pokémon regulations. It would allow for control over the League, or vice versa.

The balance of power could shift away or towards the Trainers, who held the Pokémon... and what about the bank-rollers? Devon and Silph, amongst them... Steven Stone, probably. Wallace was the Hoenn Champion, and remained as such- though he was friends with Steven, and Devon Corporation by default. Unknown stance...

I found my way into the personal wing, calling Aegis to break the door in only one instance. It was three steps later that I realised that the Psychic Pokémon had Teleported in.

“Hello, Jeeves.”

The Gallade with the bow tie had the audacity to nod towards Altair. “I see that the Elite Four have met you, Mme Linden.”

“I go by Linden du Bois now. I'm a researcher at the Sycamore Lab.”

“Symbolic, Doctor. I applaud your achievement in the field of academia.”

“And Bertie?”

“Master was unfortunately harassed by Mme Malva. I have escorted him to the Battle Château with Jarvis and McIntosh.”

I paused. “Jarvis? Bertie got a new Pokémon?”

“Indeed. I believe his cousin Mr Stark in Unova sent a Klingklang as a gag gift.”

“But Steel-type Pokémon are some of the hardest to handle!” I paused. “You’re planning to foist the Klingklang off to Wikstrom, aren't you?”

“When Master realises that the Klingklang is beyond his abilities as a Trainer, he shall have to ensure that the beast is sent back to Unova. Meanwhile, it should be placed in the care of an expert Steel-type Trainer, and M. Wikstrom is amongst the best, is he not?”

“So Augustine's message, the bit of the two of you being in danger... that was a lie too?” I asked lightly.
“We are in danger, most of it caused by Master himself. Being the Baron of the family would be enough responsibility for Master, but he is... mentally negligible. I would not place undue stress upon my master with the coming situation.”

“Fair enough,” I admitted. Jeeves had, as far as I had known, been Bertie's starter Pokémon, and basically ran his life. If the Gallade with an intellect to rival an Alakazam and the savvy to employ it like a Dark-type Pokémon said so, it was so. “And I presume you heard everything?”

“You may presume.”

Altair held my right elbow as Aegis held my left, and even in weakness, I faced the tall Gallade with as much mental clarity I could muster. “How did events end up like this?”

“It was always going to happen.”

“Now, it remains to be seen if the blood sport would be politicised.”

“And then?”

Jeeves pondered. “Future Sight does not reveal much. Just know that this Conference shall decide the field of battle. Shall it be an individual test of skill... or shall it play out in wars across nations and regions? Merely know that no Trainer should have life and death over other humans.”

“I see,” I relented. Psychics would say something only when they wish to, and no further. “Let us go.”

“Is the Gallade telling the truth?” Altair questioned as we hobbled away from the Gallade valet.

“No,” I replied. “Or if he was, not the entire truth. That is the way of the Psychics, don't worry about it.”

“Then... what should we do?”

“Turn up,” I rummaged in my pouch for the tiny badge I knew was there. “What they want is Linden, anyway. Time to strut your stuff, partner.”

“What?”

“If this Conference would be held, most likely Gym Leaders are going to be flown in,” I calculated. “If so, then Korrina would be there, and if I am to act the Champion, even without- without Delphi, or Deneb, then, you will be my proof of identity.”

“You are who you are!” Altair sounded stunned. “The name you discarded-”

“Yes,” I agreed, even as I walked out of the doorway of Parfum Palace, to greet an overcast sky. “Cards can be counterfeited, mannerisms copied, even a substitute Mega Ring can be procured. The bond of a Lucario and Trainer cannot be faked. I suppose it's good luck that I got that tie-neck blouse and pleated skirt with the socks.”

“So you will reclaim that identity?”

“Kalos has need of Her Serene Highness once more, Altair,” I murmured right as we walked through the Palais Lane. “I placed Diantha into that position to begin with.”

“Very well,” Altair decided. “I will assist you.”

“Thank you, partner,” I winked. “Besides... where better to start with the rebellion than quashing all
I could feel my chest heaving. My heart thumping, and my nerves on the fringe. Serena wasn’t much better, since she was stuck dealing with the out-of-control mechanical menace of a Klingklang.

Me? I was facing the ugliest dog-thing this side of the Orange Archipelago. It was purple, bipedal, and bulldog-like, in that it had a prominent lower jaw with two long, fang-like growths, and its upper jaw has two small fangs. The monster had trouble keeping its own head up, that was how heavy those teeth were. Flat, curved ears hung on either side of its head, and its small, snub nose shone like a polished onyx I had seen in Pewter Museum. A black collar was stuck around its neck, with two small white markings on it, and round its wrists were two black band markings. It had a tiny tail, but the rest of it was kinda creepy.

The Pokédex read: Granbull, the Fairy Pokémon. The evolved form of Snubbull. Granbull has extreme fighting power due to its heavily muscled jaw and its strong teeth and tusks.

Thank you, Pokédex, for telling me which monster would have Frogadier for lunch.

Its foppish dandy of a Trainer stared. “Ah, well, boy. You do know that McIntosh is a Fairy-type, right?”

“How is that relevant?” I called. “Water Pulse!”

The dog moved faster than I thought possible, choosing to dash towards Frogadier.

“Fire Spin, Elmo!” Serena called. “What are you doing, Donar?!”

“Quick Attack!” I called towards Frogadier. “Aim for the feet!”

Frogadier stuck its tongue out, before it dashed, cut around the monster's stubby tree-trunk legs and hammered. McIntosh, that thing’s name, howled and made for Frogadier.

“Careful, McIntosh!” the dandy called. “Don't want to hurt anyone unduly, right? There's a good laddie, Ice Fang!”

“Pound!” I retorted, staring as Frogadier flipped, leapt, and threw a wild fist at the Granbull's knee before jumping for the other side of the field. Unfortunately, by some miracle of movement, the Granbull managed to snag on Frogadier, throwing my poor Pokémon into the air.

“Bite!” the dandy called.

“Elmo, Psyshock!” Serena retorted as a scream of metal screeched across the field.

“Frogadier...” I called. “Now! Water Pulse!”

Right as the bite was about to land, Frogadier unleashed the Water Pulse with enough force to propel himself away. At the other side, the Psyshock struck as a concussive wave of energy that rattled the large head until the Granbull keeled over.

“We win!” I called, whistling.

“Great job!” Standing by the sidelines, Viola pumped a fist.

She was not alone, though, instead joined by a purple-haired woman in a black dress. The woman wore a white cloak under the dress, though the shadows that moved around her were... strange. Like
seeing stars manipulated around a human body, or perhaps seeing Sabrina walk down a street... rather than float, I realised.

“Well, that's my loss,” the dandy, Mr Wooster, laughed, handing us a wad of cash. “Oh, Marchioness Viola, Marchioness Olympia!”

“Mr Wooster,” Viola teased. “Or should I say, Baron Yaxley?”

“Nah, I'm not that good,” Mr Wooster demurred, cheerful to a fault. Beside him, the Klingklang rumbled. “But, I think Jarvis might be in need of a, erm, firmer hand.”

“You are good Trainer.” the purple-haired woman, Olympia, spoke. “Your Gallade knows what to do. Listen more to him.”

“Many thanks, Lady Olympia!” Mr Wooster grinned, nodding. “Ah, have you met my opponents?”

“I inducted them into the Château,” Viola assured. “Serena, Donar, this is my friend, Olympia. She's the Gym Leader of the Anistar City Gym, and she gives out the Psychic Badge.”

“Nice to meet you,” Serena nodded towards her. “I'm Serena Calme. Nice to meet you, Leader Olympia!”

“Donar Oak,” I chipped in, cringing at the comparisons to come.

S he looked at me with unfathomable eyes. “An ancient custom, deciding one's destiny.” She then leaned closer. “The battle's begun.”

I gaped as she walked off. “Erm...”

“She's a psychic,” Serena clarified. She looked awed. “Well? What do you think?”

“I think Sabrina looks more terrifying.”

“Ha!” Viola giggled. “Take a good look at her cape.”

I turned to look. Olympia had stopped by to chat, which mostly consisted of her stopping to listen to some random guy deride something, before she pulled a Pokéball and then unleashed a Slowking, that used Power Gem and defeated the other guy. Her cloak had moved, fanning out such that-

“Are those... the stars?” I gaped.

Serena winked as I caught sight of the galaxy under her cape. “Olympia is known as 'the person who creates paths with starlight'. She's literally one of the Kalos region's biggest stars. She's beautiful.”

“In a dark, macabre way.” I added under my breath before looking down to my trio of Pokémon. “Frogadier, good job! I'll take you to dunk in the river, 'kay?”

“Frog!”

“Bulba!” Bulbasaur complained.

“I just fed you,” I mumbled, perplexed, even as Fletchling hovered over and perched on the brim of my cap with a chirrup.

“Dinner was provided, right?” Viola murmured, eyeing the Fletchling trying to eat my hair.
“Ow! No!” I dissuaded Fletchling. “Yes, it was provided. They mooched off me.”

“You give your Pokémon human food?” Serena sounded honestly confused.

“I’m going to make you ride outside your Pokéball,” I growled towards Fletchling, who just squawked in offended distaste. “Sorry, Leader Viola, I’ve got to dunk Frogadier in water now.”

“He looks like he’ll become a good Greninja,” Viola murmured as I manhandled Serena out of the Battle Château – “But battles!” “I don’t care!” – and giggled. “You’ll be at Parfum Palace tomorrow, right?”

“Huh, what?” I blinked once we were standing in the twilight of Rivière Walk. I hadn't caught a single thing Viola said.

“Viola mentioned that there's going to be a conference in Parfum Palace,” Serena mentioned, stretching her legs.

I walked to the riverbank, released all of my Pokémon, and Frogadier made a splash jumping into the riverbank almost immediately. A stray Magikarp drifted away immediately as Frogadier opened its mouth to go into song. Well, croak into song. Right, lame puns over, I cupped my hand and began pouring a bit of water over Bulbasaur, who just made happy sounds. Fletchling stretched its wings, free to fly about for the moment.

A swarm – school? Horde? Something? – of Flabébé floated past, chattering happily. Serena considered them, before shaking her head. “No good...”

“Not going to get one?” I asked.

“I'd prefer a Pokémon that could carry its own weight,” Serena mumbled. She had released her own Pokémon alongside mine; so far, she had three, too. Elmo snoozed by the sidelines, Pika cuddled by her, and Squirtle jumped into the riverbank alongside Frogadier to begin a splash fight, with Bulbasaur mediating.

“A Fairy?”

“Probably.” Serena pondered. “That Granbull looked awful powerful. But I'd rather have something that's resistant to Poison and Steel, since the Type advantage is so common.”

“Find a Steel/Fairy dual-type,” I suggested, getting a dirty look thrown at me.


“Bulba!” Bulbasaur raged, offended as I took him to shield myself against the mad woman.

Somehow, we all started laughing, and then Bulbasaur took himself off to curl up against a pair of black bootied feet. A pair of long hands picked him up, and Bulbasaur curled against those slender, deceptively strong arms as their fingers scratched his belly and head.

Idly, Dr du Bois evenly eyed our six Pokémon, who seemed to have ignored that their Trainers' laughter had died down. Beside her, Altair held that same, if rather dissimilar, expression. “You seemed to have fun. Viola inducted you into the Battle Château, I presume?”


“Your Pokémon bears signs of the stress of battling continuously,” Dr du Bois explained. “This
Bulbasaur bulb is telling. Several new scratches. You should get it checked later at the Camphrier Centre.”

“Y- Yes!” I shuddered. “Erm... how was your case?”

“Case?”

“Parfum Palace?” I waved a hand. “It's... none of my business, sorry...”

“The Pokémon would live,” Dr du Bois blandly replied. “The Trainer... the same cannot be said when I am finished with him. Shall we retire for the night?”

“I'd rather stay outside,” Serena replied, almost defensively before I could agree. “After all, we're licensed Trainers. You can't really stop us, right?”

There it was, a frozen sort of look. “No, I can't. The rooms are yours, if you'll return to them. Good night.”

“Dr du Bois?” I blinked. “You're not staying at Hotel Camphrier?”

Her walk slowed. “I... I shall manage. Somehow.”

When she said it like that, it felt like my heart should be growing about ten times bigger and breaking. How could a single voice sound so broken? Was this the human equivalent of the Perish Song? “Doc-”

“Finally!” Serena exclaimed loudly as a swarm of Volbeat and Illumise erupted, dancing across the river to which the route gained its name and then, they began dancing. The Firefly Pokémon began to draw their patterns, scattered sparks within the light.

A breeze blew, the lights of Volbeat and Illumise bobbing in the winds. “Dr du Bois?”

The dark head turned, from where its owner was about to leave, and green eyes greeted my view. One eyebrow was primed to rise, as if wondering.

I ignored Serena and called: “Why are Volbeat and Illumise both called the Firefly Pokémon?”

Altair looked up, at the skies of the dancing Pokémon, at the lights that dotted the curtain of night. Slowly, Dr du Bois cracked a smile that was bursting with life; I couldn't describe it. Not now. Not later. Not for the rest of my life, as the indefinable *je ne sais quoi* that Marguerite Linden du Bois held strong over me.

Even as she turned away, walking down the Rivière Walk with her head held high and Altair a silent dark sentinel, the dancing Volbeat and Illumise seemed like glitter to the shining jewel, leaves to a flower, the servants of a queen that deigned to let them free reign just for the summer night.

Chapter End Notes

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
VII: Valser - To Waltz

Chapter Summary

According to Altair's guilty admissions, if I am too prideful to sleep where there was plenty of room, I deserved to get a cold, but there was no way he was going down with me. I thought Lucario were supposed to be loyal...

“That's all you can say?!” Serena yelled at her. “That three of your friends died to find you, and all you can do is say 'oh'?! Or are you as emotionally constipated as that Lucario of yours?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 10: A night passes sleeplessly in the tall grass surrounding the Palais Lane. The summer night is chilly, yet I dared not return to either the palace or to Camphrier Town. The decision was taken out of my hands when Altair left the camp. I had no idea what for, and I wanted to grab Liz's Pokéball just in case a passing Honedge came I, but then my camp was uprooted and Altair appeared with Wikstrom. Wikstrom who bodily carried me back into the Parfum Palace.

According to Altair's guilty admissions, if I am too prideful to sleep where there was plenty of room, I deserved to get a cold, but there was no way he was going down with me. I thought Lucario were supposed to be loyal...

“Well, it is cold for the summer,” was Drasna's assessment when I developed a cough come dawn.

I was not an early riser, despite ownership of the epitome of such in the name of Lucario. However, illness had made for a restless night, and the Elite Four had always made me feel rather... excluded. Drasna's motherly tutting grated, like I was not good enough to join them, despite having beaten them at their best again and again.

I moaned and sank my head into a soft pillow. “I know.”

“Let's hope that Malva finds something that could handle colds well,” Drasna continued, still smiling. “No point asking Siebold to make a consommé if you can't taste it, after all.”

“No fish,” I mumbled.

It was like ten years of alienation and four years of running had not happened. Then again, Drasna was more motherly than my own mother. My own mother had hied off to Johto or somewhere once I was settled on Île-de-l'arc, I had not seen her in a long time. Perhaps the fame of being mother of the Kalos Champion wore on her, or perhaps she could never stay away from racing for too long. I missed Rhyhorn, though. Rhyhorn had better taste than Mama. Was more affectionate than Mama. Did not seem to travel around and leave her daughter to make friends-

“Take this,” Malva appeared, pushing something into my hands that I took a stray gulp of. The broth flowed easily down my throat, giving temporary relief to my itching nose.
“Why are you so nice to me?” I mumbled once the bowl was empty. “You hate me.”

“Brat,” Malva hissed. “I do, but Diantha's right. We need you to tell the entire world to piss off. Since you can't do that if you look on your deathbed, you need to recover enough to pass tonight.”

I shook my head as Drasna took the bowl. “Altair? The Holo Caster, please.”

Wordlessly, Altair picked up my bag and handed it to me. I typed out a message and sent it to Donar's device before clicking the home button and calling up the word processing program. “Show her this.”

“What?” Malva blinked as her own Holo Caster beeped. She opened her own, reading the message I had sent. “This is...”

“Wrote this before I slept,” I yawned, sneezing again. “It's the entire argument.”

“It's... critical,” Malva slowly echoed. “Of Trainers overall.”

“It must be,” I reasoned. “The main rational assumption behind such movements is that Trainers can better coordinate or manage governmental systems better. In fact, most Trainers are young, obsessed, and prone to battle more often than not, which makes for neither a stable economy nor political atmosphere. To hand a Trainer even more power than what is represented in the League would be economic suicide.”

Besides, most forget that the one-on-one form of battling first originated as a substitute of civil wars between towns and regions. I suppose sending young men and women with their Pokémon around to challenge others until one came out as the last Trainer standing, to be crowned as representative of all of their region. It would be an interesting view, to speak of how battling affects politics-

“You're saying that as if we can't handle power,” Malva snorted. “Lysandre would totally agree with you if he was still alive.”

A corner of my lips twitched. “And how would you know what Lysandre would have agreed with, Malva? Your fans would be... burning to know.”

The Fire-specialising Elite Four backed off with a theatrical bow. “Understood. So this is how would you argue that Trainers should not handle politics?”

“The method, while not wrong, did not account for what is wrong with the system,” I articulated, pausing to blow my nose. “Since I'm being forced to do this, I might as well go the whole hog. Best debunk everything at the start rather than credit anyone more momentum.”

“It's creepy, you know,” Malva remarked. “How you haven’t changed. At all. I thought ten years were supposed to make you taller, for one.”

“I stopped growing at sixteen,” I replied.

“It's just not possible. Who's your stylist? That must have been a really good facial.”

“Coiffure Clips doesn't do facials,” I retorted. “I am just like this. I have been since Geosenge.”

“We would have made a beautiful world,” Malva remarked, turning on her heel to leave.

“The word utopia has two meanings,” I called behind her. “One means an ideal world... the other means no world.”
My next visitor after they left was Wikstrom. The Steel Master still wore armour, and his Aegislash floated by him. “You worried us, princess. Kalos shall rejoice that its princess has returned.”

“Not permanently returning,” I clarified, feeling bad as I watched his hopeful expression fall. “I suppose you’re getting a Klingklang soon?”

Wikstrom’s expression remained grim, though certainly lighter. “Mr Wooster's Gallade valet has certainly hinted as to certain... issues that Mr Wooster might be facing regarding Jarvis.”

“Bertie doesn't have the temperament,” I agreed. “It takes a certain... something to handle Steel-type Pokémon. I don't understand how he ever managed without Jeeves, or when Jeeves was a Ralts or Kirlia.”

“As I understand it, Jeeves has been following Mr Wooster for a long time.”

“It's amazing.” I agreed. “How a human in Bertie's circumstances could show anything remotely like slavish adoration of a Pokémon who's supposedly serving him. He's a very good friend.”

“Mr Wooster, I suppose?” Wikstrom suggested with the air of a warrior about to face death.

“Mmm. Too bad all good men are gay or obsessed,” I grimly broke the bad news.

The Steel blade of the Elite Four gave a hacking cough. “I- see.”

“Tragic, really,” I commiserated. “Siebold would have a better chance. What do you want, Wikstrom?”

“I wished to see how were you,” he stoutly replied. “It has been years. A knight is concerned of his princess, after so long without even a hint.”

“I am not a princess.”

“You may as well be.”

“Diantha is far more appropriate, then,” I replied. “I am not La Pucelle. I just did what any Trainer would do then, and I succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.”

“You are an able heroine.”

“I don't want to be a heroine.”

“Yet that you are,” Wikstrom simply replied. Wikstrom was unusually suited as a Steel-type master, since arguing with him was far harder than rocks would ever be. The patience of Wikstrom would outlast even the lifespan of a Torkoal. “There are many who shall envy you, princess.”

“I am not a princess,” I mutinously replied.

“If you are able to protest, then you shall be able to attend this night,” Wikstrom turned to face my bed, and thus me. “It shall be a gruelling one. Many anticipate the unification of Kalos and Unova to the alliance of Kanto, Johto, Hoenn and Sinnoh.”

“Not going to happen,” I assessed.

“Of course not,” Wikstrom patiently agreed. “The last war left several ties soured between them and us, and also ended at a stalemate.”
“... so that is why I am being summoned,” I pondered. “The Champions of Unova and Kalos could hopefully show everyone that they are not to be overlooked.”

“None of the Leagues would like anything to happen,” Wikstrom sounded tense as he related the news. “The reason why such a conference is being held in Parfum Palace rather than on Indigo Plateau or Mount Silver is because of trust issues, apparently. Ever Grande City and Lily of the Valley Island does not seem keen to follow Indigo Plateau any longer.”

“So this could be a chance to study if Unova and Kalos are getting together, as that was the cause of the stalemate of the Kanto alliance versus the Unovan-Kalos alliance,” I reiterated the possible lines of thought. “War is not our domain, as the Lumiose Tower should know.”

“Competing leagues are,” Wikstrom answered. “And competing leagues are usually the first sign of war.”

“What happened in the time I was away?” I shook my head. “War couldn't be threatened so easily.”

“The discovery of the Fairy-type in Kalos unnerved many,” Wikstrom related. “Especially since a good many Trainers specialise in Dragon-types. We have a Gym that specialises in that elusive type, and exclusive access to Type expertise. I believe that to be the reason.”

“Types aren't everything!” I groaned.

“But they do make an important factor,” Wikstrom reasoned. “Especially given the bloody history of the Unova and Kalos regions, and we are regions well-versed in the art of war. They see us as a danger.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

“The other regions.”

“Including Unova?” I scoffed. “The Century War was fought between Kalos and Unova for a reason.”

“A dispute over the Kalosian throne aside, Unova and Kalos are much closer to each other than to the other four regions,” Wikstrom explained. “An alliance such like us stands a chance of posing a threat to the Pokémon League mediated by Indigo Plateau.”

I got out of bed immediately, reaching for my bag. “If this is true, then there must be an outside factor that accounts for such tensions between the regions. Altair, did I pack my blouse-”

“Princess!” Wikstrom hurriedly looked away, as I glanced down at myself.

“Is there a problem?” I archly questioned.

“P- Please warn me before-!” Wikstrom sputtered.

I looked to Altair, puzzled.

Clothing, he signalled.

I shrugged. “I don't understand sometimes. Kalosian men are stereotypically more lascivious than you, Wikstrom.”

“I- It would do you no good to bare yourself before a complete stranger,” the Elite Four Trainer murmured.
“Immaterial,” I shrugged as I slipped into my underwear and pulled on the brassiere, closing the hooks easily behind me. “I have an unchanging body now. Why not display it?”

Altair eyed my left shoulder, which still bore the scarring of that Pokémon and its horned head spearing through. I wore similar patterns on my back, though the ones on my stomach had long healed. There was a permanent scar on my hip where it had been gored through, that Wikstrom pointedly did not look to. They did not hurt, and I had the nagging suspicion that if I ever forgot about them, they would disappear into the aether, a forgotten scar a Trainer had gotten in service of their Pokémon. I had failed mine, and I bore the scars in their memory.

“Are you done?” Wikstrom looked up, and straight where my hands were slipping a garter belt on. He swallowed, made for the door, paused for a brief moment, and then stoically walked out.

I saw him leave, and the door close. “Was it something I said?”

“You just enjoy upsetting him,” Altair communicated.

“Nudity is a concept I got over a while ago,” I muttered, picking up a tub of blonde hair dye. “Perhaps that is another mark that separates me from them.”

“Or perhaps Wikstrom does hold more than the platonic, as you have long believed”

“Love is ever sweet, is it not?” I reflected on the knight that had taught me to fight with Pokémon once. “But to reflect on it is dangerous.”

“To want a life for yourself is not bad.”

“Until this curse is lifted, Altair, all the bonds I make are doomed to fail,” I replied quietly as I began to dye my dark hair. “All I shall be left with are the memories instead.”

The result of utilising blonde hair dye with my newly black hair left it as a dark honeyed colour, my original look before I had gone into hiding as my falsified sister-in-law. I had wanted to use my blue contact lenses, but my green eyes were slightly less rare in exotic Unova and Kalos than compared to homogeneous Kanto, Johto or Hoenn.

I turned around slowly, balancing on one foot before I put on the rest of my clothing after my newly honey-coloured hair had dried. The pleated plaid skirt of red and white, with the red tie-neck blouse. White socks rolled out to just over the knee, and I stepped into the bow shoes that matched it.

A bit of straightening later, I took my belt and buckled it with some give. The skirt flared as I turned before the mirror I found in the room, somehow pondering if Augustine had broken into my house to get this exact piece in my size.

A knock resounded. “Enter.”

That armour clanked hesitantly. “Are you... dressed, princess?”

“Yes,” I answered as Altair opened the door.

The Elite Four member stopped in the doorway, staring at me. I had taken my backpack, swinging it over my shoulder in a gesture of defiance. His jaw went slack, and his eyes sparked, but in a moment the spark was lost.

“You are leaving?”
I unslung the bag, handing it to him. “It'll be your head if anything is lost from it.”

Wikstrom smiled as he accepted it. “I shall guard this with my life.”

I really wasn't meant to be there. I don't know what I was thinking. Better yet, I didn't know what Serena was thinking, dragging us to Parfum Palace just on the strength of the word 'tournament'.

“There's a big gathering starting at the Palace!” Serena nagged. “Aren't you curious? Even Trainers from outside Kalos would be there!”

We walked down a tree-lined path, the quiet serenity of the walkway soon lending itself to noise on the other end of the path. I passed girls and boys and young and old alike, all of them gathered around the palace like moths to a flame in night.

The palace was... well, take a really large mansion, really large, pour buckets of gilt over it and maybe cover walls and floor in gold, and it still wouldn't have matched the sheer wealth that Parfum Palace displayed. There was a corps of servants on hand, directing unsuspecting tourists and Trainers towards the ridiculously large back courtyard.

What really caught me was the two statues that lined the centre of the courtyard. The one I stood by was white, wings outspread. It faced the black statue at the far end, both dragons looking like they would clash in battle. Little Pokéball statues lined the corners and sides, and a large fountain stood between the two, but no one gave them any attention; window dressing they were to the spectacle that was immortalised in stone.

Reshiram and Zekrom; truth and ideals personified, and somehow the sculptor made them look alive and standing in the courtyard of Parfum Palace. I noticed most Trainers give the statuary a wide berth; I guessed that they were not the only ones to be freaked out by the statuary.

The statuary and central fountain marked points in the courtyard paths, lining out four sectors. Even on the ground level, I could tell that each sector would have hedges arranged to display a different scene, and a passing Trainer remarked that the second-floor balcony would give a full aerial view. I was about to tell Serena this, but then I heard Shauna nearby:

“Donar! Serena!” The girl herself leapt from the crowd. A bunch of what look like Cottonee Candy regularly made its way into her mouth from the stick in her hand, and she was smiling. “You're here!”

That Cottonee candy must have been the size of her head, I thought as she continued eating it. “Erm, Dr du Bois stopped here to examine a sick Pokémon or something. She dragged us along, and we're just hanging around.”

“Do you know where to sign up for the tournament?” Serena asked hurriedly, glancing around.

“Ah, that,” Shauna smiled. “So you're being a good boyfriend, eh?”

“No!” I cut in. “Definitely not!”

“Great!” Serena declared, cutting in. “Donar, come here!”

“I am not signing that,” I refused the moment she produced the registration form.

“I say, what-ho there!” A dandy suddenly kidnapped me away from the crazy woman who advanced on me. I looked up, gaping at the dandy whose Granbull I had fought with the crazy Klingklang.
“You looked like you could use some help there, what with the battleaxe there, eh?” he winked good-naturedly.

“Erm, thanks...” I paused. “Bar-”

“None of that aristocratic stuff outside the Château,” he warned, blue eyes twinkling under the blue fedora that matched his blue suit. “Name's Wooster, Bertie Wooster, old chap. Yaxley's just the family title.”

“Where are we going?” I asked as he dragged me into a crowd.

“She's going to come upon us,” Bertie winked before he suddenly let go of me, saying loudly: “Awfully sorry, old sport, you looked real familiar. Just can't for the life of me think who you are. Is your name D’Arey, perchance?”

“No,” I flatly replied.

Bertie nodded, lifting his hat in an oddly gentlemanly manner. At the same time, a Gallade appeared by his side. “The preparations are complete, sir.”

“Lo, Jeeves!” Bertie greeted. “Right then, this here's Jeeves, my absolutely spiffing valet and butler and generally runs my life. Jeeves, Donar Oak. Met him at the you-know-where down Rivière Walk.”

“Indeed, sir.” Turning to me, the Gallade nodded. “Mr Oak.”

“Hey, what gives?!” Serena burst upon the scene.

“I apologise for my master,” Jeeves continued. “It appears that he has mistaken your friend Mr Oak for another old acquaintance from the Kanto region.”

“I'm fine!” I assured Shauna. “Erm, Mr Wooster-”

“Call me Bertie,” Bertie corrected, boyish though he must be well in his thirties now. “Everyone does. Well, 'cept the nephew-crusher, who dances nude by the light of the full moon in arcane ritual and what-not. What-ho!”

“Alright...” Serena nodded, slowly buying to the look of harmless, albeit rather airheaded innocence. “Hey, we met you once! The guy with the crazy Klingklang!”

“Ah, Jarvis,” Bertie placed a hand upon his chest dramatically. “After the disaster that was our match, Hennessy wouldn't let him back. Left him up the creek, you know. I had to do as Jeeves advised and leave Jarvis in able hands.”

“As I had advised, sir, that M. Wikstrom was quite willing and able to handle Jarvis,” the Gallade added, like the straight man in a comedy duo. “I did express some lack in your ability to handle Steel-type Pokémon, as no doubt Mr Stark was well aware.”

“Right ho, Jeeves,” Bertie flippantly answered. “We'll just toodle along, then.”

“He speaks like an Unovan,” Shauna commented as man and Gallade left.

“A bit odd,” Serena agreed, before tugging at my sleeve. “Come on, the tournament's starting!”

Two of Hoenn's representatives, a woman in a flight suit and a man in a foppish hat, shirt and purple pants, were present by the judges' table; I knew that they were from Hoenn only because the
commentator kept harping on it. Serena was more obsessed that the man was the Hoenn Champion. I was more stunned, because I kept comparing him and her.

“It's so romantic, isn't it?” Shauna pressed. “I heard that Wallace actually gave up the Hoenn League and took over the Sootopolis Gym just to be near Winona. Until he became Champion again, that is.”

“I'm trying to figure out why is she with him,” I specified. “She could do a lot better.”

“I think she rejected him once...” Shauna awkwardly continued.

“Good for her,” I firmly stated.

“Elmo, Fire Spin!” Serena ordered as we discussed by the sidelines. After that preliminary charge, it looked like Elmo was in for a Psychic slog with its opposing Meowstic.

Aside from Wallace and Winona, there was another guy-girl duo bearing the Hoenn badge on some part of their clothings; I noticed because the guy started fanboying as the Unovan Gym Leader Elesa appeared, causing the girl to sock him in the face and drag him away. There were also two old men, one nearly bald and bellowing with laughter as the matches went on, the other in navy wear grumbling.

The Sinnoh region's presence was marked with their Champion Cynthia, clothed in black and twice as forbidding, with a bookish-looking guy with purple hair that Shauna told me was Lucian of the Sinnoh Elite Four, as well as a spiky-haired blond in a blue suit that needed no explanation to be fingered as Volkner, the infamous Shining Shocking Star of Sunyshore City. They gave no indication or greeting, but one of the old men, Volkner, and Elesa, gathered for a brief discussion.

Kanto and Johto representatives appeared; I nearly had a coronary as, with Champion Lance appeared Koga of the Indigo Elite Four, Sabrina and Lieutenant Surge of Vermilion City. Sabrina, outside of Saffron City? Much less, Lieutenant Surge?

Surge went to join the Electric-Type Gym Leaders, bellowing at stray Trainers who scarped from his sight quickly.

From the second floor balcony, I could spot the assembly of people, watching the show from down above. Occasionally one would give way, and a red-haired bespectacled woman, a smiling woman with tusks for earrings so large I could see them from my vantage point, a man in white, and another guy in honest-really knight's armour watching the battles rage. All of them seemed to sport tension, a hidden hunger, something like a reflection of a desire to battle.

Elmo, Squirtle, and Pika were exhausted when Serena was finally kicked out of the tournament by a stray Magical Leaf from a Chikorita, and now Serena was giving them an obligatory cool-down outside of their Pokéballs. I indicated up and asked.

“Oh, them?” Serena squinted, before gasping. “Oh, right, Donar, you're not from Kalos, so sorry. My dad mentioned them. The Kalos Elite Four.”

I stared at her, before waving towards the blond man in white. “The Kalos region's strongest Trainers, along with representatives from other regions? What the hell?”

“Siebold's the blond,” Serena identified. “Drasna is the smiling one, Malva the red-haired, and the guy in armour's obviously Wikstrom. I'm hungry, let's go get something to eat.”

There were no stalls; instead, vendors pushed their stuff in little carts by the paths. Lunch was fast
food and Pokémon chow; the latter obviously not for me, though the Coke I washed down lunch with tasted like it was watered, and I suspected that the vendor's Glaceon was sleeping amongst the bottles.

The sun was high in the sky by the time the background music swelled to a sudden crescendo, and cut off when she appeared. She appeared on the second floor balcony, a vision in white. Brown hair braided into a chignon at the back of her head, and the collar of her jacket flared out to frame her head, emphasising her against the balcony. Framing her on either side were the Elite Four; Malva and Wikstrom on her left, Drasna and Siebold on her right. Say what you liked, but she made a hell of an entrance.

Lance stood. Wallace got up. Cynthia evenly stared up at Diantha. A small, purple-haired girl stepped out from the crowd to face Diantha, her face set as she joined Elesa.

"Welcome, one and all," Diantha spoke, seemingly without a microphone, her voice bouncing around the courtyard. "If you recognise me, then there is no need to know my name. I presume that everyone knows my name anyway."

This greeted a bout of laughter; who could miss the movie star and Pokémon Champion, Diantha?

"Trainers of Kalos, Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh and Unova," Diantha listed. "Today, you must have wondered why so many luminaries have gathered here, in the courtyard of the Kalos region's historic Parfum Palace. Why we hold a tournament free for all to enter on this day. Today we celebrate history, as well as a mystery."

A murmur ran through the crowd at those cryptic words.

"None of that," Diantha dismissed. "Today might be the anniversary of the start of the infamous cross-regional Wars centuries past, but today we also celebrate the gift of peace. Today, we have gathered the Electric-type experts of each region, and the founder of the Pokémon Storage System, to update the Pokémon Transporter. In short, we will soon facilitate the transfer of trained Pokémon across regions and waters."

Cheers and whoops, and quite a few tourists celebrated.

"So that's why all the Electric-Type Gym Leaders are here," Shauna squealed. "I can bring my lil' Chespin to Unova!"

"Trust you to choose the most fashion-oriented region to go on your first choice," I snarked to hide my utter suspicion. Not that improving the Pokémon Storage System was a bad idea, but then why choose this place to announce it?

"Also..." Diantha waved an arm elegantly. "Today in history marked the start of the Wars, wars that still erupt now and then in skirmishes. Today also marks the origin of the Pokémon Leagues."

At this, Diantha met all the Champions' glances, masterful and clearly the centrepiece amongst luminaries as whispers gathered.

"What seemed a thousand years ago, towns, regions, people alike were at war," Diantha related. "Kalos itself has known war intimately, historically. Within this series of wars, towns that developed eventually decided on a system to prove their worth as Trainers of Pokémon. Each town chose a young Trainer, and their Pokémon. That Trainer would begin on a journey, sweeping through each town on their way to a single spot. They would begin to do battle with these Pokémon, and the last one standing would be Champion. That was the origin of the Pokémon journey."
Ancient history Diantha might be relating, but somehow, there was an undercurrent of restlessness between Trainers as she spoke. Iris looked around the balcony there, fidgeting, eyes wide as she shared eyes with Elesa and the other Champions, who held similar looks of stupefied shock.

“These small-scale civil wars would become codified in Gyms, and these Gyms produced outstanding Trainers that also became Champions and the Elite Four,” Diantha continued. “The Gyms were codified, their leaders became the luminaries of each town. Rules developed, and the forerunners of the Pokémon League were codified in every region, on top of what makes them unique in culture, landmarks, climate, people. In this, though today we embrace peace, the remnant of war remains amongst us. It is with the Pokémon League Conferences today that civil wars are prevented. Yet, inter-regional wars remain a threat, a boiling pot that may spill over and burn us all. At the heart of this all is the Leagues of Kanto, Johto, Hoenn, Sinnoh, Unova, and Kalos. Several of the crème de la crème of each region have fought against others, of different regions, and not all of it was in friendly battle.”

At this, tensions seemed to rise, Trainers exchanging glances, doubts, discussions, whispers.

“We're not soldiers!” one female Trainer irately yelled.

The noise was almost deafening before Diantha raised her hand to call for silence.

“It is not an easy truth, I realise,” Diantha serenely related. “To know that all of your Pokémon battles emulate the old regional wars. Nevertheless, it is our history. It is the blood-stained history, the thousands of Pokémon that have given their lives, towards the safeguarding of dreams from the horrors of warfare. To those who forget, they are the lowest of Trainers, who have forgotten the bonds of their Pokémon and the price Trainers and Pokémon alike before them have paid. Those who forget that this peace cost them lives, and would discard that truth in exchange for their ideals, are the lowest of the low.”

Diantha looked away, for only a brief moment, before she stared out at all of us once more. “I hope that this message shall be imparted to all of you.”

I stared as the Champion of Kalos stepped back. That effortless charisma, that warm power was that of a natural leader, of perhaps a queen that considered all of her subjects. A chorus of cries resounded, and I was tugged back. I was about to exclaim, but the whoosh of a passing Togekiss stole my breath away.

Cynthia, distant and powerful, was astride that Togekiss, and as it floated up she leapt down and landed on her feet on to balcony, staring at Diantha evenly. A Hydreigon bellowed with all three of its heads, and quite a few Trainers backed as Iris joined Cynthia in taking over the balcony stage. Wallace staged a dramatic entrance by walking in from behind, Winona's Altaria at his side. Lance just appeared, unsteady on his feet. I looked around, spotting Koga grin towards his former colleagues. The implications as he shot a look towards the balcony in some animated discussion were staggering.

A slow clap resounded, and I saw Cynthia turn around and regard the source of the clapping, a familiar dandy wearing a grey hat. Bertie must have laughed at her returning comment, for several other Trainers began clapping, and some began whistling, and one joker even climbed a pole to shout encouragement.

“Many thanks to the regional Champions of our fellow regions for that show of solidarity,” Diantha related. “I hope that they will show the same amount of support for my successor as they have done for me.”
“Successor?” Serena echoed amidst various murmurs. “Someone's already beaten the Champion?”

“Or, on second thought, 'successor' would not be the appropriate word,” Diantha continued. “Ten years ago, during the fall of Team Flare, the Kalos Champion disappeared during the aftermath. The heroine of Kalos, the Maiden of Notre Dame, you know her by those names. A legendary Trainer whose talent only comes once a generation, whose entered the Hall of Fame at twelve and reigned undefeated for the four years that she sat within the Radiant Chamber.”

“She went missing,” Serena pronounced flatly, her eyes wide. “It's not possible. There's no way that she would appear here, Dad said that she disappeared!”

“You know who is Diantha talking about?” Shauna enquired in confusion.

“Of course I know!” Serena hotly exclaimed. “I grew up hearing stories about her! The Trainer that Dad lost to again and again, the girl that arrived new to Kalos, and yet became its Champion within two years – the girl Trainer, Daisy Linden!”

Petals danced in the wind, a tornado of force that blew past any and all present. Light flashed, before, in the midst of the crowd, she appeared, standing on the ground, equal to all of us Trainers.

It was only for that passing second, a beacon amidst the courtyard, before a dazzling gleam caused us to look away from its brilliance. I could not have seen her, neither er face nor her bearing, not to speak of any identifying features as she winked out of sight.

Yet, there she had been, her impression stronger than any other Champion; a ghost that eclipsed even the living.

“T- There was a woman, right?” A male Trainer spoke up, inviting a boatload of murmurs.

“Yeah, there was...”

“That was the Kalos Champion?”

“I didn't see her face...”

“Look! A Pokémon!”

There, standing amongst them, was a Lucario, posture ramrod straight and tail barely swishing. A red and yellow scarf curled around its neck as it just stood, a coloured statue within a courtyard littered with grey stone.

“That's Altair,” I realised.

“Altair?” Shauna exclaimed.

“Dr du Bois's Lucario,” I clarified, confused.

One of the Trainers present stood up. “What? Where's your Trainer?”

“Cario.”

It took me a moment to comprehend that Altair had actually spoken. The telepathic Pokémon was emphatically not using its skill to communicate. From the expression on the Lucario's admittedly inexpressive face, it did not wish to.

“Should we remove it?” the Champions turned to each other.
“Can't be helped...” Cynthia muttered, releasing her own Lucario. It leapt down, and both Lucario faced each other before Cynthia's Lucario looked up to its Trainer. Whatever it was, it caused Cynthia to recall the Lucario back to its ball and shake her head.

“Sorry,” a woman with her blonde hair tied up, sweating in a tie-neck blouse and a kilted red skirt slowly walked up, adjusting her red hat as she did so. “Today was a chance to show off, though, so his carer had to rush all the way here with his Pokéball. We're still getting used to each other. He seems interested in your aura, Indigo Champion Wataru.”

I watched as Altair reached out a paw, accepting her left arm in the same soothing, assisting gesture that I had seen him take with Dr du Bois. My suspicion rose as the pair disappeared into Parfum Palace, only to reappear on the balcony with the others. I could not see Daisy Linden, but that suspiciously protective gesture...

“You are...” Lance blustered.

“Young, your Lucario explained the circumstances,” Cynthia said, almost gently. “Your stamina is unaffected, yes?”

“I'm sorry for the trouble,” she explained. “I usually leave Altair with my sister-in-law for exercise, but we're still getting used to each other. Friends don't find it easy to be apart, but in the state I am, I can't give Altair the training he needs to maintain himself for long stretches or long battles.”

Having heard that explanation, having seen Altair's protective gestures, I could already piece together the reason for the speed at which Altair moved, as which the Lucario fought to finish a battle as soon as possible, even to go as far as to permanently maim a Pokémon. “That guy... so that's why he fought so harshly. To protect his Trainer...”

“Sister-in-law... that means that Dr du Bois is related to the Kalos Champion!” Shauna exclaimed.

“Never mind that!” Serena screeched. “But that someone married that hag?!”

“Serena...” I hissed.

Diantha stepped forth. “The real Champion of Kalos, Daisy Linden.”

This declaration was met with an uproar.

“Hold on!”

“Then doesn't this mean that we could have had to fight six continuous battles?!”

“Explain, Diantha!”

From the side, Wikstrom released a pink – *pink!* – Pokémon that resembled a series of keys. The keys jangled together in a move that I would know later as Metal Sound, but which currently caused a racket such as to shut out most of the chatter altogether.

“Many apologies,” Daisy said, facing the crowd. “I would have liked to answer that no, the requirements should you have defeated Madame Diantha would have been fulfilled. However, that would have insulted the dreams of many a Trainer who stands with us today. To be the best is to defeat the best master battler in the region, and not just to defeat the Elite Four and Madame Diantha. The point, however, seems to be moot, since no one has gotten past the Elite Four...”

“They say that Wikstrom got really vicious right after she left,” Shauna commented, watching the
armoured Master Steel-type Trainer looming by Daisy up there. One good thing about Shauna, was that even as a crappy Trainer, she seemed right on top of all the best gossip. “Daisy Linden is alive. Mum would be happy.”

“... and with these concluding remarks, I hope that we will usher in an era as far removed from inter-regional war,” Daisy finished whatever speech she had been making. Whatever it was, it caused quite an avalanche as a horde of Trainers clearly from Kalos began to charge.

“The woman...” Serena fisted a Pokéball. “Why... why didn't she ever approach Dad? That woman... she claims that she's weak, but she's standing right there, with the elites of the Pokémon world-”

The Champions disbanded, descending at last, some approached by reporters, others retiring towards the food stalls, and Serena took off with Shauna and I following. We skidded to a stop as Serena released Elmo, confronting both Daisy Linden and Altair within the glided hallways of Parfum Palace, right by the giant Milotic statue of pure gold.

“You were her Pokémon all along!” Serena was screaming at them. “You were her Pokémon, and you...!”

Up close, Daisy Linden was an average beauty. Not that she did not pull off the tie-neck blouse preppy look well, with her bow shoes and white knee socks to match with her hat, but she was hardly as luminous as, say, that Unovan Gym Leader Elesa, or the Sinnoh Champion Cynthia. Now, though, she looked thoroughly confused, and not at all like the regal Champion she had projected. “I'm... sorry...”

“I'm Serena Calme!” Serena yelled, drawing attention towards them. “Calem Calme's daughter! Your rival's daughter, that rival that you never acknowledged!”

Daisy now looked politely bewildered. “C- Calem got married...? I- I see...”

“He searched for you,” Serena spoke through gritted teeth. “He climbed the Mamoswine Road, he dove into the Frost Cavern, he braved the jungles of Kiloude and the forests of Santalune to find you. He wasn't alone; Shauna's mother, Tierno's and Trevor's parents, they wanted to find you so badly!”

“Your mother?” I turned to face Shauna's solemnly dark features.

“My mother,” Shauna admitted. “I was named after her. She died five years ago, with Tierno's and Trevor's parents in the Frost Cavern.”

“Oh,” Daisy echoed.

“That's all you can say?!” Serena yelled at her. “That three of your friends died to find you, and all you can do is say 'oh'?! Or are you as emotionally constipated as that Lucario of yours?”

Altair bristled visible, and Elmo tensed, sizing up Altair. Despite that a Braixen held a visible type advantage in this situation, Altair was still a Champion's Pokémon, and a key Pokémon if all indication was clear. Maybe as a Delphox it would have been a more even battle, but as it were...

“I- I don't know,” Daisy shuddered. “M- May we go somewhere private to talk?”

“You ignored my father for the past ten years,” Serena snapped. “You won't go and see him?”

“I- I'm a bit occupied at present,” Daisy pressed. “Why don't we-”
“We settle this here!” Serena ordered. “Elmo, Fire Spin!”

“Altair!” Daisy screamed.

The Lucario was already present beside Elmo, and as I watched, it began raining a hail of punches that was over as soon as it began.

Altair had backed to right beside its Trainer, its lips defensively curled into a snarl, more of an ancient retainer than any Pokémon battler. Elmo fell over, the stick in its hand clattering with a thud.

“T- That was Close Combat!” I gaped, fumbling with my PokéDex to confirm it. Close Combat: The user fights the target up close without defending itself.

“Altair!” Unlike Dr du Bois, Daisy actually looked visibly distressed. “I- I’m so sorry for my partner, he’s very protective. I’m really sorry about your Braixen!”

Shakily, Serena recalled Elmo’s fallen form into its Pokéball, still staring at the growling Lucario with shaken eyes. “You’re a monster.”

“I... I have a reason for not approaching Calem,” Daisy hung her head as security guards surrounded us. “I’m very sorry. Guards... someone please take the Trainer and her Pokémon to the Camphrier Centre, hurry!”

Chapter End Notes

Critique, s’il vous plaît!
Chapter Summary

Static perfection could be the same way. The dreams of a Bagon and Quagsire, the ambitions of a Smeargle, the-

Metal screeching and screams interrupted me. Was there no peace to be gotten?

“Thus passed the power of the priests,” this was said in a breathy whisper, like an invocation or a prayer, away from the luminaries of the Pokémon world who had, apparently, not heard the almost blasphemous words. “Thus began the Age of Reason.”

Throughout the years that Altair had followed me, we were always an aberration. A Lucario who fought too violently to be allowed in any Gym battles, and a Trainer who did not care about the destination so much as the journey. We had met in Versant Road, but it would not be until I had journeyed to Geosenge Town that I would meet Altair and Korrina again. It was only after I had taken Altair that I realised that my newest partner had restraint problems that Korrina had forgotten to discuss with me.

“Close Combat,” I mumbled. We were in a private room set aside for my use, though technically each Champion had a suite for their own use. I was hiding in my room, commiserating with my Lucario, and definitely not trying to hide from Korrina. Said Lucario was mutinously staring back at me.

“On the joints,” I emphasised. “Altair, we have discussed restraint.”

“You should not have taught me to recognise weaknesses if you did not wish me to utilise the knowledge,” Altair defended.

I shouldn't have taught him anatomy. It just made an already deadly fighter even more effective in permanently incapacitating Pokémon and humans alike. A Pokémon might thirst for knowledge, but I was quite sure that most Fighting-type Pokémon did not have the in-depth anatomical training that myself of years ago had taught my Lucario. “It was a Braixen. Not a Delphox, not an Infernape, not even a Blaziken. A Braixen. There was no need to try and break an innocent Pokémon's arms and legs, or its skeletal system. This is as much a headache for me as it would be for you.”

“The girl was clearly intent on your life,” Altair argued.

“Of course she is,” I mumbled. “Calem was the same in the heat of battle, and yet I don't remember his Absol receiving the same treatment.”

“The Absol was a worthy opponent,” Altair defended. “Either way, that Braixen had no choice. I merely defeated it in as forceful and overwhelming a way as possible. The shock factor kept the girl quiet at last, did it not?”

“I...” I faltered. Pokémon morality was not equal to human morality, as I had long expounded upon. Altair had faced the same issues in Shalour City with Korrina, against Calem, against the Elite Four, against Diantha and her Gardevoir, and so time and again it had gone rather far in combat or in
protection, especially after what happened in Geosenge. Hence, it was rather pointless to explain to a Lucario, who might have understood human language, that there were impending legal troubles if the Braixen had been permanently injured, or if grievous intent was proven.

Overhead, Crystal clinked intimidatingly. I had let Jelly loose in the Parfum Palace courtyard, resolving to take her back in by tonight to save the inhabitants of the fountain from an imminent population bottleneck. Aegis must be somewhere with Wikstrom's Aegislash, and Liz lingered by my side, bristling at Altair. Its Aromatherapy was relaxing, but I could not let my guard down, not against any imminent entrance by the Evolution fighter.

“The Braixen was no match for you,” I firmly stated. “Just because Delphi defeated you as a Braixen does not mean that every Braixen would be as intimidating as him. Serena's Braixen was not Delphi, and you are far above a Braixen now.”

“I know,” Altair admitted reluctantly. “I... overreacted.”

“I am glad you understood,” I answered. Still, it had happened long enough for me to have a standard operating procedure. Apologise, pay for medical bills, and invite for a meal. In the case of Zachary, I had informed Viola as to the state of affairs, and I expected that the young man would exercise restraint and guidance against young Trainers in the future.

“Time for Lady Korrina's big appearance!” The door crashed open.

I bodily restrained Altair, looking to where Korrina had drop-kicked the lock. Did she have to wear those roller skates indoors as well? Still, she looked to have aged well, I admitted, at how she'd shaved off her long hair to cut it short. “Bonjour, Korrina.”

“Where were you?” Korrina scowled, hands on her hips. “Disappearing for years for no reason like that... and with Altair, at that!”

“There was... a spot of trouble,” I answered.

“Well, at least it looks like you're training Altair well, I've never heard of a Lucario clocking in at the speeds described,” Korrina crossed her arms. “What's this I heard about a Braixen?”

“The daughter of my rival had the same reaction you did, albeit in a more infuriated manner,” I relayed. “I attempted to direct us to private quarters and she ordered her Braixen to use Fire Spin. Altair incapacitated the Braixen using the overkill method of Close Combat.”

“Ah, right,” Korrina nodded. “So the reason why you went AWOL?”

“I...” I stopped. “Geosenge. I needed... time.”

“Okay,” Korrina nodded. “I see you kept the Ring, though.”

I touched the ring glowing within, contemplating. “It is proof.”

“Diantha has a Mega Charm, not a Mega Ring,” Korrina scoffed. “As Successor, I would know.”

“I know,” I answered. “We aren't going to battle, though.”


“Because Altair is currently under punishment,” I clarified. “And the only other non-Ghost I have on hand is Liz. Liz, meet Korrina.”
The Floette floated around Korrina, spiralling in an aerial dance, a sweet scent wafting in its wake.

“Damn,” Korrina muttered. “A dark blue Floette... that's from purple flowers, right? Any chance I could convince you otherwise?”


Korrina stopped. “Now how did you know that?”

“Previously, you wore your Key Stone on your left glove. Now, it has switched to your ring finger,” I indicated. “Presumably commemorating your devotion to your chosen discipline. Since you have no practical reason to shift the position of your *clé de voûte*, I can only conclude that there is an emotional reason.”

“Fine,” Korrina conceded. “You know, that thing you do. Where you can tell if a Pokémon is about to be sick, or-”

“If this is a roundabout attempt to thank me for mentioning your Machoke's tumour, then you're welcome.” My Holo Caster beeped, and I picked it up to read Donar's message.

“...you were right then,” Korrina admitted as I picked up the bag that, indeed, Wikstrom had guarded with extra zeal. “I took him to Lumiose to have it checked. The doctor said that Machoke was lucky. What are you doing?”

“I have to feed my Pokémon,” I released Jelly, Crystal and Aegis. Korrina blanched as she saw the three Ghost-type Pokémon, the pink menace hovering nearby, Aegis just floating about, and Crystal malevolently looming.

“You keep Ghosts now?” Korrina echoed.

I did not answer her, merely shuffling through the vitamins present in my bag. After a moment, she got the message and left.

“Aegis, Iron and Zinc,” I held out the supplements, watching as the pills disappeared... somewhere. The mouth of an Aegislash could be anywhere near the length of its sword. Or shield. I gave him a PokéPuff for the effort, and it accepted it placidly before I reached out and touched its hilt with my hand.

The first rule of fighting with an Aegislash; you don't touch the hilt. Soldiers did not use their Honedge companions in direct hand-to-hand, they were sabotages. Likewise, Doublade wielders competing with their partners merely dictated the motions with their bodies, the Doublade copying the patterns by telekinesis in a parody of swordsmanship. In the case of an Aegislash, only its Trainer could get away with touching its hilt, and then only for a moment.

The hilts were the means by which it took life force, for their entire breed.

So I touched it. My hand deadened of feeling, along with most of my arm. My reflexes slowed, my vision dimmed. When I let go, it returned, albeit slowly.

Crystal hovered as I pulled out a bottle of Fresh Water. I cracked the seal, drank half of it, and then faced Jelly. I held my hand, palm up, and watched as my Jellicent latched onto the offered appendage. The white-out was less numbing or effective; at this stage, ten years of feeding three Ghosts had left me numb.
I knew, it was not a requirement to let Ghosts feed on life force. In fact, even the most obsessed of Hex Maniacs would not dare allow this leash over their companions. Ghosts did not always understand what was a long-term food source. Then again, I was never a typical Trainer. If he wanted to inflict this curse on me, it might as well hold some value.

I faced Crystal now. The first of my Ghosts, the first that gave me the idea, the idea that I had not dared to entertain until this curse struck. If I had to live like this, then let eternal life hold some value while it can.

The blisters on my palm opened as I reached into Crystal's flame. The ethereal heliotrope flame was not as hot as some Fire-type Pokémon, but they burnt differently. The struck directly at the spirit, and in the end, after the prey was left drained and then, only then, feral Chandelure would feed on the soul. Trained Chandelure just left the victim as a walking shell, until they recovered. Malva would know, since I had burnt her face with Crystal's Will-O-Wisp as revenge. All the plastic surgery in the world would not stop the embers of a Houndoom's bite or a Chandelure's fire.

"Remember where we met?" I whispered to her, Crystal. "You, greedy little Litwick. Runt of the litter, and the punks inside the Lost Hotel all had Dark-type Pokémon. You tried to feed on me. I let you."

Crystal trembled.

"You gorged yourself sick, if that was even possible," I continued, embracing it close, uncaring as its Flame Body scorched at my arms. "Until you evolved. So I found a little Lampent, trying to eat me out of house and home, and I was so thankful that at the very least... at least, my life would be of value."

Crystal whined, a curious reed-like whistle that was pitched at me.

"You gave me the idea," I reflected. "I gave you this evolution, this name, this power... you accepted it. To find Aegis... Jelly... Liz was a surprise. Wasn't it, Altair?"

My Lucario tensely observed with me, as my burns began to heal and dispassionately, I was living still. A sizzle reached my ears, and Liz gave a whimper as she hovered behind Altair.

"Crying?" I almost laughed at the bad joke. Pendulous and hovering, Crystal's eyes thinned as she parted from my arms. "Ghosts exist to torment the living... I wonder where Banette went. Do you, Altair?"

"The parasite escaped during the Geosenge strike. I would not be surprised of we never saw it again," Altair answered.

"Well, you didn't like the prankster," I reflected. "Altair, when you made the choice to follow me, those years ago at the Tower of Mastery... do you regret them?"

"I have grown far stronger," Altair reminded me. "I have challenged the best. Now, all there remains is to see that which I had fought to a standstill during our greatest tragedy."

I tried not to smile. "Korrina and your brother would be proud to know that they trained a Lucario capable of taking on a Legendary Pokémon to a standstill."

"I did not win that match."

"The Sacred Swordsmen of Unova had trouble handling Kyurem, it was said. There is no shame in what a Lucario did. Epics would be written had anyone known the truth of the matter."
“I do not wish for such a hollow celebration. It was exhausted, anyway. I imagine that had the destructive herald not arrive, all of us would have been in the nether world in an instant.”

“Yes,” I answered. “At least four of us survived, if one of us is not present. And now Vega has left us.”

“For the moment. There is no place for a Flygon.”

“Deneb would have implied it,” I whispered, watching the last of the burns heal as I finally got around to applying aloe upon them. “Six o’clock is coming, Altair. Try not to mistakenly injure any Pokémon now, there’s a good partner.”

“Do you anticipate a battle?”

“Perhaps,” I looked down at my outfit, and Liz perched on my shoulder, still slightly shaken, but much calmer as I cooed and gave her a PokéPuff.

Time to go greet the guests.

“Hello, sprout,” came the greeting as I wandered the elaborate hallways of Parfum Palace. “Glad to see you’re still alive and kicking, eh?”

I smiled at Ramos, the old goat still as fearsome as he was a decade ago. Somehow, the greens and browns of his gardener's uniform had given way to more browns, like some bizarre change of camouflage. Ramos could probably give Byron of Sinnoh a run for his money on beating sense into idiot Trainers. “Sure you aren't up to retiring now, old goat?”

“An old goat's gotta stick around to kick arse into shape,” Ramos snorted. “Like that brat that held up my Gym entrance with you, what's his name again?”

“Calem,” I replied.


I felt a chill, and yet a calm that if anyone had noticed the change or lack thereof, it had been Ramos. The Coumarine Gym Leader could be an institution, like Blaine. “Has your Weepinbell evolved yet?”

“Stubborn coot ain't ready yet,” Ramos muttered. “I got a Leaf Stone from bloody Lumiose, and then he ain't ready. Here's to hoping that one day, otherwise...”

“I think he just likes not being upside down,” Ramos continued. “Eh, sprout?”

I nodded, comprehending the oxymoron. On one hand, forcing a Pokémon to evolve before its time was Not Good, as Professor Kudzu would explain it. However, Ramos's situation was unique. Evolution was the only way to save a Weepinbell from its impending death by dissolution in its own stomach acids. Much like how the Sunkern engineered its own endangered status due to over-catching in search for the elusive Sun Stone, the whole reason Bellsprout grew something like arms and legs was, after all, to break open rocks in search for the Leaf Stones that would bring them salvation from the countdown that began from evolution.

There was a bit of small talk that may have involved a comparison with Inkay and Malamar, and then a guard arrived with Ramos's giant scissors. I left the Kalos region's oldest Gym Leader to wait at the entrance, ducking to avoid Cynthia and Lance. Iris was a delight, rather terrified but interested,
especially in the native Noibat and Noivern. Drasna came by soon enough, and I left the Dragon Masters to discuss in peace as I walked silently with Altair past timelessly glided halls towards the entrance hall, singly occupied by the Milotic.

The Milotic statue was pure gold, and the only reason its previous miser of an owner did not take it was because pure gold was too dense, rather than due to any historical respect. Unlike most of the statues, one featuring the infamous Bisharp general of the Kalosian Revolution, this one was far more demure, the patina of matte gold adding a softness and life to the cold gleam of gold.

There had never been a record of a Feebas evolution in Kalos since three millennia ago. Perhaps due to the Kalosian acknowledgement of themselves as the most beautiful, or perhaps due to some belief in the perfection of the design of Arceus; the inner beauty of the Feebas could not be acknowledged either by its Trainers and by an external party together. There were no Pokémon Contests in Kalos, for pageantry was already common enough in Kalosian everyday life; thus, the Feebas had no chance with the belief of static perfection.

Lysandre had been very troubled when I asked would a Feebas or Milotic be more beautiful – the quandary was in the paradox. I understood the paradox far better now; to acknowledge the Milotic would be to welcome beauty in change, and to acknowledge the Feebas would be to acknowledge the current situation as perfect, thus unneeded to change. I do not think any other question must have rattled Seigneur Fleur-de-lis as much as the oxymoron.

Static perfection could be the same way. The dreams of a Bagon and Quagsire, the ambitions of a Smeargle, the-

Metal screeching and screams interrupted me. Was there no peace to be gotten?

The reason why the Kalos Champion quickly called for emergency first aid soon became easily apparent; Altair was a vicious bastard. Even in a throwaway all-or-nothing move like Close Combat, it had aimed for the joints and hinges, which made the doctors and Nurse Joy frown and flinch.

“Is that bad?” Shauna asked, since the Nurse Joy that told us looked very grave as she said so.

“The joints of the body determine the body's mobility,” Nurse Joy explained. “They are some of the most complicated parts of the skeletal system, and the most complex to heal. I was in Shalour City on rotation before, and most Pokémon, when using Close Combat there, usually aim for the biceps or chest, which offer a greater chance of hitting at least part of the body in such a reckless, all-or-nothing move. Aiming for the joints is a way of ensuring a very long and complicated hospital stay if used on a human being.”

Shauna and I gulped, trying not to look at Serena's ashen features. “And... the battles?” Serena asked. “Will Elmo... battle again?”

“Don't worry,” Nurse Joy assured. “Pokémon heal faster than humans, and this Close Combat was meant to incapacitate. He'll be fine in a week or so, with physiotherapy.”

“That Champion was too much!” Serena exclaimed as we adjourned to the waiting room. “She could've put a leash on that beast!”

“You did yell at Elmo to use Fire Spin first,” I severely replied. “You started it.”

“Whose side are you on?!” Serena yelled at me.

“The side of the people who think rationally,” I muttered. “Rushing in yelling like a madwoman...
she already gave you two chances to settle things like a normal human being.”

“That Lucario didn't have to be so vicious!” Serena defended. “You heard Nurse Joy, that could have been a mortal injury! I'm going to call Dad! A lawyer! Professor Sycamore!”

“Er, Ms Calme?” Nurse Joy had reappeared, holding a clipboard. “Please sign here.”
Blankly, Serena scrawled her name there. “What's it for?”

“It's to confirm that you acknowledge the Kalos Pokémon League paying the hospitalisation fees for your Braixen,” Nurse Joy answered sternly. “Mme Linden was very particular about that, but she's been barred from leaving Parfum Palace on account of her health. M. Wikstrom delivered the missive himself.”

“So she's a good person,” Shauna nodded.

“I still say, that Lucario is a sadistic bastard,” Serena grumbled.

“She must be good, if her Pokémon is so willing to injure for her,” Shauna reflected. “Did you see the speed of that Lucario? It's out of this world!”

“It's a Champion's Pokémon,” I rolled my eyes. Still, the mystery of Dr du Bois's competence was solved, if she was related to the Kalos Champion.

We returned to the Hotel Camphrier, only to be told that the Champion had left us a summons to Parfum Palace. The card was simple card stock bearing a letterhead of a white deer's horns spread over a pair of black wings, with a simple message:

Mme Serena Calme,
I understand that you have many questions regarding my state that has deeply affected your family. Though I do not know how to account for the violence my partner has shown you, I would still issue a formal apology, were you to arrive at the Great Library of Parfum Palace.
If so, perhaps you would also accept my invitation to dinner with the Elite Four and Madame Diantha at seven pm. Please arrive by six pm. Your friends are welcome to attend. Please RSVP via my sister-in-law's Holo Caster coordonnées.
Sincerely,
Daisy

“Huh,” Serena muttered as she picked it up. “Posh, isn't it?”

“It looks like we aren't the first to be mauled by Altair if this is her reaction,” I commented. I had released Bulbasaur, Frogadier and Fletchling, and currently Fletchling was perched on my head as I cradled Bulbasaur. Frogadier had looked visibly distressed, staring at Elmo laid out on a padded table and stuck in a full-body cast, that I had not the heart to recall him into his Pokéball.

“If she's treating us to dinner, we might as well accept,” Serena grumbled. “All three of us. We can interrogate her for Mme Linden and Dad.”

I got the feeling that Serena was more focused on what Daisy Linden had been to her father rather than Mrs Linden's state without her daughter, but I hardly voiced it. Elmo's state had taken most of the enjoyment out of the day. Even Shauna looked visibly less bubbly as she changed the topic to Mega Evolution.

“Shabboneau Castle yielded nothing,” Shauna complained. “I want to know how to do Mega
“Mega Evolution is known to the Champions...” Serena muttered. “And Dad.”

“Your dad knows?” I blinked.

“Yes,” Serena confirmed. “My dad didn't tell me, though. But, it has three requirements. From the stories he related, it required two stones; one to be held by a Pokémon, and a cle de voûte. A keystone. And a bond between Trainer and Pokémon.”


“But think of the possibilities?” Shauna exclaimed. “Anyway, maybe the Champion would have an idea! But...”

“But?” Serena echoed.

“What do we wear to a palace?” Shauna screamed. “I didn't get the chance to go window-shopping in Lumiose before Trevor dragged me to Versant Road!”

“Are you sure you should put fashion before battling...?” I muttered, tugging at my shirt. “I don't really have a change of clothes, and I think they'll let it go if we're invited. This is an apology dinner, after all.”

Shauna looked doubtful, even as I engaged her Skitty against Fletchling in a mock battle. I sent our acceptance to Dr du Bois via Holo Caster, and then Serena went on a shopping spree for Super Potions.

By dusk, we had ventured out of Camphrier Town with a notification to the concierge desk, and headed down the Palais Lane towards the grand Parfum Palace. The first time, I had been dragged by Serena and Shauna, and it was daytime. Now, seeing the palace surrounded by woodland gave it the creeps, like those old Johto fairy tales. Or the legendary Litwick Mansion in Unova.

In the distance, I could see the tents of camps being set up, the Trainers unable to lodge for free at the Pokémon Centre or those without the money or luck to stay at the Hotel Camphrier choosing to camp out in the tall grass. It felt like the entrance into an otherworldly empire, I reflected.

“What do you think they'll serve?” Shauna reflected.

“Who knows!” Serena scowled. “Donar, say something!”

“It's your apology dinner,” I mumbled, trying not to trip on the slightly uneven ground. The weather in Kalos was much different from Kanto, the variations in weather controlled by the legendary birds missing here.

“What kind of person leaves their clothes around?” Shauna complained, picking up a blue scarf. The end of the scarf clanked ominously, and I heard the snick of metal on metal. “E- Eh?”

“Let go!” Serena shouted as the scarf wrapped around Shauna's forearm.

From the bushes, a scabbard, brown and worn, clattered onto the ground as the sword attached to the other end of the scarf swung up, eyes gleaming as it prepared to stab.

“AAHH!”

“Frogadier, go!” I released the Pokéball, the ninja amphibian rushing immediately. “Lick!”
Frogadier blinked as he held down the clicking sword, blinking at me as if to say Really? Lick it?

“It's a Ghost!” I shouted.

I think my Frogadier dissed me, for it merely leaned over and licked the hilt. The sword paused, shivering, and its scarf uncurled, allowing Shauna to run.

“How’d you know that?” Serena hissed, Shauna hiding behind her. “That it was a Ghost-type Pokémon?”

“I lived in Lavender Town before we moved here, and way before that I spent my childhood passing through Ecruteak City,” I answered grimly. “You can't survive in that place without knowing when you're getting pranked by Ghosts.”

The Pokémon's scabbard clanked, and the scarf wrapped around it in a proprietary manner, the sword twisting about as it hovered point down, beady eyes blinking at us from within the hilt.

“Why...” Shauna stumbled, but was caught by Serena. “That...”

Grimly, with Frogadier to defend us, I pulled my PokéDex. Honedge, the Sword Pokémon. If anyone dares to grab its hilt, it wraps a blue cloth around that person's arm and drains that person's life energy completely. Ominous alright.

“Scary!” Shauna screamed.

“It's a Steel/Ghost type,” I whispered as the sword oriented itself to prepare to stab towards Shauna. “Normal-type attacks won't work—”

“Elmo is still in the Pokémon Centre, we don't have a Fire-type Pokémon—” Serena shook her head, pulling out a Pokéball. “Appear, Squirtle!”

The aqua tortoise appeared, babbling before it caught sight of the Honedge currently engaged in one-sided fencing with Frogadier.

“That's a living sword—” I shook my head, shuffling through the electronic pages. “It's the original form of Aegislash. No wonder it looks like Dr du Bois's Pokémon—”

“Enough, how do we defeat it?” Serena scowled.

“Erm, Ghost, Dark, Fire,” I counted. “At least Frogadier knows Lick, otherwise we're screwed.”

“M- My lil' Chespin evolved...” Shauna confessed.

“Ghosts are immune to Fighting,” I answered, reaching into my bag slowly.

The Honedge screeched, a curious mix of metal screeches and indignant silk rustling. It stabbed out, Frogadier kicked out, and added a Water Gun for good measure, which did not seem to deter it so much as piss it off.

It screeched, a horrible sound that reverberated around my skull and caused me to shut my ears and cringe on reflex. Shauna screamed again as the Honedge dived, a vindictive stab to the ground as she tugged onto Serena.

“Squirtle, Water Gun!” Serena ordered, as a jet of water coursed onto the Honedge, driving it back for a brief moment. “Run!”
“Frogadier, come back!” I recalled him, dashing to drag Shauna, and together the three of us ran from the murderous sword Pokémon towards the palace gates. We ran down the driveway, but Shauna screamed as the Honedge’s sash rippled out, the sword flying on the other end to rotate itself and stab into her back.

“Shauna!” Serena yelled.

“**Bone Rush**!”

For a moment, my brain must have gone offline. I saw a glowing bone form, and then a black-blue blur overcame my sight. A Lucario had defended Shauna, the glowing bone used to club the Honedge’s keen blade away from her and towards the gates. Steadily and continuously, switching between left and right paws, the Lucario lashed out, one, two, three, four, five hits, leaving the Honedge flying out of the gates of Parfum Palace.

“A spot of trouble?” Daisy was there, blinking at us. “I see you made it.”

“What was with that Honedge?!” Shauna hissed. “How is such a bloodthirsty Pokémon still around?”

“That story has something to do with the history of this palace,” Daisy answered. “Would you come in?”

Remembering the last time not following her suggestion had landed us, I dragged Serena in, with Shauna quickly following in the wake of the Honedge attack. The doors closed behind with a ponderous yawn as we walked past the Milotic statue to the equally decorated hallways.

“That Honedge…” Serena whispered. “It attacked us.”

“Unlike most Pokémon, the existence of Honedge and its evolutions made its primary purpose in war,” Daisy related to us. “Soldiers would carry Honedge, and despite being armed with nothing more than a spear or a shovel, would never draw their companion. Rather, the Honedge would become a trap, for the Pokémon would drain the life force of supposed victors, allowing the soldiers to safely sabotage whole battalions. Kalos was faced with numerous invasions after the fall of the AZ Empire and leading to the Warring era, and thus the Honedge and Doublade became a crucial companion in the many battles waged. The Dusk Stone that came to Kalos by the old shipping routes were discovered to have an effect on Doublade in the Century War era, and the resultant Aegislash had an advantage over Doublade and Honedge, being able to use its spectral power to control these deadly Pokémon. The Kalosian Revolution would see the destruction of many symbols of the Last Dynasty, culminating in the massacre of the royal guard in the tall grass around Palais Lane as revolutionaries seized Parfum Palace and executed the *Roi-Soleil*. The Honedge and Doublade, freed after the death of the Kalosian king’s Aegislash, took to hiding amongst Palais Lane, still guarding it however they know.”

Shauna swallowed. “So... that Pokémon remembers its ancestors' war?”

“The Honedge remembers its war, and perhaps the wars of its ancestors,” Daisy clarified. “Ghost-type Pokémon are amongst the Pokémon with the longest lifespan. The tall grass around Parfum Palace is thus the only known habitat of wild Honedge and its like.”

The silence allowed us to fully comprehend the implications. “S- So...” Shauna whispered.

“Those who live in Camphrier Town know that the Honedge mean no harm, and usually issue warnings to passing Trainers not to touch the Honedge,” Daisy shook her head. “I apologise. This
talk of war must seem distressing, Madame Calme, Madame Shauna, Mr Oak.”

“M-Madame Linden...” Serena hesitated. “I'm sorry for my behaviour today. I- I shouldn't have attacked you.”

“The fault lies with Altair and I as much as it lies with your Braixen and you,” Daisy Linden answered, with a small smile that seemed to light up her face, an animated, passing fantasy despite that she was nearly leaning on her Lucario. “Apology accepted.”

“So... ern, dinner, right?” Shauna asked. “Is this going to be like that... the really big dining room the guide mentioned?”

“I see that someone has noted Parfum Palace's attractions,” Daisy remarked. “It is actually more informal than what the guides would say. The ritualism of Kalosian traditions have to be foregone, for the sake of our delegates.”

I was about to ask when she opened a set of double doors, and then we were in a grand hall. Elaborate chandeliers – and one or two real Chandelure – overhead, on the far end a stage of dark wood with silver filigree edging, a long table in the middle, and on either side of the table were...

“There's Elesa Kamitsure!” Shauna squealed, watching that Unovan Gym Leader with a dark-haired woman in a mystifyingly long-sleeved *kimono*, discussing in animated detail. “And Lavarre City's Gym Leader, Valerie!”

On one hand, Lt Surge and Volkner holding a very loud agreement session that their job was too easy, with interjections from the Hoenn Electric-type Gym Leader Wattson. It continued until their argument was interrupted by a loose robot followed by a blonde bespectacled man in blue overalls and a backpack.

“Bonnie isn't here, Clemont?” Daisy enquired as the robot, and its chaser, passed us.

“She's in Lumiose, holding down the Gym,” Clemont half-shouted. “Get back here!”

“That is the man responsible for half of Lumiose City's blackouts,” Daisy sighed.

“That's the Lumiose Gym Leader?” Serena blinked. “Aunt Shauna-” She flinched, glancing towards Shauna before looking around. And there were a lot of people to look around at; Iris, Drasna and Lance holding a heated argument about the merits of Haxorus, Noivern and Dragonite, stoked as they pulled Garchomp and Cynthia into the argument. Lucian, Sabrina and Olympia, doing what looked like three-tier chessboard simultaneously with their psychic power, and then I saw a woman with bubblegum-pink hair intervening as Elesa and Valerie's argument got more heated.

Oh, Daisy Linden had invited us to dinner. She probably forgot to mention that dinner was taking place in Parfum Palace, with some of the Pokémon world's celebrities.

“Mademoiselle Iris,” Daisy whispered as she more or less bodily shoved the three of us towards a rather short, dark-skinned young woman with a tiara stuck in her bushy purple locks. “The Trainers involved in that little mess with Altair today. Serena Calme, Shauna, and Donar Oak. Oh, I'm being summoned, please excuse me.”

“Y- You're the Unovan Champion...” Serena honestly whimpered as Daisy and Altair left.

“Thanks!” Iris smiled, cheerfully intimidated by the brilliance of the hall. “I'm Iris. Nice to meet you!”
“The youngest Dragon Master!” Shauna exclaimed. “Is it true that you've seen Kyurem once?”

“Well, only once…” Iris laughed depreciatingly. “So, you're all Trainers?”

“My goal is to become Champion of Kalos!” Serena affirmed.

“That's great!” Iris looked even more excited. “Donar, right?”

“I'm just going to find myself,” I admitted. “Maybe the League can help me with that. Anyway, I have a Pokémon researcher tracking me in exchange for food and lodging in each town, so I'm good with that.”

“A researcher?” Iris looked blank. “Researching what?”

“Something about the Trainer and society,” I shrugged, but Iris's exclamation left me with a feeling that I did not fully comprehend what Dr du Bois was researching. Speaking of which, the doctor wasn't around-

“Eek!” Iris suddenly squealed and hid behind Shauna. We turned around, spotting three old men – the Elite Four Drake from Hoenn, a large heavyset man with a light blue jacket thrown over his wide-set shoulders, and a reedy-looking gardener with a pair of giant scissors – arguing over what looked like a giant iceberg on legs.

“That's an…” Serena flipped open her PokéDex. “Avalugg, the Iceberg Pokémon. Its ice-covered body is as hard as steel. Its cumbersome frame crushes anything that stands in its way.”

“I hate Ice-type Pokémon,” Iris complained.

“Huh?” I snorted. “You're a Champion and you have a fear of Ice-type Pokémon?”

“Ice is super-effective against Dragons!” Iris insisted mutinously.

“Che, only you…” I muttered. “Still, that's a ridiculously big Pokémon.”

“Speaking of which…” Shauna's nose wrinkled as more and more Pokémon were appearing. “The Pokémon seems to be having fun... ah!”

“What are you doing?” I asked as Shauna got out a Pokéball.

“Come out, Chester!” Shauna called as she lightly threw the ball up, releasing the Pokémon within.

“Quill, quill!” the bipedal Pokémon shouted. It was largely covered in an armour-like shell, green with two large spines jutting out like ears. The spines and the Pokémon's pointed tail had red tips, with banded segments on the back. Its lower half was brown like its stubby limbs, a patch of fur decorating the front. As I watched it, I wiggled its small, pink nose and pointed snout, the hairy brown fur on it immediately homing onto the buffet table. Its eyes widened, the triangles of fur on its cheeks ballooned out, and its buck teeth appeared as the Pokémon made a mad dash for the table.

“Oh, your Chespin evolved?” I commented, pulling out my own PokéDex. “Quilladin, the Spiny Armour Pokémon. They strengthen their lower bodies by running into one another. They are very kind and won't start fights.”

“Very suitable,” Serena nodded. “My Elmo evolved, but... it's in the Pokémon Centre at the moment...”

“Oh,” Iris echoed into the awkward silence.
“Donar, your Froakie evolved, right?” Shauna suddenly commented.

“Yeah,” I took my three Pokémon and unleashed them. Fletchling immediately perched on my head, giving me a light peck. Bulbasaur lingered, Frogadier giving Iris an assessing look before it went back to posing like some amphibian ninja.

“It looks like Koga...!” Iris bit back a giggle.

I looked around. The Poison-specialising Elite Four was currently speaking to Daisy, and his expression was so much like Frogadier that I started laughing. This prompted Shauna and Serena to giggle, and Iris to laugh until we were attracting some attention.

“That woman looks rather...” Iris made a universal gesture by her head. “She seems sane, though... I should release my Pokémon, but Hydreigon might ruin the party...”

A low whistle sounded by my feet, and I looked down to where Frogadier was staring at the interloper. The fox-like Pokémon rubbing against my leg was covered primarily in pale cream fur with pinkish feet, ears, and tail. Two bows, pale cream with pinkish centres, adorned it: one on its left ear and one around its neck, the bow-tails that protruded out pale cream with pinkish and blue tips.

“Cute!” Iris reached down to pet it, but the cream-and-pink confection of a Pokémon bristled and meowed. The voice was heartbreakingly soft, as it turned to me with glassy wide blue and white eyes.

“Syl vie~

“Oh, he likes you.” I turned my head to see Valerie. Up close she was ethereally beautiful, her long hair merely tied back with a purple ribbon to match her long-sleeved furisode set with a bodice cinched around her stomach. “Pick him up.”

“It looks like an evolution of Eevee,” Shauna squealed as I picked it up, and it purred, twisting in my arms like an angry Meowth.

“He is,” Valerie clarified. “One of the first discovered pure Fairy-type Pokémon, Sylveon. The newest evolution of Eevee.”

“That's a Fairy-type Pokémon?” Iris exclaimed. “It's so cute!”

“Aren't Eevee rare?” I blinked. “And Eevee are only known to evolve with a Stone... right?”

“Espeon and Umbreon evolve with the dawn and dusk,” Valerie clarified. “Perhaps it is the Sylveon that holds the greatest mystery of all. He evolved one day, in a battle- till today, I cannot remember the exact circumstances of his evolution.”

I pulled out my Pokédex as Valerie accepted her Pokémon, its ribbons flying around. “Sylveon, the Intertwining Pokémon. It wraps its ribbon-like feelers around the arm of its beloved Trainer and walks with him or her.”

“Syl vie~” the Sylveon purred as she set it down, its feelers curling around her hand.

“The legend of Jeanne...” I muttered.

“Oh?” Valerie blinked. “I came from the Johto region. The legend of Jeanne is an amazing story, is it not?”
“Y- Yeah!” I nodded furiously. “I came from Kanto, and before that I was always travelling with my Mom. She worked at a Fighting Dojo, but after its last branch in Saffron was closed down, we took to travelling around the regions. I think, Sylveon could win a Pokémon Contest against a Milotic.”

“Who knows,” Valerie smiled. “Luckily, we have a Milotic in our midst.”

I spluttered. “B- But, Milotic are incredibly rare Pokémon-”

“Wallace,” Valerie called out to the Hoenn Champion. “This boy claims that my Sylveon can win against a Milotic.”

“Is that so, Ms Valerie?” To my horror, the Hoenn Champion had flounced over to us, a Pokéball already in hand.

“I- I didn't mean anything against your Milotic!” I exclaimed, faced with one of the greatest Trainers of the world. “I- please just assume that it's a mark of ignorance.-”

“Then, it would be proper to correct that,” Wallace smirked as he released the Pokémon.

What was released...

The Milotic undulated in the air like some aerial serpent – or a flying Gyarados – with its primarily cream-coloured body. Red eyes with long, pinkish antennae above them fluttered their eyelashes, the wispy hair-like fins above its eyes that extended along to half its body. A straight spike was perched on its relatively small head, and running down either side of its neck were three black dots, similar to gills. Its lower body was a mosaic of blue and pink diamonds, outlined with black, its fan-like tail four large, blue fins with pink ovals in their centres. As I watched, the tail swished, causing the patterns and colours to shift from red to yellow to green to blue to violet and back, an entire electromagnetic spectrum contained within a fan attached to the graceful serpent of the sky.

“It's beautiful...” Shauna gasped.

“Milotic...” Serena echoed numbly, reaching for a Holo Caster and activating its camera. I took out my PokéDex, the small picture attached hardly doing the creature justice.

*Milotic, the Tender Pokémon. Milotic is said to be the most beautiful of all the Pokémon. It has the power to becalm such emotions as anger and hostility to quell bitter feuding.*

“That entry was made before the Kalos PokéDex came into being,” Daisy mentioned, having reappeared as a crowd began to pay attention to us. “Shall we play a game, Wallace?”

The creature of heart-stopping inspiration curled around Wallace and crooned, a song of enchantment and promise. Absently, its Trainer patted its head. “A game?”

“The aesthetics of Madame Valerie serves her well, in the fashion circles of Lavarre City,” Daisy waved an arm, the gesture one of careless elegance. “For a master coordinator, your Milotic has won Grand Festivals all over the world. Both parties are contributors to beauty. Should the veracity of this claim not be tested?”

“The elusive Fairy-type appear frail as a breeze and delicate as a bloom,” Valerie distantly answered. “Its beauty is a transient one, one that the water captures only for a brief moment.”

“Born from a Feebas, the inner beauty of Pokémon are truly expressed with the Milotic,” Wallace imperiously gestured.
“Shall we leave it to this boy to decide?” Daisy slyly whispered. “A Pokémon Contest had five judges, but this is a game. This boy, Mademoiselle Iris and myself would be able to judge the aesthetics of Sylveon and Milotic.”

“Sad that Fantina is not here,” Wallace shook his head, sending his teal locks flying from side to side. “I know another within this room who can act as judge.”

Before I could sink into the expensive panelled floor in embarrassment, Wallace had already flounced around. “Elesa!”

“A Contest on the fly!” Viola was rushing by with her camera. “Oh, Donar, Serena!”

“I invited them and Mme Shauna for dinner,” Daisy explained to the Gym Leader. “Donar has apparently appointed himself chief judge in the game to determine if a Fairy-type Pokémon can defeat a Milotic in beauty.”

“Well, this is going to be interesting,” Viola chattered happily as chairs were cleared to the side and Gym Leaders and Elite Four alike began chattering.

“You've done it now, boy,” I turned around and had a heart attack as Sabrina, Mistress of Psychic Pokémon and Leader of the Saffron Gym was talking to me. Me, Donar Oak, not even related to Professor Oak.

“W- What?” I squeaked. “I mean, I'm sorry, Leader Sabrina-”

“No,” she delicately answered. “The whole dinner had been swallowed in tension. A bit of unnecessary pageantry might just be enough to save us a headache.”

“Erm...” I swallowed. “Right...”

“Well, because of time constraints, there will be only two segments,” Diantha had taken over as host of the impromptu contest. “The first is the appeals segment. Each Pokémon will present one show-piece for the sake of entrance, and next is the battle portion, where the Pokémon battle while showing off their beauty.”

“I wouldn't know how to judge!” I shouted, but my answers went unheeded.

“Can't be helped,” Shauna wisely commented, already having grabbed a sandwich and bitten into it. She handed me a plate of canapés. “Here, have some food.”

“That's the appetiser,” Daisy clarified as I stared at the plate piled high with finger foods that looked way more expensive than back in Kanto. “To account for the stomachs of our guests, we decided to stick to a three-course meal rather than let them suffer through the full course. Perhaps you need a drink to go with it. Orange juice?”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, partially glad that someone was alleviating my pain. “Save me,” I begged Serena. The effect of my plea might have been lessened by stuffing my face with the ridiculously delicious bread. I can honestly say, right now, that cafés in Kalos put more effort into their food than even the Kanto region's most expensive restaurants.

“You dug yourself into this hole,” Serena shrugged, eating through the entree.

“I heard that the kings of Kalos could eat their way through twenty-one courses,” Shauna hissed. “I wonder where they put all of that.”
“No!” We were shocked out of eating as the blonde man in the chef's uniform suddenly appeared. “You do not put away a pleine plats. You enjoy it, it is artistry!”

“Erm, you're... Siebold! The master chef, Siebold of the Elite Four!” Serena's eyes widened.

“Yes,” Siebold nodded. “Young ladies, young man, it is an affront to the chefs of Restaurant Le Wow, Le Yeah, perhaps, even Le Nah, that you suffer through les repas. The profession of a chef is more than merely cooking. It is to create something wonderful, that shall disappear when it is enjoyed. It is the chef who can empathise the most with the heart of a Trainer.”

“Siebold,” Siebold was interrupted from his tirade by Daisy's quick intervention. “If you call yourself an artist, perhaps you can sit in as guest judge as well.”

“Hold on,” I realised. “There's no water-”

“If my opponent requires merely a blank stage upon which her art shall be displayed, then there is no meaning!” Wallace declared. “And, it shall not unduly harm her, either way.”

The Milotic crooned in agreement.

“T- Then- here?” I waved at the great hall.

“There's enough space,” Daisy whispered. “This hall was built to take battles to begin with, hence the extra height. It can't take a Wailord, but anything up to a Dragonite is fine.”

“Shall we?” Diantha promised, to cheers and laughter. “Let the appeal begin!”

I sighed as I got myself the main course, before Wallace began his display. The Tender Pokémon leapt into the air, curling its body as a shimmering ring of water began to form around it. Its body coiled with power, undulating, and as I watched, the water rings began to move in mid-air, the torrents of their motion the only thing to keep them from spilling apart. It was not alone, though – the Milotic shot a rainbow beam of light, freezing the rings until gravity took over and then, the Milotic used its powerful body and uncoiled to show the ice spiral it had created. The ice splintered and cracked as Milotic slapped its tail up, and within the crystals, Milotic danced to show its fan, a rainbow caught within a waterfall, at least for the moment.

“Caught it!” Viola screamed, albeit in a hushed voice.

“This commemorates the lives of wild Milotic,” Wallace declared. “Beauty as hidden within the placid lakes of Hoenn, Sinnoh and Unova, the inner beauty of Pokémon acknowledged at long last given material form, a Pokémon that seized the dreams of Hoenn.”

“Well, that's some flashy move right there,” Lieutenant Surge mentioned. “I betcha we could shake it up, Raichu.”

“Rai, rai!”

“Pika pika pi!” Pika complained to Serena.

“Wait till Mama finds a Thunder Stone, alright?” Serena cooed to Raichu.

“Excellent, Milotic,” Wallace held out a berry that it ate delicately as it floated down. “Come, my lady.”

Even Valerie clapped. “Très bien, that is truly beautiful. Sylveon, we'll have to try our best, alright?”
“Syl vie~!” The Sylveon leapt forth, staring towards all of us humans. Then, it began to pace. Where it stepped, mist began to form, until its entire body was shrouded in the off-pink mist.

“How mysterious,” Elesa commented. “But will Sylveon reach the dazzling heights of Milotic-”

She was cut off as a truly haunting voice sounded from within the mists. A pair of horns formed by shadow appeared, stark against the mists, and the voice cried out, terrified and lonely and afraid that there was a wave of flinching from within. A faint echo, took place like a dying cry.

The shadows reformed, the silhouette of Sylveon within holding its ears flattered, its ruff puffed like an Eevee. A silver wind blew around, circling the Sylveon as its shadow reformed, the haunting melody continuing, a lament of regret and hopelessness.

It was then that the first rays of light shone. The feelers billowed out like ribbons as the wind dismissed the mists; the tails themselves shone, white and resplendent as the stellar fall might have looked from far away. Milotic had been shrouded by a rainbow; this fallen star glowed with its dazzling gleam, and as it did so it screamed with triumph:

“Syl vie on!”

The light was gone; everyone held their breath. Disoriented and amazed, I think only a few had noticed Valerie take her place beside her Pokémon.

“Sylveon has re-enacted its own evolution process,” she spoke quietly. “All Pokémon evolutions come from a desire, a deep love and happiness between Trainer and Pokémon that leads them to find the stones that hold the power to unlock their transformations. Espeon and Umbreon derive the power of their evolutions from the sun and moon respectively, Glaceon and Leafeon from the Ice Rock and Moss Rock. However, unlike its other evolutions, the power of a Sylveon is different. Even I do not know how it works, but, perhaps... Beyond the power hidden in Stones, without the aid of Stones, an Eevee must fight to unlock the divine power within themselves, for the sake of another. The Eevee, weak, unable to fight, and desperate, wishes for power unlike any other to fight, out of deep and abiding love for its Trainer. Then and only then, can they embrace the power within to transform themselves into the divine.”

“An Eevee can transform itself into a Sylveon?” Wallace looked stunned at that information.

“An Eevee, which usually requires an external force to allow it to evolve, whose very own genetic structure is said to be the most unstable, that, in the absence of any other external factor and with only the love that the Eevee feels for its Trainer, chose to evolve,” Daisy whispered, staring with half-lidded eyes to the Sylveon purring in Valerie's arms. “If Salamence and Quagsire represent the power of dreams and wishes, then Sylveon represent power in love.”

Se smiled, if only for a moment, and I was caught again in her faint shadow.


“The Smeargle.”

“Sorry?” I blinked.

“Smeargle learn in an instant attacks which take other Pokémon years to master, and can combine them in nearly infinite ways of which others can only dream of,” Daisy stiffly replied. “There is no divine power within the Smeargle; the Smeargle's determination to Sketch moves is admirable, to poison, stun and paralyse itself in search of copying nature.”
“Erm... right,” I muttered.

My reluctance must have been heard, for Daisy turned her head to regard me. Fiery, defiant, her eyes set, she made me feel like Dr du Bois was glaring at me. “Few people know that the Renaissance was symbolised in the Smeargle. There is a legend about the Smeargle, that is outright banned in the Sinnoh region. Today, most archaeologists do not even dare cite the legend.

“There was once a Smeargle for whom merely being among the greatest was not enough, for he sought the power of the gods,” Daisy recited, almost lost in a memory. By her side, Altair listed down, supporting her even when she was sitting with nary a growl. “He travelled from across the lands, doing "battle" with various Pokémon of legend, losing each match. He was a brilliant painter of objects as well as techniques, and used his income to purchase countless Focus Sashes, which he used in order to last long enough to Sketch their wrath. In time, he climbed Mount Coronet, faced off against Dialga and Palkia in turn, and gained control over time and space itself, a power which he used to perform miracles for personal gain.

“To preserve the harmony of the world, Arceus descended from the heavens and cast Judgement upon this Smeargle. Smeargle, badly wounded but not yet vanquished, Sketched out the attack in all its heavenly glory, and the god was too surprised to move.”

Her lip curled, and for once, I thought, she's gone utterly mad, but then her expression changed from grinning madly to calm, eyes placid as the clear sky, and that was even more unsettling. “Smeargle then cast his own Judgement on Arceus itself, bringing forth and condemning it for every atrocity of mythology, every cruel thing in creation. Arceus – Mighty Arceus, Arceus the Creator – was defeated in battle for the only time in its eternal life.”

I wondered if her disappearance wasn't purely without reason, that somehow the stress of being Champion had turned Daisy Linden loony.

“Thus passed the power of the priests,” this was said in a breathy whisper, like an invocation or a prayer, away from the luminaries of the Pokémon world who had, apparently, not heard the almost blasphemous words. “Thus began the Age of Reason.”
IX: Rêver - To Dream

Chapter Summary

The meeting has begun.

“I...” I shook my head, whatever half-forgotten memory lost to the ether once more. “I’m fine. Just... just a dream.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Day 11 (am): The meeting has begun.*

*It is a curious case of balance that Indigo Plateau attempts to walk, I observe. Its long-time ally, Sinnoh, boasts a Champion that could take on Lance and Clair together. Its rival, Unova, is the same, a Champion blessed with talent that comes once a generation. Kalos, the ally of its rival, a country with a long history of unification under a monarchy, that had not only turned the tables on Unova once, but had also fought Kanto and Johto to a standstill during the last wars between regions.*

*It is clear that, though the decision has been decided, Indigo Plateau wishes to exercise its power, hence Sabrina as speaker. Koga is the only ninja under League employ important enough to be sent to confirm security; he is no threat. Lt Surge fought in the last wars, with Drake; he would remember. This meeting will see if Indigo Plateau shall keep its supremacy, or herald the winds of change. I can feel it, the reason why Diantha wanted me here.*

The fact behind disguises were that, they were always a self-portrait of oneself. The masks we paint is merely a facet. Daisy Linden was a rather innocent, quiet girl that became Champion because her Pokémon fought for her, lending her their strength. Daisy Linden was a mask used to hide the loneliness, being unable to relate to others, being abandoned and alone as Champion of Kalos, elevated to Grand Duchess and princess, and-

“I- I just can't. I'm sorry.”

The current Shauna had never known her mother's cruelty, the arbitrary cruelty that drove the Shauna I had known to leave. Apparently the Champion was not a human being in their eyes, but something on a plinth.

I wanted to discard the mask of Daisy Linden. To do that, in her place I must create a persona opposite of Daisy. Daisy Linden had been a drifting soul for most of her life; the persona must be Kalosian, and act as a native would. Daisy would be content with the same high-waisted outfit, hence my bank accounts should flow to a tab in Boutique Couture instead. Daisy Linden was gentle, kind; the persona would be cruel, rational and self-serving, because kindness could be cruel too, and to be cruel would be a social death sentence.

The clue was in the name. Marguerite would become Daisy’s newest incarnation. If Marguerite was going to be the rational Pokémon professor on fieldwork, then the accompanying cultural
associations must be built as far as possible in Donar's view. Only the Elite Four would ever have a chance to realise that blue-eyed, blonde-haired Daisy Linden had reincarnated into the green-eyed Dr Marguerite Linden du Bois with midnight locks.

The problem with disguise, though, was that the result was always a self-portrait. And I had been Daisy Linden for a lot longer than I had been Marguerite Linden du Bois.

“Are you alright?” Altair stared at me. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled.

“I am,” I whispered. The magic, or whatever force that was left after Banette cursed that Pokémon with its Destiny Bond between it and I, had done its work, and I felt alive once more rather than a dead woman walking. “Look, there's Korrina. Why don't you go catch up with your brother?”

Altair nodded, and left me, approaching the Lucario that followed Korrina around. At least Cynthia had chosen not to bring her Lucario out.

The children save for Iris, which included Wallace's and Winona's apprentices, had fallen asleep, and now, under the cover of night, decisions over the world of Trainers would be made.

“First round of negotiations, taking place on March 17 of the year 20XX midnight. First on the agenda,” Sabrina recited. “Proposition 42: To aim for the unionisation of the Pokémon League. The implication being that, as a union of Trainers, the League would be subject to regulation under the Industry Act and thus hold governmental control. Representing the League of Indigo Plateau, which encompasses the Kanto and Johto regions, speaking in place for the Sevii Islands and the League of the Orange Archipelago, Champion Lance Wataru. Representing the League of Ever Grande City, covering the regions of Hoenn, Almia and Fiore, Champion Wallace Mikuri. Representing the League of Lily of the Valley Island, that encompasses the region of Sinnoh and the Battle Frontier, Champion Cynthia Shirona. Representing the League of Vertress City, that encompasses the region of Unova, Orre and the Decolore Islands, Champion Iris of Dragon Village. Representing the League of Île-de-l'arc, encompassing the region of Kalos and the Royaume-Uni, Champion Daisy Linden.

At this, she took a breath. “Speaker and secretaries: Sabrina Natsume, Gym Leader of Saffron City Gym, Kanto region. Olympia Gojika, Gym Leader of Anistar City Gym, Kalos region. Elite Four Lucian, of Lily of the Valley Island, Sinnoh region. Having affirmed the relevant parties' presence, the witnesses will now swear to allow no word out of this place.”

I n the four corners of the hall, and in the centre, five static generators in the form of a Raichu, a Manectric, a Zebstrika, a Luxray, and a Heliolisk began to hum.

“Static generator okay,” Volkner confirmed.

“The static is messing with my hair, but I'm fine,” Elesa relayed.

“Hahaha! Here I'm fine!” Wattson called.

“C- Clemont reporting! The static generator's working!” Clemont called.

“Surge to Sabrina, Raichu is in full form,” Lt Surge answered. “Over.”

“Security is fine all around,” Koga finally reported after having reappeared from thin air. We were all seated around in a circle formation, Viola, Valerie and Ramos representing the Gym Leaders of Kalos as silent witnesses, reminders that we were deciding the future of Pokémon Training.

“Then, begin,” Sabrina called. “The floor is opened by Champion Shirona.”
Cynthia was the first to start. “First, I would like to state that I am for the passing of Proposition 42. Before recriminations begin, first allow me to elaborate upon the training climate that has changed since Team Plasma's revolt. The trainers were realising that they had the power. It is neither police authority nor Jubilife City that has kept order in the region for years, but its Trainers, the children who leave for the wilderness and train their teams for years. To allow Trainers an authority beyond the norm, to allow the League more powers than we already have, is merely a formalisation of the proposition laid out here. I cannot speak for all Trainers, but a lot of things would be done faster were we to cut off the formalities and rituals that go on. Thus ends my point.”

Ordinarily, the Gym Leaders of Vermilion, Mauville, Sunyshore, Nimbasa and Lumiose would never have met. However, the current situation was too volatile.

“The floor recognises Champion Linden.”

“I dare not agree with Champion Shirona,” I spoke. “First, though, I would like to pose the question: what is a Trainer?”

“What do you mean?” Cynthia asked. “A Trainer is someone who Trains Pokémon! What relevance does this hold?”

“This question is relevant to my points,” I severely answered. “Take each region's criminal organisations. There cannot be a debate that their members are not Trainers, am I not wrong?”

“Much to our disgust,” Cynthia admitted. “But, the trash of Trainers everywhere does not relate to this question!”

“They do,” I clarified. “Because, by ratifying Proposition 42, we will also be giving Trainers under those Teams the same authority that we ourselves hold. We are the Pokémon League, and we hold some of the world's greatest Trainers, but so do those Teams. And, I would like to speak of motivations. Say, for example, the various motivations of the regional reactionary teams. Rockets in Kanto and Johto were based around the ideology of exploiting Pokémon for human gain, which is a reaction to the Oak idea of Pokémon coexisting as equals. On the extreme end of Oak's ideology would be Team Plasma in Unova, who advocated for the liberalisation of Pokémon and the unification of societal forces, ergo, the separation of humans from Pokémon. Hoenn's Team Magma and Team Aqua were a reaction of the desert- and coastal-dwelling population of the Hoenn region to each other when the Hoenn region was unified. Team Galactic wanted to recreate the world, and Team Flare...”

I paused, trying to gather my words. “All motivations discussed are noticeably different. And what of the Pokémon League itself, composed of diverse minorities and groups as it were? The League would find itself with nowhere to stand, because no matter where it stood, no matter what action it takes, someone will hurt for it.”

I took a deep breath. “Furthermore, let us examine the implications. To achieve their ends, the criminal organisations sought out the legendary Pokémon, and some did morally repugnant things such as to genetically engineer powerful Pokémon. The criminal teams have proven that the best way to attain power is to control a Legendary Pokémon. In order to counter such threats, were we to be given the official onus as Trainers under governmental control, we would, eventually, have to control Legendary Pokémon ourselves, even if those Pokémon end up fighting for ideals they themselves do not support. What then? Will we force them, bend natural powers into our will and perhaps cause a catastrophe? The Porygon line, and possibly the Rotom line if Professor Rowan is correct, are the results of such experimentation, to say nothing of the urban legend of Mewtwo, the corrupted clone of Mew. It seems like the logical development of the Rocket ideology of exploiting Pokémon. What other depths shall we, as humans, fall to in the pursuit of power?”
“The floor recognises Champion Iris,” Sabrina stated as Cynthia and I stood down.

“I believe that Trainers on a whole know power,” Iris stated. “But, I do not believe that any one Trainer can bear the responsibility of great power. The ambition of many a Trainer is to control a legendary Pokémon, but we are speaking of living beings as well. I am acquainted with the clash of ideals between Trainers; Team Plasma has proven as such, and with them, Reshiram and Zekrom. True, with additional powers granted to the Pokémon League, we could protect Pokémon better... but, when are we protecting Pokémon, and when are we merely exerting our control, that line remains a blurred zone we do not comprehend. Until those limits can be defined, I, and Unova, cannot endorse this agreement.”

Sabrina eyed me as Iris sat down. “The floor recognises Champion Mikuri.”

The purpose of the speaker was not to express opinion; that was Lance’s decision. Instead, now the speaker and two secretaries were to record the topics discussed, and protect them from psychic thieves looking for insider information. I was forcefully reminded of this when Sabrina did not even turn her head to acknowledge Wallace.

Wallace coughed into his fist. “It's all very well and good, but the Industry Act will also allow the League additional loans from the world banks. From a practical standpoint, right now it is the League’s status over Pokémon tournaments that places it as a sport, a blood sport but a sport, and thus out of financial obligation. Banks, financing, business, industry, etcetera, are kept out of Pokémon battling for this reason. They are not the purview of the League, unless Pokémon become involved in a criminal capacity. They are not our speciality... well, perhaps not to most,” he laughed with a nod to everyone. “Most Trainers are still underage, and I do not think I need to stress that point more, since we have living examples amongst us who also serve as Gym Leaders. We cannot manage these things, not well. If the world favours Pokémon battles, then it merely favours us as a proof of being the best and hardly everyday life.”

I could see quite a few nods of agreement. While Iris could probably be trusted to pick up on the idealistic tones, Wallace had been Champion longer, and could be trusted to speak on the practical aspects. The cool reality, unhindered by his natural superiority with the impromptu competition, had worked – Wallace could see past his personal experience with Magma and Aqua, the two teams that could have been brought down sooner if Trainers had only held the power-

“The floor recognises Champion Wataru,” Sabrina spoke quietly.

“The Pokémon League works primarily with Pokémon,” Lance stood, the quiet air of authority daring anyone to rebut him. “We are debating on a human matter that is imposed upon us. A Trainer is about as far removed from the concept of human society as is possible to still walk amongst human beings. The arguments of Champion Linden and Champion Iris are recognised; the League must limit itself, and by skill and example show our respect to the Pokémon of our world, and Trainers, and Training on a whole. I confess, I walked into this meeting, unknowing of the troubles everyone faced, only aware that within this room contained the possibility of regional war. I am glad that this matter has been brought to our attention.

“With that said,” Lance paused for effect, “I would now like to submit an addendum that the League's response be one with a focus on civic responsibility. As the people who know Pokémon battling, I would prefer that the Leagues each represented submit their decision, that the Pokémon League shall not be assimilated into human politics; that we hope that all League Trainers shall stand by this decision, and that Trainers all over the world will continue to exercise a modicum of civic responsibility to the human and Pokémon communities that has supported their travels all over the world.”
“Vertress City votes aye, with concerns to be addressed in the second round of negotiations.” Sabrina whispered. “Lily of the Valley Island submits a request for an addendum, that Trainers holding four badges and above be allowed into the police examinations, and increase manpower for the understaffed cities of Sinnoh.”

“Actually, that's a good idea,” Lance spoke up. “Saffron, Celadon and Viridian City always suffer from manpower problems in their police forces. If we offer Trainers an alternative path in line with the urban restructuring back home, we could probably increase recruitment.”

“Indigo adds an addendum for the implementation of Lily of the Valley Island,” Sabrina read out.

Wallace raised a hand and said something.

“Ever Grande City would like to submit a request for the League to open investigations into the origins of Proposition 42 prior to committing to any decision,” Sabrina read out. “Citing societal concerns, Champion Mikuri has noted that an over-admiration of the Trainer culture might in fact become detrimental to other notable industries such as medicine and Contests.”

“Île-de-l’arc agrees,” I stated, aware that the meeting could have gone a lot worse. Especially worse, if Steven and Alder was here. “Especially within the Kalos region, there are splinter groups of Flare grunts still existent. Within one year, Dr du Bois and I will submit a report behind the case of the criminal organisation Team Flare. That report shall serve as the basis for which subsequent policies shall be laid out.”

“Understood,” Sabrina commented. “With that, Indigo Plateau and Île-de-l’arc register an abstention prior to decision. Further negotiations shall be decided at the second round.”

I stood, starting to leave. “Request for recess before we begin on the next item on the agenda, controversial research practices.”

“Agreed,” Cynthia stood. “It is Champion Linden and I who shall be doing the majority of the debate here. We should get all the debates hashed out before Champion Linden has to leave.”

“Eh?” Iris blinked, barely hiding her yawn as I left the meeting hall for the salle de bains. The mirror was speckled with droplets as I splashed my face within, watching my old eyes stare back at me. Diantha was an actress, surely she understood politics? Even Wallace understood everything, if only because Winona must have made him study all of Hoenn’s current affairs. Winona Nagi was the most dangerous woman in Hoenn, regardless of Flannery, Roxanne, Liza, Phoebe or Glacia.

The door swung open, admitting Cynthia. The Sinnoh Champion was inclined to ignore me, so I assumed until I made to dry my hands with a towel laid out nearby.

“It is the first time we have met,” Cynthia whispered. There was not a soul that did not know her, especially in her home region.

“Good evening, Champion Cynthia,” I distantly replied. “I was unaware that you had an interest in Pokémon research.”

“Archaeology has always been my trade,” Cynthia replied, completely non-ionic if distant. “And you?”

“I have a greater interest in Pokémon in human sociology,” I answered. “I believe my studies could actually branch into the Pokémon in political science, but that would be a field of greater historiography than I am interested.”
“That sounds like it could use an anthropologist,” Cynthia suggested. “Kalos is home to the researcher Marguerite Linden do Bois, is it not? I actually intended to visit the Sycamore Laboratory concerning the myths of Kalos. What Leader Valerie performed... that was a common Kalos folktale, was it not?”

“Some parts of it has been embellished, certainly,” I answered cautiously. “Yet, Jeanne d'Arc was, to all intents and purposes, the first Kalos Champion as we understand it. The facts of SAS Jeanne d'Arc is at Geosenge Library, unfortunately.”

“I'm sure that Camphrier Town must have its own myths, too,” Cynthia added.

“If you are indeed researching folktales, then it is no wonder that you came to this town,” I answered. “Parfum Palace itself is a historical monument both for the Pokémon that first appeared as well as the population in the tall grass along the Rivière. Other notable spots include Santalune, Shalour, Île-de-l'arc and the cities of the Montagnes de Kalos.”

“Not Lumiose?” Cynthia teased.

“All roads lead to Lumiose,” I advised. “One way or another, you will find your way into the capital of the Kalos region. It seems pointless to add onto your burgeoning itinerary when you will come anyway.”

“True,” Cynthia shook her head. “Fantima, Candice and Caitlin kept saying that Lumiose is the Pokémon world's leader in fashion, and... well, the people of the Kalos region are certainly stylish. I haven't seen so much pageantry short of Hearthome City's Contest Hall. The food is divine and the restaurants hospitable, and even the run-down cafés around the Lumiose Airport... it is a far cry from Sinnoh or Unova. It makes me feel that sometimes... old things must have value.”

“Tonight's caterers would not be happy to hear that,” I crisply answered. “Even in Lumiose City's lowest-grade cafés, you could expect a three-course meal for three thousand Poké. I believe that there is a high-class sushi restaurant owned by a Kanto native, Kazu. Oh, and in some cases battles between proprietor and customer are de rigueur- I mean, they are common.”

“Food must be a subject close to the heart of Kalos,” Cynthia sighed.

“If you wish, perhaps you could research on the association of the Swirlix line and the invention of confectionery in Kalos,” I added, judging by the glazed look in her eyes that she was going to do just that. “But, that is more of my field. The link behind the proximity of Honedge, Swirlix and Spritzee to Parfum Palace might be of more relevance to your field, but that's not really what you came for, is it?”

“That topic sounds interesting, but it does not match up to the legends of Kalos,” Cynthia looked around. “This building does not look three thousand years old.”


“Aren't you curious?” Cynthia blinked. “I have seen the mural at the Lumiose Museum. The legendary king who built the ultimate weapon... what happened to the king in the end? What other wonders are there within the Kalos region?”

“Champion Shirona... why do you chase after fairy tales?” I asked. Any goodwill I felt had melted away at her confirmation.

“Why... it is the interest of an archaeologist, of course,” Cynthia replied.
“Johto boasts the ancient civilisation of Alph,” I pointed out. “Sinnoh itself holds Mt. Coronet, and the associated temples. Kanto and the Orange Archipelago hold the legend of Lugia and Ho-oh. Sinnoh itself must have the most legends of all, including the residents of the three great lakes, Mount Coronet, Sendoff Spring and Spear Pillar. Why did you come to Kalos?”

“For the talks, of course,” Cynthia defended. “You are quite rude, Champion Linden-”

“No,” I spoke. “Your reason to come to Kalos is not for these talks, not for the future of the Trainer world, not for the Sinnoh region. Your point was barely argued; it is not worthy of any student of the humanities, especially not for a field as intense as archaeology. Your reason is different. Different from Lucian, different from Volkner. Perhaps you do not care for the world of Trainers.”

“H- How dare you-!” Cynthia flushed, her face blotchy between the collar of her black robe.

“You would not be the first Champion not to care,” I suggested.

“As Champion of my home region, it is duty,” Cynthia replied coldly.

“But being Champion is lonely and sad,” I reflected. “Especially for an academic career. We can’t attend a conference without our reputation being involved. When troubles occur, the public turns to us to fix things, and then blame us when we cannot. When we actually try to fix things, the resulting instability comes from those delusional enough to believe that the Champion exist solely to solve all Pokémon-related problems. If we are known as Champion, the other career paths we walk are lonely, because the world holds itself in jealousy of our power. Perhaps, Iris is the luckiest of us all.”

“You're envying a child?” Cynthia shook her head.

“She has youth,” I answered. “It becomes so hard, just to live as a human being and not being on a pedestal. I consider myself lucky compared to you, Champion Shirona, but to Iris, I fail completely. After all, Iris has managed to keep her family even after becoming Champion.”

“I am Champion of the Sinnoh League,” Cynthia informed me grimly. “I am one of the Pokémon world’s most successful Trainers. I have matched the wits of men and women alike, and they have yet to win against me and my Pokémon.”

I smiled at her, trying to consider what armour-piercing question I could use. I just went for the classic. “And then what shall you do, Champion Shirona? You will still be just as alone on your island.”

She dropped the soap. It landed under the tap’s flow, the suds building up as I left. It sounded like Cynthia was faced with realisations herself.

I came face to face with Sabrina on my way back to the great hall. “Good evening,” I murmured in acknowledgement.

“Bonds with your Pokémon haunt you.”

I turned around, looking at the Kanto Gym Leader. “As a Trainer, all bonds haunt us.”

“Especially when our partners fall in battle,” Sabrina glanced at me. “You are a very strong woman. Many Trainers would have given up faced with the decimation of most of their team. You have built yourself a new one.”

I smiled to hide my reflex to tear her throat out. I wanted to call Aegis. I wanted him to Night Slash the Kanto region’s most notorious psionic Trainer because she kept looking at me like that. I glanced
down. Her shadow melted, a smile forming followed by glowing, slitted red eyes, and then a small tail attached to a rotund body with small limbs.

I smiled, kneeling down to meet the Kanto region's second-most dangerous creature. “Your Gengar is cute.”

It smirked, its tongue flying out to lick my face. I accepted it, dripping slime and all. “Gengar gen?”

“Until he opened his mouth,” I sadly added. “He looks like those minions in the movies. Can I pinch him?”

Sabrina bit her lip, her eyes twinkling. Her Gengar bristled, offended. I understood. Comparing him to a genetically engineered corn kernel seemed to have offended him somewhat.

“Yes, that was a low blow,” I soothed. “Are you hungry, Gengar?”

“Don't spoil him,” Sabrina intervened, the Ghost flitting back to her side. “A Chandelure, a Jellicent, and an Aegislash. I believe every Ghost Trainer would know that as a recipe for disaster.”

“Crystal, Jelly and Aegis are such lovely babies,” I agreed. “Would you like to see them? I'm sure Aegis would love to see all of you.”

“A Quagsire would have been a better option.”

“I'm not going to drug myself on Quagsire slime, unfortunately,” I admitted. “They're very happy, the Quagsire. Very simple-minded, but happy. Being able to shrug off thunderbolts with a smile must help.”

Sabrina's eyes widened, and she nodded. “I understand that you might not wish for hope. Yet there is something that keeps you alive, is there not?”

I closed my eyes. “I hope the sun is shining tomorrow. That would be reason enough to smile.”

When I opened my eyes, Sabrina, and that cute if rather perverted Gengar, was gone. I smiled. Valerie's answer always seemed to be perfect; childish, but honest and perfect. Sabrina couldn't hold a candle to that.

The smile dropped when I got back into the hall to see it shrouded with Misty Terrain. Judging from the nature of the room, and that Lance had his Pokéball out, I guessed rather correctly that the Indigo Champion must have taken offence to something.

“A child can't understand what you're proposing!” He yelled at Iris in a manner rather our of character. There was a Dragonair out. I was halfway impressed at how disciplined it was, to stay in the middle of a no-Dragon zone.

“I- I don't understand!” Iris exclaimed, panicked. “I just said that if we have so many problems Indigo Plateau must be doing something wrong...”


“I'm entitled to my opinion,” Iris defiantly answered, staring down at Valerie's Sylveon, the only thing between her and that Dragonair. The reason for Valerie's appearance was becoming more apparent as both Dragon Trainers faced each other, and mentally I thanked Siebold for planning that out.
“This hall was not meant to accommodate a Dragonite,” I severely directed towards both Champions. “Neither is it meant for a Haxorus. Tell me, Lance, what is the issue?”

“Beauty is universal,” Valerie quoted, her eyes clouded as if in a faraway dream. “To control beauty is another form of power.”

All eyes seemed to be on Lance.

“It is impossible to comprehend the stress of using one Pokémon League to cover two regions,” Lance stiffly explained.

“There is unrest at every moment of life,” I archly commented. “Champion Iris is well within her rights to make a suggestion.”

“Her suggestion offends the Indigo League,” Lance snarled.

“And then it falls to the Indigo Champion to punish for a slight to the League’s honour?” I commented. “The implications are astounding.”

“And what about you, Kalos’s little heroine?” Lance snapped. “I know Kanto Trainers who are ten of you and use nothing more than a Pikachu.”

“There is only one of me,” I answered. “I have merely lacked the luxury to find these Kanto Trainers. Cool your head, Champion Wataru. Is there any other important topic to discuss?”

“No...” Olympia drawled.

“Then sleep is the order to be given until tomorrow,” I answered. “Champion Iris, if you will.”

“Y- Yes!” Iris quickly followed behind, leaving Diantha and the Elite Four to pack up. As I passed, I spotted Wikstrom staring by, and I had to ignore him as I listened to Iris chattering.

“And then Hydreigon had to eat the whole table and all...”

“Mmm,” it was almost soothing, but I was hardly keen to have my ear talked off. “May I call you Iris?”

“S- Sure,” Iris nodded. “Erm... you're Daisy, right?”

“...yes,” the lie tripped on my tongue. “Are you lonely, Iris?”

“Caitlin’s my friend,” Iris defended. “She's lazy, but she's my friend. And my Pokémon are my friends too.”

The conversation somehow segued from there. On top of a Haxorus and Hydreigon, she had a Druddigon, an Aggron, an Archeops and a Lapras. The last was a bit odd, and I said as much.

“And what about you?” Iris asked. “I mean, I know you have a Lucario like Cynthia, but what else?”

“I have a Chandelure, a Jellicent, an Aegislash and a Floette,” I answered. “I also had a Flygon, but she decided to fly around Kalos. I think she's hanging outside of Lumiose at the moment.”

“Hanging around?” Iris blinked.

I looked around. To show the crack between Daisy Linden and Marguerite Linden du Bois was
always entertaining. “It's very hard to move around with a Flygon. Like trekking through Sinnoh with a Salamence on your tail in Snowpoint.”

“Uhh,” Iris shuddered. “I see your point. I like all of my Pokémon, but some of them are really weak to Ice.”

“I don't have a particular like or dislike,” I answered.

“I think Ms Valerie is very strong, to stand up to a Champion like that,” Iris discussed. “That Sylveon is both cute and strong!”

“It's also immune to Dragon-type attacks,” I added. “Plus, that mist attack that Sylveon used in the field was Misty Terrain, which not only prevents status effects, but also reduces the damage taken from Dragon-type attacks. In that field, it might as well be a Dragon graveyard.”

“Eh?!” Iris nearly shouted in alarm. “It sounds scary!”

“If that was the case, then the Ralts and Cleffa line should terrify as well,” I observed.

“Even as a Champion, I can't get used to Ice-type Pokémon sometimes,” Iris sighed. “And now there's a new Pokémon type... Ms Daisy, how did you get used to it?”

“The new type?” I blinked. “I became a Trainer at the same time when the Fairy type came out, and everything was new to me. It made no difference to my education. And, even against Diantha's Gardevoir, my Venusaur dealt the finishing blow with Sludge Bomb.”

“Your Venusaur?” Iris exclaimed. “Can I see it?”

I stopped in my tracks. Iris noticed the pause, but did not comment on it. “...he died.”

Iris gasped, but I did not notice as we approached the guest wing. “I suppose I shall take my leave then. Bonne nuit.”

“I'm... sorry if I mentioned anything uncomfortable,” Iris apologised, a certain tension around us. “Sorry.”

“It's not a problem,” I mechanically replied before I turned my back on the Unova Champion. “If that is all.”

“It's...” Iris swallowed. “I think the palace is haunted!”

“It's a palace that saw a war that killed a king and his entire guard outside,” I flippantly replied. “Of course's it is haunted.”

“Eek!” Iris squealed. “Please don't say such horrible things! My room... my room has things moving around!”

I stopped. “Then why did you not alert the staff?” I asked as I turned back to her. “Lead the way.”

“Y- Yes!” Iris walked a bit down the hallway, before she opened a door. “Please.”

I suppose that Iris's room could be called the green room, if such a thing existed. There was a leaf-green wallpaper, matched with the curtains of the four-poster, the window curtains, and the bedspread. The furniture inside was heavy oaks and associated dark woods, perfect if Iris decided to let her Pokémon sleep around. Sturdy furniture needed a bit of effort for Dragons to break.
“The cabinet?” I asked, knocking around. “Stay back, please.”

“Y- Yes?” she asked as I produced a Pokéball. It released a sleepy blue Floette, who yawned, giving me a rather irritated evil eye.

“It looks like we have something here,” I told her seriously. “We're going to help Iris look around.”

Liz grumbled some more, but floated around me.

“Use Flash,” I asked, Liz's flower glowing with a soft white light within that threw shadows against the bedspread.

“There's nothing,” I turned to Iris.

“I- I don't want to sleep,” Iris admitted. “I... it's my first summit. Alder was supposed to come along, but... his partner's death anniversary is coming. I've been having nightmares since I went to Caitlin's house in Undella Town, and it won't stop. Please...”

I leaned over and gave her a hug. “And Elesa?”

“She doesn't understand,” Iris admitted. “I don't want to be seen as more immature than I already am. I... I represent the Unova region, and everyone I love is there.”

“What was Unova thinking...?” I whispered, eyeing the shadows. “What do these nightmares show?”

“Something chasing... me, us...” Iris shuddered. “It's strange.”

“If you're having nightmares...” I clapped my hands. “Prepare for bed.”

“What?” Iris blinked.

“If it comes to situations like this, then a magic charm would work,” I waved my hands. “Go.”

Iris slowly nodded, rummaging in her closet only for a change of clothes before moving towards the en suite bathroom. The door closed, I checked the windows and shut them loosely as Liz used an Aromatherapy on the sheets as I fanned them out. The shadows remained, as I had first thought.

“How lucky,” I whispered. “This song is for you, dark hero.”

Iris came out in pyjamas, and I bundled her into the large bed that seemed to swallow her petite form. For a moment, I realised that I should have been taller, then I realised that I was about as short as her. I was older, but not by a lot, and I had the intelligence. I did not even know what Iris felt, coming to the Kalos region in a meeting that all she knew might have resulted in war.

“I was travelling in Kanto and Hoenn before,” I reflected. “I think I had approached Sinnoh once or twice. You know, there exists a charm to chase away nightmares.”

“A charm?” Iris echoed.

“A magic charm,” I agreed, snapping my fingers to a tune I only vaguely remembered, as if from a fading dream. “Liz. Round. I will see a morning dream, come to greet the dawn.”

“Flo!” It was a form of the move I had taught, and then improvised accordingly. As Liz began to sing, I changed the lyrics slightly, until the lullaby had been unfolded between us.
“No, not just right yet,
No, not just right yet,
Who knows what colour will we greet the dawn.

No, not just right yet,
No, not just right yet,
The night is still young, there is time to eat.
Morning bells will chime, wherever we are~

Now then, good morning, Nightmare,
The bad dream is asleep now, it is over.”

Iris clapped, albeit slowly. “That was a nice lullaby, Ms Daisy.”

“You're very trusting,” I answered in reply. “The original version... Liz, sing with me.”

“Flo, flo!” Liz spun around, beginning the song as my lips parted.

“Watashi wa asa no yume wo miru...
Mada dame yo,
Mada dame yo,
Nani iro no, asa ga kuru?

Mada dame yo,
Mada dame yo,
Mada you wa, tabekake yo.
Nemuru beru ga naru, doko ni iru...?

Saa ohayou, Nightmare,
Warui oyume wa, korekkiri...”

Iris blinked, her eyes lidded over as the Sweet Scent Liz released at the Sing hidden within the Sweet Scent took effect, before she succumbed to slumber, looking rather young. I wrapped her in the blankets and left, Liz hovering behind me and the shadow trailing behind.

Serena and Shauna might have assured me that in Kalos, people are very hospitable. In Sinnoh, which we were living in for a spell, they give things out for free. A Potion here, a Pokéball here, etcetera. In Kanto and Johto, they're a bit more stingy, but it's supposed to be – according to elementary school – easier to live off of the land.

In Kalos, here is their idea of dinner; a three-course meal of hors d’œuvres, a main course and either Skiddo cheese or dessert is just the tip of the iceberg. For your information, I got through five courses watching Wallace and Valeria show off, and then we were sent back to the hotel, this time with an Elite Four escort. I nearly did an about-face as Wikstrom himself was present.

“As part of the Elite Four, I am honour-bound to assist the Champion,” Wikstrom stoically answered. He had discarded the armour for a dress shirt, pants held up by a belt and tough leather shoes that looked like they could trek through Viridian City and still have that rugged look. I saw Serena's eyes glaze over with Shauna's titters.

“I heard from Madame Linden that you faced some trouble with the local Honedge,” Wikstrom mentioned as we walked down Palais Lane. “Did the townspeople not warn you?”
“Well, I wasn't expecting a monster sword to come stabbing at us,” Shauna muttered.

“I hope the circumstances will not sour your experience tonight,” Wikstrom answered.

“No,” Serena shook her head. “We had fun, and it was... impressive. Mme Linden has done a lot for us. Altair, on the other hand... what do you think, Donar?”

“I'm... undecided.” I swallowed. In the end, I had bowed out of choosing between Sylveon and Milotic, because there was no criteria I could choose. I had left feeling like... like I had left some rupture between Hoenn and Kalos.

“Donar's the strong, silent type,” Shauna snickered. “We're sorry for giving you trouble, M. Wikstrom.”

“It is not a problem,” Wikstrom answered. “It is I who should apologise in the stead of Mme Linden.”

“Erm, Mr Wikstrom...” I volunteered. “Do you...” Always act like this, I wanted to say, but found myself lost.

“My family descended from the chevaliers of the Royal Court of Kalos,” Wikstrom explained. “Since the start, I had decided I wanted to train Steel-type Pokémon, to change their status as mere weapons to something higher. Of course, my path took me to a meeting with a Honedge right here, without arms or Pokémon.”

“You've also met a Honedge?” Shauna blinked.

At this, he produced a Pokéball. “My partner, my sword and shield, Aegislash!”

Seeing the Royal Sword Pokémon reminded me of Dr du Bois, of her Aegislash and its monstrous power. “A- Aegislash...”

“That woman had one too,” Serena's eyes were wide.

“That woman?” Wikstrom sounded surprised.

“She's conniving and tricky and always saying things to put people off...” Serena complained. “I hate her!”

“If she has an Aegislash, I'm not surprised,” Wikstrom commented, patting one of his Pokémon's tassels. “For an Aegislash to battle effectively, it requires one to be a master of mind games, prediction, and surprise. Being too predictable makes it easy for the opponent to counter and destroy Aegislash before it can do anything. Being unpredictable allows you to deal massive damage while leaving your opponent constantly guessing what to do. I've heard of Trainers going for a whole personality overhaul just so that their opponents cannot decide how to counter while their Aegislash decimates the battlefield. In every sense, Honedge, Doublade and Aegislash are the Pokémon of a knight, and as descendant of a knight, I honour that bond.”

“That's truly admirable,” I said, completely without sarcasm. “Erm... do people really swing around their Aegislash?”

“Only a Machoke would want to carry 53.7 kilogram of gold and iron on one arm,” Wikstrom bluntly replied. “The weight is mitigated due to the Aegislash, which has the ability to detect leadership qualities in people. To use an Aegislash as a battle weapon, is the mark of an Aegislash master who has forged a truly deep bond of trust. Other than that, it just stands for a huge threat.”
“A threat?” Shauna blinked.

“Most swords don’t stab the other in the back when you throw them,” Wikstrom commented. I decided not to analyse his meaning too deeply.

An accordion rang out over Camphrier, peaceful and sleepy, as we bid Shauna and Wikstrom goodbye at the Pokémon Centre. Wikstrom said nothing but pleasantries as he turned back to walk down the path towards Parfum Palace, and Serena and I just headed for our rooms. I let my Pokémon out of their Pokéballs to prepare for sleep, and allow them some room to stretch their limbs, resolving to call the Pokémon Centre if Dr du Bois did not return for some reason.

My face me the pillow. Somehow, my vision was greeted by white, that melted into grey, that melted into-

There was a rather exotic tone about as I ran, chanting following my every footstep. A constant repetitive beat that merged with multiple layers of instruments that made it disturbing and discordant, too many echoes of a single song being played over and over again on different instruments at different speeds.

Beside me, a Delphox screeched – I recognised the beast from reading through the Central Kalos Pokédex, the beast that Elmo would turn into. Unlike the dull red-yellow the Pokédex showed, though, this one glowed white with power, bright and great as a magnesium flare. I heard the pattering of footsteps, and I laughed.

“Well, Altair?” I heard my own voice, feminine and pitched low.

*Both wings have been evacuated and cleaned,* Altair nodded. *I had no need to be present, not with Mme Drasna on hand.*

“I got it,” I nodded. “Shall we, then?”

*Yes.*

“Delphi, let us,” I ordered, turning on one foot to set off at a brisk jog. I must have turned many corners of darkened hallway before I came across a bunch of guys in red suits. Well, actually, everything about them was red. Sunglasses, dyed hair, suits.

One stepped up, throwing a Pokéball. “Go, Liepard!”

“Altair, Swords Dance!” I ordered.

“Fake Out!” the female Trainer with the Liepard called as the purple and yellow leopard leapt forth and stopped Altair.

“Good,” I praised. “Aura Sphere!”

Now that the leopard was close, the Lucario shoved a glowing ball of light up its nose. This probably had the effect of breaking cartilage, since I heard a crack of bone and the Liepard flew off into the distance.

“Bisharp!” the Trainer now called, releasing a living version of the statue at Parfum Palace.

I’d expected Altair to move, but I just snapped my fingers. My answers were provided when the skylights overhead crashed, a curtain of glass descending with the speed, colouration and claws of a Flygon.
“Delphi, Future Sight,” I tersely called. “Vega, these Flare administrators. You're the fastest one here. Well?”

The dragon grunted in acknowledgement, a sphere of light charged.

“We're counting on you,” I nodded. “Dragon Claw at close quarters. Earth Power at far quarters. Anything in between is up to you, as long as you don't use Hyper Beam or Sandstorm. Altair, Delphi. The Legendary Pokémon still needs to be freed.”

The Delphox and Lucario murmured in acknowledgement, running as we took off for the next room. Soon, we arrived at a circular vault, the kind with wires trailing from the ceiling, and there was a six-on-one battle. I can't really describe everything, but that Delphox was damned scary, especially with Future Sight. What the Flare mooks were protecting, though... it looked like a tree and an egg. Why?

“Found them,” I breathed a sigh, approaching the platforms where said tree and egg were. “I'm going to let you two out, alright? It's over.”

I stepped back. “Altair.”

*Understood.* He broke a steel cable. Sparks scattered over the metal casing, and yet the Lucario did not flinch. Not as the tree shook, not as the egg began to crack. Not as pink and white merged with red and black. Not as the branches of the tree began to shake, as the trunk splayed out into spindly legs. As the eggshell cracked, wings spread, and a beak formed to cry out. As auras mixed, he flinched.

Both the monsters, or Pokémon, began to scream, the walls shaking with their mirth and something undefinable. The horns grew larger, the jewels upon it glowing with the colours of a rainbow that it swung as the Delphox used its wand to defend me.

I screamed as the Delphox was beheaded in an instant. The other, bird-like Pokémon, bellowed, the dark red aura flying out to strike that Altair and I dodged.

“Everyone!” I screamed, unleashing three more Pokéballs. A Sealeo, large and fat, that read the situation perfectly and shot ice at the bird. A Venusaur bellowed, standing in front of me to defend, its legs thick as tree trunks and the flower maybe just as big as a tree. A Banette, the Marionette Pokémon chuckling before I snapped at it to use Phantom Force.

I raised my arm. “Deneb!”

The Venusaur bellowed in answer.

“We're going to have to chase the Legendary Pokémon away from this town,” I called. “Understood? Altair, Sealeo and you, double team the other with ice and fists. Banette, you're weak to darkness, you're going to support Deneb with Will-O-Wisp.”

“*Ne, ne!*” the Marionette's mouth unzipped to show its teeth.

The Venusaur cried out again, but there was no time, not since one of my Pokémon, no, my first Pokémon, had died, and then now... now I had a town to protect. I had a region to safeguard.

I raised my arm, and around my left wrist, I saw the jewel upon it begin to glow. “Evolve, Deneb! Venoshock!”

The flower on the back of the Venusaur expanded, glowing purple before it spat a mass of poisonous smog at the monster, the one that was impatiently pawing around, that glowed with a pearlescent
light before it jumped, lightning-fast, and then a pink blast knocked Deneb back. The Venusaur bellowed as the flower upon its head was gored through, and the Banette was little better, the ghostly fire it used barely scratching at the true monster, the one shrouded in pink and waving its horns and then it attacked me.

I screamed as the pink blast nearly got to me, but Deneb had tanked most of it. My Venusaur was suffering, because this Pokémon didn't understand-

Sealeo backed slightly, its breath whistling.

“**Icy Wind!**” I called to the seal, who blew a spiralling gale that enveloped both shadowed, legendary monsters.

The horned one. The one that looked like a deer. The proud arrangement of horns lowered, glowing with the colours of the rainbow, but predominantly green. I recognised the move as Megahorn. It was going to hit Deneb.

My Venusaur charged a Solarbeam, aware that this was going to be its last attack. Aware that it was defending its trainer to the last. He was going to die. My Venusaur bellowed in defiance, but could not move within the vortex created by the Solar Beam it was about to fire. Around it was the mangled remnants of some of the Flares' Pokémon, Delphi amongst them.

“**Deneb!**” I screamed, swinging out. I stumbled, landing in front of the charging deer. The horn stabbed through my spine and came out in the other end. I looked straight, into Deneb's dying face where the pointed end of the horn had breached his skull.

“**Fire!**"

The Legendary Pokémon tried to move, but I held it down by the simple application of heaping my weight upon it. Monstrously strong Pokémon or whatever, I guessed physics really wasn't with it here since it could barely do anything but dig its heels and tug, and compared to holding onto a dying Venusaur for support, anything short of some weird power was going to ensure that the deer was going to stay.

“I...” I began to cry. “Can you create a Destiny Bond between people?”

It nodded solemnly. A zip pulled across its face in a broad, jagged grin that belied its panic. The deer screamed, trying to rip its horns out, but the many points it held proved to be its downfall. Especially as I clung onto them in my stomach, in my stained hands.

“Why did our comrades die?” I whispered. “I don't want this. All of this... Delphi and Deneb-”

Across the room, the bird was glowing a reddish-black. It threw a glowing red wing out, Sealeo throwing herself in Altair's path, tackling the Lucario off course but taking the brunt of the attack. Her empty eyes greeted me as the thick, fatty body slapped the floor.


*What are you thinking?*

Deneb cried, too tired to do anything but watch. The deer-like Pokémon, perhaps sensing death or the Banette's power in linking destinies, began to cry.

“For every wish these Pokémon granted, an additional curse was inflicted,” I gasped. “Altair... go! This is our best chance!”
“When you get back...” I whispered. “If they're still alive, Flash Cannon. Flash Cannon everything. Steel is the only way to kill the immortal. Now!”

The bird-like Pokémon screamed at the deer and I, trying to move if not for that one of its wings had broken under one particularly vicious attack.

“I gave you fair warning,” I growled as Altair hurriedly left. “I... do you think yourselves as gods to rain judgement upon humans? Just because you rule life and death? You lost responsibility the day we gained free will.”

It screamed some more, a low, musical cry of rage.

I saw the ghostly chains of fate intertwine in Banette's hands, and I fell down, leaning against the wall, half-dangling between Deneb's corpse, the horns, and the wall. I could see the bird Pokémon try to attack, move, do something, but I guessed that its bones were broken since it could barely do more than lift its head.

“I'm sorry our time is so short,” I whispered as I patted its head. “Thanks, Banette.”

Altair entered the room again, perched on Vega's back just as the bird managed to get off an attack. As I saw the Oblivion Wing approach, I reflected-

_How ironic that the immortal shall die with me._

I felt something cold hit my back and finally I could scream. I opened my eyes. I did nothing else. Heart thundering in my ears, I looked up at the plastered ceiling.

“I had a horrible dream,” I reflected. “I dreamt that I owned a white Delphox that was beheaded by a deer and a Venusaur that died firing a Solarbeam at the deer and a Sealeo that died defending my Pokémon from an Oblivion Wing and a Banette that used Destiny Bond to make sure both the bird and the deer died with me.”

I paused. That was absurd. I only had Frogadier, Fletchling and Bulbasaur. Bulbasaur was nowhere near evolution yet. The thing about dreams is that it was only when I woke up that I realised something was strange.

“Bulba?” Bulbasaur blinked from its restful place on the windowsill.

“Morning, Bulbasaur.” I shook my head, and went to wash my face, brush my teeth, and generally do all the crap I reserved for just waking up. I don't think you're interested in my morning routine, no need to bore you with the general details.

“What's wrong, Donar?” Serena asked as I went into the hotel's attached cafeteria for breakfast. “You look pale. Bad night?”

I blinked at her, Serena with blonde hair and blue eyes, and something nagged at me. “You remind me of someone... someone I met in a dream.”

“Ha?” Serena placed a hand on her hip. “Are you alright, Donar?”

“...” I shook my head, whatever half-forgotten memory lost to the ether once more. “I'm fine. Just... just a dream.”
Iris was followed by a very nice Pokémon. I would like to bring him on the journey. Altair might disapprove. Correction. He does disapprove, despite our visitor's winning personality. Yet he also accepts that the issues are purely logistical. With any luck, perhaps I could turn the boy to my view once I give him my proposal.

If he doesn't run screaming first, that is.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

The song, *I Dream of Dawn*, composed by Yuki Kajiura and performed by Fictionjuncture Asuka, featured in the movie *Puella Magi Madoka Magica: Rebellion*. The English is my adaptation of the ditty.

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
Chapter Summary

“Marguerite Linden du Bois,” I quickly introduced myself. “I’m a researcher at the Sycamore Laboratory specialising in Pokémon-human interaction on a sociological basis. I am a Trainer by default, so I would know the only Kalosian Trainer who could match the Kalos Champion.”

“This Pitch-Black Pokémon native to Sinnoh actually followed Cynthia to Unova, and from Unova it came via Iris to Parfum Palace,” Dr du Bois calmly explained, as if she met a legendary Pokémon everyday. “I decided to take him along. What do you think?”

Day 13: The visitor and I stayed for one day in Parfum Palace. He liked the jardins, especially the parterre. There was a comparison of Sinnoh and Kalos architecture, that ended when he concluded that despite certain gems, Kalos did have a better overall structure, though his own preference went towards au naturel. It was after that discussion of landscape architecture that came the real problem...

“No, you can't keep him!”

The heart of the trouble seemed to have followed Iris to Kalos from Unova, and from Unova it had come from Sinnoh via Cynthia. Cynthia certainly reacted quickly when faced with him.

A dark claw wrapped around the handle delicately, the cup being lifted and then the hot tea sipped as delicately as any surgeon could manage. How it managed that without a mouth should be discussed with Aegis. Its one beady blue eye glimmered towards the speaker, said Champion of the Sinnoh region, and then it proceeded to turn its head to ignore her.

“It belongs to Newmoon Island!” Cynthia raged. “That Pokémon is bad news!”

“He spent the past night in my room,” I commented. “Very restfully, I might add. I like him.”

“He?” Cynthia sputtered.

“In the Kalosian tradition, things usually have a gender,” I supplied. “In the absence of one, we usually affix a third-person masculine article. For convenience, this Pokémon is now a he.”

It sniffed the tea, drank some more, and meditated.

“It- It's a restricted Pokémon!” Cynthia protested.

“By choice,” I wanted to smile. “Why don't you try to detain him, Champion Shirona? Perhaps you can. You are the Sinnoh region’s protector.”

“You can't expect me to believe that you spent a night sleeping with that nightmare in your room!”

“Of course not.” I added, “He spent two nights.”
I then stood up. “Well, as cross-regional laws indicate, I am supposed to inform the Champion's office of the Pokémon's region of origin of my ownership. With that done, Darkrai is effectively a citizen of Kalos. Good day.”

Darkrai floated out behind me. “That was... unusual.”

Altair stood outside, definitely awaiting me. On his shoulder, Liz perched, floating to inspect Darkrai before extending her flower tentatively. Darkrai responded with a claw that merely touched the flower, before he let go.

“You're already feeding three Ghosts,” Altair commented. “Any more and perhaps that curse might run out.”

I envied AZ sometimes. He had a goal to find the bloody Floette that started the whole saga to begin with as a goal, which was somewhat determined and a tearjerker all in one. “I've made arrangements for after-care. You could work for the Looker Bureau, Essentia could use some help. I'm pretty sure I taught you well enough to pass in Lumiose, at least. A Crobat and a Malamar could build something.”

“That is not the point, Trainer,” Altair replied. “Darkrai, you followed the Unova Champion's nightmares here?”

“Yes,” Darkrai confirmed. “You are unlike any Fighting-type Pokémon.”

“I am part-Steel, and with it I have the patience to ask,” Altair answered. “Hanging around with a cynical mistress with a penchant for education also means that I can pass in human society.”

“Oi,” I grumbled, but without heat.

“She called to you with a charm, did she not?” Altair asked.

“Yes.”

“That charm's original purpose was to lure nightmarish spirits to the bodies of shamans, who would then exorcise the spirits,” Altair snarled. “Do you understand? She already knew your true identity. She did that performance to get you to attach to her. I cannot allow my mistress to throw the life my compatriots died for-”

“Altair,” I cut in. My partner's telepathic speech was petering to an end when I seized the chance. “I don't mind. Vega is on vacation, and we're one member short. That charm isn't permanent, and a Darkrai as old as him can shake off the effects pretty easily. That Bad Dreams ability might be a bit troublesome, but we'll find a way.”

“You would still accept me, knowing my ability?” he, the Pokémon from Sinnoh, questioned.

“You know the nature of this curse?” I extended my hand, allowing that icy blue eye to examine the rather unremarkable flesh.

“I do. The horned one?”

“And the herald,” I tilted my head. “It's rather hard to attack me if I'm already living in a nightmare, is it not?”

“So you look to break this curse?”
“Is there a point?”

“If you plead with the horned one, perhaps he could reverse his work.”

“I refuse,” I answered severely. “What my team did to him is not something that can be forgiven so easily. Furthermore, I have my studies to do, and my partner would like me to live a little longer, for some reason. If you wish, I leave by noon. If not, then Cynthia would probably see that you return to Sinnoh safely. You can take transportation, right?”

“I flew.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you have to,” I answered, running a hand through my newly darkened hair. “I’ll be waiting for your answer.”

“You are a Trainer?”

“I’m too dependent on my Lucario to do so,” I answered self-depreciatingly, allowing Altair to guide me by an arm down the hallway, Darkrai floating behind me.

“The mask you present to the rest of the world... is fascinating,” Darkrai answered. “You want others to know your true self, yet you only show them a false face. How can anyone know you if you don’t reveal yourself?”

“In most of the world's mythology, you are the god of darkness who induces nightmares, and most of the time as a power-hungry megalomaniac,” I blandly answered. “Right now, we are speaking as equals, acquaintances whose threads of fate just happened to be intertwined, and you are a rational creature. Which is the real Darkrai?”

“If you hide behind masks, you are afraid that they will find out who you really are.”

“It’s not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me,” I quoted. “Who said that I was hiding a mask, anyway? Altair, let’s go.”

“Understood.”

As morning approached to noon, I was obsessed with packing, planning, and I typed a draft message on my Holo Caster to Donar. It was unfortunate, but Daisy Linden would be put away once more, and Dr Marguerite Linden du Bois put back into place. If Altair gave any indication of discomfort, or if somehow the masks I used to deal with the world had different auras, he never showed it. “With this research...”

“No great rush,” I replied, tucking my hair behind my left ear as a passing breeze tossed my hair about, in the shadow of Parfum Palace. “Bonjour, Donar.”

“Dr du Bois?” Donar gaped, staring at Altair. He clung onto his bag, his Fletchling clinging to his cap. “Hi, Doctor. Erm... what about Ms Linden?”

“Daisy has entrusted Altair to me,” I answered. Technically not a lie; since a Trainer's Pokémon is entrusted to their own Trainer. “Speaking of which. We may have a new member to join us. Shall we set off for Ambrette or Cyllage?”

“What's the difference?” Donar frowned. “Cyllage... that's the next gym, right?”

“Yes,” I reflected. “The Cyllage Gym Leader Grant was not present in Parfum Palace during the League conference, if I remember Daisy saying so. Ambrette Town and Cyllage City both lie along
the Muraille Coast, and both can be accessed by the Connecting Cave we are headed towards. Whismur have destroyed the local Zubat and Geodude population, so we can expect a change in scenery.”

“Whismur?” Donar frowned. “Erm... do you think I can take on Grant, as I am?”

“Grant is a Rock-type specialist.”

“And...?”

“He will use two Pokémon,” I counted. “You decide yourself. You learned about types in school, right?”

“Yeah...” Donar frowned. “Erm, Rock is super effective against Flying, Fire, Ice and Bug... weak against Water, Grass, Fighting, Ground and Steel. Still, if Grant is stronger than Viola, then Frogadier might not be a good idea. I don't think Bulbasaur can get into a battle now either.”

“Use the Whismur as target practice,” I suggested as we passed the Battle Château. “If you wish it, we could get Bulbasaur some more practice at the Château.”

“That pack of elitists?” Donar wrinkled his nose. “No thanks. I'll take my chance against the Whismur.”

“As you wish.”

Donar paused as we walked past a school of Spritzee, a swarm of Swirlix, and finally a pack of Smeargle. “About Smeargle... they're very nice Pokémon, aren't they?”

“Their unique move, Sketch, was the inspiration of the modern Technical Machine,” I answered. “That, and the Beautifly.”

“Huh?”

“We have a case of divergent evolution in the Wurmple,” I explained. “From one Wurmple, you can get a Silcoon or a Cascoon, which would then evolve to Beautifly or Dustox respectively. A Meowth could create gold using Pay Day, but there is no Pokémon more associated with alchemists than the Beautifly.”

“Why?” he asked.

“Unlike most Pokémon, whose attacks are developed entirely internally, a Beautifly's thorax is so small and fragile,” I explained. “Its attacks from Stun Spore to Bug Buzz are thus produced in plain view, on their wings. Many alchemists, especially amongst the forest-dwelling denizens of Fortree City, has spent their life studying Beautifly in the hope of infinite wealth. Although they failed to teach this Pokémon Pay Day, or to turn Silver Wind into solid silver, they discovered a great deal about how Pokémon attacks worked. The first Move Tutors in Hoenn are descended from Beautifly alchemists, and the Technical Machine developed from there when science studied the various methods by which Smeargle Sketched moves.”

“I see...” Donar looked doubtful, but accepting as we climbed a flight of steps. “I met Daisy Linden.”

“And?”

“Your... your sister-in-law is the Champion of Kalos,” Donar waved a hand. “Altair's a Champion's Pokémon, and a close Pokémon at that! Why didn't you say so?”
“How is this relevant?” I asked.

“It is!” Donar shouted. “Shouldn’t you be more protective of her? I think... I don’t quite know, but I think Daisy’s under a lot of stress. Shouldn’t Altair be by her side, supporting her?”

“You make it sound like I made her lend Altair to me,” I severely narrowed my eyes.

“Sorry...”

“Do you really think I could make Altair do anything he doesn't want to?” I archly questioned.

“You have his Pokéball,” he answered slowly.

“And he has Extreme Speed,” I rebutted. “He can run out of the Pokéball range and back to Daisy if he wanted. Lucario are famous for their strong sense of justice and their fighting skills as well. I reiterate; I cannot make a Lucario do anything against its will.”

I then leaned back and examined the results of my verbal evisceration, before I laid a balm: “Besides, removing the stress of training off for a while would be good for Daisy, as you might observed. She’s a bit high-strung.”

“Understatement,” Donar muttered, but made no mention of it.

I could feel Altair's derision at my self-description. Still weird, describing the same person as two different people.

As long as no one reveals it, Marguerite Linden du Bois can live. That was what I thought as I climbed the steps before I was confronted by my past.

“Pika, Thunder Wave!” Serena was battling, and against her opponent, it looked like she was having a hard time. There was not a dark blue blur, before water missiles collided with the creature, knocking it out.

“Fast!” Donar gasped, staring as the Pokémon slowed down, flipping to land on its feet.

It was a large, bipedal, frog-like Pokémon. Its body and legs were a dark bluish-purple, large white bubbles floating upon its legs and arms. White spots were present over its eyes, upon its triangular head. Its feet were webbed, back feet between two toes and front feet between three toes. Its chest was an off-white, its triangular, flat features on a yellow and purple face. Its eyes with white sclera, red irises, and white pupils glistened, standing out from the large, projecting blue stripes down the middle of its head and the projecting blue stripes in between its large, yellow ears. Its mouth is hidden behind a large, pink tongue that wraps around its neck, extending outward behind its head.

“That Pikachu requires a bit more training, Serena!” the Trainer called. “Otherwise, Jean is going to keep winning!”

“Papa is too strong!” Serena just shot back. “Oh, Donar? Papa came over with Jean! Erm, Papa, this is Donar Oak, our next-door neighbour. Donar, this is my father—”

“Calem Calme,” I spoke the name I had not heard from over the years. “And that is his... Greninja.”

Perhaps I should take a moment to explain. Despite the type advantage and Greninja's clearly larger move pool and speed, Delphi always won against Jean, the Greninja. And each time I was faced with it, or its earlier incarnations, the comptine kept running through my head:
Il pleut il mouille,
C ’est la fête à la grenouille.
Il pleut il fait beau temps,
C ’est la fête au paysan.

Il pleut, il mouille,
C ’est la fête à la grenouille.
Quand il ne pleuvra plus,
Ce sera la fête à la tortue!

So each time the Greninja appeared, it had its own mental theme music. Which was still not going to put it as bad as the mental music Darkrai would have.

“Do I know you?” Calem, ten years older and looking barely changed, squinted at me.

“Marguerite Linden du Bois,” I quickly introduced myself. “I'm a researcher at the Sycamore Laboratory specialising in Pokémon-human interaction on a sociological basis. I am a Trainer by default, so I would know the only Kalosian Trainer who could match the Kalos Champion.”

“It's... nothing,” Calem demurred. The egoistical Calem, actually exhibiting humility? What a shock.

“Greninja...” Donar took out his Pokédex. Greninja, the Ninja Pokémon. It appears and vanishes with a ninja’s grace. It toys with its enemies using swift movements, while slicing them with throwing stars of sharpest water.

“Greninja is the final evolution of Froakie!” Serena explained to Donar quickly.

“That's fantastic...” Donar gaped towards Jean, which gave Calem a chance to study us, and look at Altair. If Calem did not recognise the Lucario that had beaten him every time at every battle since Shalour City, then I was going to give up on the human race.

“That Lucario...” Calem blinked. “Altair... right?”

You again? Altair muttered via telepathy.

“You're Daisy's Altair... then why are you here?” Calem blinked, looking at it, ignoring even his own daughter. “It's been a long time, Altair!”

“Papa, you know that Lucario?” Serena asked.

“This Lucario was always used to finish our six-on-six battles,” Calem explained. “Daisy's Lucario... then, where is Daisy?”

“I am taking guardianship of Altair while Daisy recovers from her tragedy,” I replied, the lie already firmly in place. “I have been holding guardianship of Altair for nearly six years.”

“Tragedy?” Calem blinked. “What happened to Daisy? I haven't actually kept much contact since we last fought at Kiloude.”

I remembered. Kiloude City was where Calem Calme tasted defeat for the last time from the hand of Daisy Linden, Trainer. Before Daisy Linden became the Champion. “You're Daisy's friend?”

“Yeah,” Calem nodded firmly. “She's my friend! I want to battle her team once more!”

“Even if half that team is dead?”
Serena paled, Donar reared back. Calem looked like his own judgement was coming. “What do you mean?” he spluttered. “What's going on? Altair?”

“M. Calem...” Altair replied. “On that last strike on Team Flare in Geosenge... we were betrayed. The details are restricted information, but I can tell you; three of us six were killed, and one is missing. Of the original six registered in the Hall of Fame, only Vega and I are left.”

“What?” Calem swallowed, and Jean, that grenouille, actually looked physically ill. “Delphi, Deneb, Sealeo and Banette are... dead?”

“On the advice of Dr Entendre, Vega and Daisy have taken a retreat,” I explained. “Because a Fighting-type Pokémon demands a greater training schedule, Daisy has arranged for Altair and I to stay together for the time being.”

“She loves this Lucario!” Calem snapped. “Even if her legs were broken, she'd find a way to train him! D'you think I'll be fooled?! Dr du Bois, I will only ask once. Where is Daisy?”

“Daisy Linden was in Parfum Palace,” Serena told him.

“She's already left with Vega,” I rebutted. “To where, only Madame Carnet would know. I wouldn't recommend it, though, since her psyche is rather fragile.”

I saw Donar looking towards Altair and then to Calem and Serena, almost trying to comprehend the current turn of events.

“If you are right...” Donar swallowed. “Then Altair is supposed to follow your orders? For six years?”

“Ah,” I replied with a drawl.


“...I got it,” I nodded, figuring through his reasoning. If I refused, that would be a suspicious sign. If I lost, Calem could take that as a sign to begin digging into Daisy Linden's activities. “Altair.”

“I know.” My Lucario stood opposite Jean, who rearranged the folds of his tongue, eyeing Altair as it slowly dug its back feet into the ground.

“Erm... do we need a referee?” Serena volunteered. “Then... Start!”

“Water Shuriken!” Calem immediately shouted.

“Extreme Speed!” I countered.

It was a battle of speed more than anything else; Jean leapt high, the discs of water slicing through trees, earth and rock as Altair dashed forth and planted a glowing fist near him. Both immediately jumped back, aware of each other's reach and speed now.

“Aura Sphere!” I commanded.

“Jean, Mat Block!” Calem called.

Two moves unique to the Froakie line... “Metal Sound!”

I stuffed my fingers into my ears as Altair let out a howl, and the grenouille flipped back, stunned for a brief second with its Trainer. Mat Block did not stop status moves, so...
“Aura Sphere!” I retaliated, and Altair dove into the air, the grenouille preparing to jump up before realising that a sphere of light was falling to it. The resulting explosion sent the grenouille shaking again, but then Altair was already ready, positioned in the air right above it, the glowing bone forming in his paws.

“Bone Rush!” I ordered, Altair bringing the bone down with all of gravity and his weight behind the force.

Jean gave out a bubbly sort of cry as it hit his tongue, and then, as Altair landed, the second swipe made it across, almost a baseball run. Jean was sent flying off of its feet. It landed, and it did not stir until Calem had ran over to check.

“Dr du Bois wins...” Serena sounded disgruntled.

“That's the Altair I know,” Calem nodded. “Jean?”

“Ja...” the Greninja hissed.

“You did well,” Calem smiled sadly, recalling it into the Pokéball. “Altair's skills hasn't faded at all with you, Doctor. I'm sorry.”

“It's alright,” I dismissed.

“But... like this, Altair can't access his Mega Evolution, right?”

I tried not to finger my Mega Ring, certain that Calem had not noticed it yet. “Do you anticipate that we will need it, M. Calme?”

“Probably not,” Calem admitted. “So... both of you are headed to Cyllage, right?”

“We're taking the long way to Ambrette Town,” Donar answered.

“Ambrette?” Calem laughed. “Oh, the Glittering Cave. You have a Frogadier, right?”

“Yes,” I replied. “But my Bulbasaur also needs training, so I'm taking the long way.”

“Turning the long trip into a training journey, eh?” Calem laughed. “Training is good, but remember to have fun. Well, Doctor, Donar, Serena and I must see Elmo. About Serena and Elmo... I understand now. Altair... is Daisy willing to see me?”

I felt the dark presence approach, and I saw the shadow assimilate with mine as Altair slowly and carefully replied. “Her mental state is too fragile to accept anyone. Perhaps this is also an effect of having a Mega Evolution Pokémon die while Trainer and Pokémon are connected.”

“I see...” Calem slowly nodded. “Then, d'you think she'll accept letters?”

I doubt that, but you could try. Professor Sycamore could forward those letters.

“Thank you, Altair,” Calem nodded, before he threw a protective arm around Serena's shoulders, and both father and daughter left us to enter the cave.

Nothing that you have said was a lie, Darkrai casually observed.

Instead of a mirror, think of a diamond, cut into many facets that shines like fire. From no matter where you look, you will see a different colour, but you will never see that the diamond itself has no colour.
“Ah, right. Donar, turn back.”

“Yes, Dr du-” My breath stopped. My heart was palpitating. There was a single, glowing icy blue eye below a wave of white hair surrounded by teeth-like growths. The rest of the form was shrouded in shadow, but I didn't need any more information to know. “I- It's a Darkrai!”

“This Pitch-Black Pokémon native to Sinnoh actually followed Cynthia to Unova, and from Unova it came via Iris to Parfum Palace,” Dr du Bois calmly explained, as if she met a legendary Pokémon everyday. “I decided to take him along. What do you think?”

What do I think of you inviting a Pokémon just a step above eldritch abomination compared to the legendary Giratina to our journey?! “I think you've gone mad, Doctor. Do you intend to sleep at all?!”

“Darkrai are convenient scapegoats of most of the world's mythology,” Dr du Bois scolded. “It hasn't attacked you. Do you have a problem?”

“That's because you're here!” I pointed towards her. “Why did you have to take that Pokémon in, anyway?”

“It was in Parfum Palace,” she answered.

“Isn't the League there?”

“And who else?”


One of which had seen three of her six Pokémon die in front of her. I felt my stomach clench.

“The Bad Dreams ability of Darkrai cannot be controlled by him,” Dr du Bois softly explained. “It has a radius of about four point eight kilometres.”

The other side of the Connecting Cave. And where Daisy was. “There's... really no choice, is there?” I muttered, eyeing the inside of the cave. “It's going to be weird...”

Dr du Bois immediately released Liz. The Single Bloom Pokémon looked from the inside of the cave, then towards Dr du Bois, and then towards Darkrai, blinking. It gave me a pleading look, as if I could change her decision.

“Sorry,” I muttered to it. “That Connecting Cave... are we really going in?”

“Of course we are,” Dr du Bois eyes Liz. “Flash.”

The Floette grumbled in bubbly tones, glowing with a soft, controlled light as we entered behind the floating Pokémon. Wet earth clogged at my nose, and with it a rank smell of moss and other stuff associated with the dark and damp. Darkrai levitated, a silent spectre.

“I can't say I'm completely comfortable with this,” I told him. It. Whatever. “It's not you, it's Dr du Bois.”

I understand.

“Of course you-” I stopped. “You just talked... right?”

There is no other voice, save for the Lucario, that would deign to talk to you.

Humans, I find, tend to regard voices in their head as signs of mental insanity.

I faltered. “There's that... but, you can speak.”

Yes.

“You're not a raving demons who distributes nightmares.”

I hardly have a choice regarding whether or not I give nightmares.

“Pokémon... can't control their ability,” I reflected.

The only viable way is by Gastro Acid, as far as I know.

“Being drenched in stomach acid, yeah, no thanks,” I nodded, testing the sandy earth under my shoes. “Dr du Bois, are you sure-”

“Shh,” Dr du Bois hushed, leaning down to run her fingers through the earth. The cave seemed to hum from her voice.

“Why?”

“On the walls either side of us are freshly dug earth and remnants of geodes,” Dr du Bois murmured. “No sign of Zubat droppings, fresh or otherwise, but plenty with signs with Pecha berries. The low height of this cave means that Exploud and Loudred find it a poor habitat, and the lack of Zubat or others so far...”

Within the sphere of light created by Liz, a pink Pokémon bounced in. A giant rabbit-like Pokémon with yellow ear-tips and toe-tips, and puckered ears. Liz gave a gentle burble, hovering near.

It murmured, a gentle burble of sounds indistinct to my ears.

“Whismur has taken over the Connecting Cave,” Dr du Bois suddenly stood up. “Bye bye, Whismur.”

I watched Dr du Bois shy away, slowly stepping back from the pink Pokémon. “What's wrong?”

“Shh!”

“Why-”

The Pokémon suddenly screamed, and I clapped a hand over my ears to save them from popping. A dark sphere flew past me, growing to envelop the Whismur, whose voice died down and then it keened and toppled over, and began snoring loudly.

“Dark Void...” Dr du Bois murmured. “I see. Liz's Sing would have no effect on a Pokémon with Soundproof, but Dark Void would have an effect on any Pokémon without abilities like Insomnia. Let's go.”

“Dr du Bois, the Whismur?” I asked as she started walking away.

“Lower your tone, or we'll attract more Whismur,” she darkly replied. Then, in a more normal tone: “It's in its own habitat, it'll wake up by itself. Our first priority should be to get away before Bad Dreams takes effect, or this might become our grave. Je vous remercie, Darkrai.”
“I got it,” I nodded, following Dr du Bois and Liz quietly, Darkrai following behind me.

We trekked through a long part of the cave, like a corridor, before we entered a high-ceilinged part of the cave that Dr du Bois identified a colony of Zubat living at the eaves – “The high ceiling must be out of the echoes' way,” Dr du Bois murmured as we passed the squawking colony. “Do you notice the incline of our path?”

“Incline?” I asked.

“The slope,” Dr du Bois indicated. “So far, we've been on a steady direction up. Seeing as the cliffs are supposed to be a few hundred metres over sea level, I'm not quite surprised that the Zubat chose to nest back there to escape the Whismur.”

“So... is there another path through?” I asked.

“There's a very long overland route, but the Connecting Cave route is faster and less rocky,” Dr du Bois spread her arms. “These cliffs served as one of the Kalos region's natural defences during the regional Wars. It must have survived millennia of war and wear already.”

“It's impressive,” I whistled.

_I am surprised that an Aggron has not tried to dig through this,_ Darkrai commented.

“This cave, and the cliffs, are mostly limestone,” Dr du Bois supplied. “Limestone is composed of the dead skeletons of marine organisms, and it is vulnerable to water erosion, so Aggron don't use it to build mountains. The Aron line requires a steady diet of haematite, iron ore, which is more often found in the mountains that surround Île-de-l'arc. Thus, the only population of Lairon in Kalos is at Victory Road.”

“That's amazing!” I honestly answered. “So... the Whismur?”

“Whismur are usually herbivorous Pokémon, so I imagine that they live off the plants that grow on the cliffs, like other Pokémon,” Dr du Bois shrugged as we found an underground creek.

Immediately, I leaned forward, cupping my hands into the pool to sip. “This is...”

“Rainwater or snow from the cliffs gather and melt, forming these constructs...” Tentatively, Dr du Bois knelt, the edge of one knee sock to the ground as she examined the soil around the creek once we stopped. “The surrounding rock is bedrock, but the stalactite formation... an underground spring. We can spend the night here.”

“We're camping... in a cave,” I echoed.

“We could rush, but there's no point,” she shrugged. “Even if we clear the Connecting Cave in a day, we'll still have to camp at the cliffs before we can climb down to Ambrette Town. I'm sure Darkrai is hungry too.”

_I shall be fine._

“Just because you shall be doesn't mean that you have to put up with it,” Dr du Bois archly answered, unpacking her bag to drag out two large canvas sheets, a tent pole, and a small shovel. “Altair. The collapsible bucket. Take the water we need before I let Jelly into it.”

_Very well._
I unpacked as well, watching Altair and Dr du Bois move in the sort of synchronisation you see in either married couples or long-time partners. “Erm, Doctor... Altair was only with you for six years, right?”

“I am a Pokémon researcher,” Dr du Bois answered. “The Sycamore Laboratory in particular sends a team out to the Lavarre Nature Trail for fieldwork at least once a year. Furthermore, the supplies I bade you get on my tab was all planned for this cliff-side trip.”

“I... I just got my sleeping bag.” I muttered.

“A shovel?”

“Erm...” I pulled out a folded Swiss Army knife. “Will this do?”

“Note, the newbie Trainer is often unprepared to camp out,” Dr du Bois muttered as she reached into her own – comparatively smaller – backpack, pulling out a small shovel before unlocking one of the levers upon it. She bent the head until it was perpendicular, locked the spade in place, and handed it to me after she dug a hole in the middle, away from the tarp. “Mark our camp borders. A ditch, starting from the edge of that spring to...” and she made an arc towards the cave wall. “Okay?”

“Right...”

“Darkrai, if you can, I need some help,” Dr du Bois waved.

It should be odd, seeing the scene of a Darkrai and a human set up a bivouac off the ground lit by a Floette, while by the side a Lucario set down a bucket of water.

What is this?

*Temporary habitation for humans,* Altair replied. *This can be used to set up a quick camp to hide, and locked down during a storm such that the occupants do not feel the cold. This is part of the reason why human explorers can go into any terrain with their Pokémon, as long as they have food and water, they can construct a shelter. Other humans, working in a team with Pokémon, can also construct more stable structures with metals and special materials such as glass or cement rather than search for a cave or tree to hide in for the night.*

...*humans are amazing,* the Darkrai, bringer of nightmares, sounded odd.

“If we could, I would have bought the frame for it,” Dr du Bois reflected. “Unfortunately, we'll have to rough it, Donar, Altair, Liz, Darkrai.”

*A bit of discomfort is acceptable. I am a Lucario, anyway. Why did you leave such a big space?*

“Huh?” Dr du Bois turned around, glancing at the line I had set out. True enough, even with the bivouac by the creek and the pit, there was still a lot of camp space left. “Does it matter? We'll need the space. Everyone!”

Dr du Bois released her Pokémon. The pink Jellicent, Jelly, immediately homed into the creek with a burbling squeal. Crystal the Chandelure hung about, whispering before Dr du Bois ordered it to prepare a Flamethrower while Aegis rearranging a mass of what looked like kindling into the pit. Liz threw out a Vine Whip, and between Darkrai, Dr du Bois and the Floette, the bivouac was constructed between two poles, partially covering the fire that Crystal was starting.

“Portable Fire Pokémon are slightly under Pelipper in terms of usage by explorers,” Dr du Bois started, digging out a small iron pot and a pack of rice, as well as a huge packet of Pokémon food
from her bag. “In Unova, Tepig are some of the most common. It's small, it makes for a decent attacker to take down small threats, and if you're desperately hungry, you can kill and eat it immediately.”

“That's horrifying!” I shouted at her.

“Just because you can doesn't mean you should,” Dr du Bois wrinkled her nose as she placed some water into her pot. “Why don't you let out your Pokémon?”

I stared at her as she set the pot onto the fire. “Okay... come, everyone!”

Bulbasaur greeted me with a smile, Frogadier with a croak, and Fletchling chirped until it spotted Jelly, at which it flew to hide in my cap.

“It's fine, Fletchling,” I soothed. “The jellyfish ain't going to eat you. Neither is the chandelier.”

Bulbasaur mouthed at Darkrai, and Frogadier seemed slightly guarded, but they seemed cheerful enough to accept some kibble from my own stash.

“Where does... all this fit into that bag?” I pointed towards her backpack, which was smaller than mine.

“Fine packing,” Dr du Bois answered. “According to the Sycamore Laboratory's survey, the things most Trainers list that they forget is shelter. Food, water and basic hygiene they remember, as well as Pokémon care on the road, but you'd be surprised how many start out without knowing how to camp out or how to care for Pokémon with limited resources. They probably skipped those lessons in Trainer school.”

“Kanto's Trainer school never mentioned it...” I mumbled.

“Neither does the Kalos region,” Dr du Bois muttered, watching Crystal spin around on her axis. “One failing of the education system. Just because Pokémon Centres exist doesn't mean that we can always stay at one.”

Having seen the efficiency at which camp had been managed, I could barely rebut her. It was true, after all.

“Some have it nice, though,” Dr du Bois commented. “I didn't set out with this knowledge, you know.”

“Eh?” I stared at her. “Dr du Bois, when you started... you didn't know anything?”

“I started out a rookie, like you,” Dr du Bois admitted. “At that time, Altair-” he stopped, before shaking her head. “It doesn't matter. Anyway, this knowledge, how to camp, and where to camp, was not easy to get.”

“Right...” I muttered.

“Still...” Dr du Bois frowned at the camp-fire. “Altair, we're going to have to get a portable stove at Ambrette or Cyllage. Kindling is troublesome.”

“He's not your Pokémon, Doctor;” I sighed. I looked to the pot, which had a long handle, and watched as Dr du Bois set the pot on the fire. “And the pot?”

“I got it in Cyllage during my own journey,” Dr du Bois recalled, almost fondly. “If there was a skill
I did not lack, it was caring for Pokémon and improvising a recipe. My Pokémon was really picky about food, so I made do with a giant pot that was easy to improvise a recipe with. Pass me that spade.

I handed over her miraculously bending shovel, watched her straighten it, take some water and wash the stuff, and then dig through the seemingly bottomless bag once more. “A bit of chicken, and then we'll see what we can catch later.”

“Are you going to use that to cut it?!” I nearly shouted.

“I picked this up from a backpacker salesman from some mysterious region,” Dr du Bois shrugged as she used the sharp edges to begin chopping. “I was very impressed by its number of functions. I haven’t met that guy anywhere else. A shame.”

The chicken was diced very neatly – and cleanly too, I might add. Then Dr du Bois cooked the chicken with rice using water from the pail, and with them she added a bit of salt and sauce, watching the contents bubble. “I'm glad I didn't have to improvise. Otherwise I might have to use Crystal as a stove.”

I nearly spat out the chicken and rice stew. “Huh?”

“Crystal,” Dr du Bois summoned her, before pointing to the relevant features. “Look. One giant flame. Four small flames. Stove in progress.”

“Doctor, your Pokémon aren't your tools,” I muttered.

“True... where to put the pot, for one thing,” she answered as she scooped out the concoction onto readied plates. “Altair, the rest of the meat.”

“Is that alright...?” I muttered as he ate the rest of the raw meat.

“He needs protein,” Dr du Bois flippantly answered as she opened the pot, the smell of rice and chicken rising to greet us as she spooned the food onto waiting plates. “Bon appétit... or, as they say in Kanto, itadakimasu.”
XI: Achever - To Achieve

Chapter Summary

“Ars longa, vita brevis,” I answered, pulling out my Holo Caster and preparing the camera function. “The greatest heist in the history of Kalos... or, it would have been. Now, lead me through. We're going to surprise that Ranger outside.”

“Night, Dr du Bois,” I walked back to my room via the bathroom, closing the door behind me. Then, I scooped up Frogadier and I hugged him, perhaps for the first time. At least, I knew it was the first time I hugged him and meant it.

Day 15: Unforeseen complications led to Donar walking into a herd of Whismur – and probably disrupting an illegal mining operation that I shall begin enquiries of once we reach a town – and thus we spent two days in the Connecting Cave. When we finally got out, a surprise greeted us in the form of Bagons falling from the sky.


“I don't feel lucky at all!” Donar yelled at me, cradling the Dragon-type Pokémon close, one hand under its skull. “Its skull... there's blood!”

A thin trickle of blood dropped from the grazed calves and its broken claw. I leaned over and checked. “Broken... wrist... probably a broken leg as well.” I looked up.

“Who the hell would have thrown it down?” Donar exclaimed.

“It jumped.”

“It... jumped?” Donar echoed dumbly.

“From the beginning of their discovery in the Hoenn region, Bagon have long been held as a living testament to the power of wishes and dreams,” I explained as I pulled out the first-aid kit. “Where most Pokémon simply battle to evolve, Bagon must fight for their wings, a fight they carry forth by jumping off cliffs, to will them to grow and hardening their body to survive the sharp descent. Usually they can survive without much damage, but the risk of a broken neck still exists. Those who survive will try again, and again, until they form their Shelgon cocoons and their wings begin to grow. Open its mouth, I'm going to give him a Berry before we carry him down. Darkrai, Altair. The tarp in my bag.”

Slowly, Altair pulled out the tarp, folding it over to make a resting place as Donar laid the small Dragon-type Pokémon down upon it. I muttered a curse, using a nylon rope and one of my tent poles to improvise a splint as I gave the whimpering blue Pokémon a dried Oran Berry. “Bagon. If you understand, we're going to get you aid.”

“Doctor, can't you do anything?” Donar asked in panic.

“That Oran Berry would give it a temporary alleviation from pain,” I shook my head. “Long-term
care would require a Pokémon Centre. Take the far corner. Altair, Darkrai, take one corner. Between the four of us, we should be able to slowly bring the Bagon down to Ambrette Town.”

“Y- Yes!”

I could remember the panic and the frustration at slowly guiding the Pokémon down, wondering why would anyone hurt a Bagon. Even experienced Trainers would have known that any nearby Salamence would have burned them alive. And that wound...

Between all four of us, each carrying a corner of the tarp, we brought the Bagon down and made for the Pokémon Centre. There, I spotted two familiar off-white uniforms headed for us.

“Donar, we've-”

“Sina, Dexio, I suppose you've forgotten to deliver the Coastal Kalos update once more,” I snarled. “Get out of the way.”

“Dr du Bois?!” Professor Sycamore's assistants immediately dashed to the far end of the Pokémon Centre.

“Again?” Nurse Joy sighed as we brought in the Bagon, even forgetting to comment on the Darkrai. “Emergency, Bagon descent casualty!”

“The Bagon broke a femur on descent from the cliffs above the Connecting Cave,” Dr du Bois informed the approaching doctor as several Wigglytuff lifted the Bagon onto a rolling stretcher and away from the tarp.

“Well, I suppose wild Bagon always do this, but... it's a danger to cliff-goers,” Nurse Joy whispered.

“Why... why would a Bagon choose to jump down a cliff, Nurse Joy?” Donar echoed, still lost.

“A Bagon's transformation into a Salamence is not a natural evolution which occurs through the ageing process,” Nurse Joy explained. “Instead, it is a power to be grasped after intense training and determination. It might be rather cold, but the moment we release the Bagon, it will climb back up the cliff and proceed to repeat the process.”

“For their dream...” Donar echoed.

“Bagon have no shortage of willpower,” I interjected. “It is certainly true that few other Pokémon fight harder for their goals. But, this time, that Bagon was not at fault.”


“I believe Officer Jenny will be visiting soon,” I answered. “After all, reporting gunshot wounds is also a duty of a Pokémon Centre. Donar.”

“Doctor?” Donar snapped out of whatever train of thought had launched itself at him now.

“Sina, Dexio,” I summoned both assistants. “You will give Donar what he needs that the two of you forgot to give. I shall be at the Hotel Ambrette, since this town's Pokémon Centre is full. Again. Donar, you will come to the Hotel Ambrette for your room key later. Am I clear? Darkrai, stay with the boy. I have to handle some things.”

“R- Right!” Sina and Dexio trembled in fear as I left. In a heartbeat, Altair was at my side, dragging the bloody tarp behind us as we marched across town to the Hotel Ambrette.
“Bienvenue-” the concierge cut off, staring at the bloody tarp behind us.

“Carried a Bagon down,” I gave my explanation in one word, and received an understanding nod. “Two rooms under du Bois.”

“R- Right!” she nodded quickly, producing the keys. “Erm, 201 and 202 have a Jack and Jill bathroom.”

“We shall manage,” I answered. The Sycamore Laboratory might be inclined for us to stay at the Pokémon Centre, but then having a private room meant not needing to camp out at the Pokémon Centre. “Speaking of the Bagon, accidents are very common, are they not?”

“Well, they are!” the concierge frowned. “But, recently they've been increasing in numbers. I mean, usually the wild Bagon can settle themselves, but I’ve heard that more and more hikers rush in with injured Bagon at their heels. Why?”

“Pokémon specialities in Bagon are so rare,” I faked a frown and a sigh. “Research is so difficult to get because Trainers of Salamence are not often willing to talk.”

“You’re a researcher?” the concierge exclaimed. “I'm very sorry, Doctor!”

“It's fine,” I shook my head.

“No,” the girl frowned. “It's just that the Fossil Laboratory’s staff don't come very often, not since Gary Oak came here. I heard that he was a famous Pokémon Trainer back in Kanto!”

“I see...” I neutrally replied, rather than remark on Professor Oak's reformed grandson. “M. Oak has taken an interest in the Glittering Cave's fossils, I suppose. He would be happy. There must be a lot of fossils.”

“What do you mean?” the girl suddenly said. “The news went out last night! All the Fossils in the lab had been stolen!”

“Gary must have taken them home with him,” I commented.

“What do you mean!!” the concierge exclaimed. “Dr Oak is the most panicked of all of the scientists! They're almost drunk every night! Dr Oak keeps crying!”

“Monsieur Oak,” I corrected. “Interesting...”

Altair followed behind me as we climbed the stairs. What is?

I unlocked my own room, and then locked it after Altair had dragged the tarp in. “The Bagon with a gunshot wound. The theft of fossils in the Glittering Cave. The supposed crowd of Whismur was a sign. These two cases are linked.”

What should we do?

I thought back to the Bagon, the creature that jumped off of cliffs in a pipe dream to reach the skies. It is said, that the iron crest on a Bagon's head exists to hold it down and keep it looking forward, for they would otherwise constantly watch the sky. The red wings of a Salamence was the courage of their heart and the will to leave the ground behind.

“What would you say if,” I turned around, “we were to act here, in Ambrette Town?”

It sounds dangerous. Altair inclined his head. I would not mind. It would certainly be a welcome
“I knew you had a Lucario's sense of justice there,” I remarked, having set down my backpack. I took the tarp, dragging it to the bathroom, where I then proceeded to place it under the cold running water of the shower-head.

So where do we begin?

As I watched, the reddish-brown colour washed off of the khaki, mixing with the water to course across white tiles to the drain. “Reconnaissance before the action. Two agents. One of us goes into the cave and search for clues. That should be you.”

I?

“You have night vision and a better sense of smell, you can detect geological irregularities better,” I answered. “We can think of a guise to get you in later. I will search the cliffs with help from the ghostly trio and Liz. If I am right, then someone is going to steal the restoration machine from the Fossil Lab.”

The aim?

“Old Amber. Helix, Dome,” I counted. “Root, Claw, Skull, Armour, Cover, Plume, Jaw and Sail. It's obvious. Now I'm going to have to get you into the caves.”

I will go inform the boy, Altair nodded. By now I have mastered enough social norms, and I should be able to get us through with the boy acting in your place. If you are to have any chance, then you must set out now.

I looked at him. “With that look?”

Acting human or Trained is not hard at all. Just act like you own the place.

I thought it over. “That works. You can try. I'm going to get to the cliffs. And, Altair... take the room keys along. He's going to need it to put his stuff down.”

Bad things comes in threes. I have no idea who spoke those words of wisdom, but they sure as hell seem true enough. First I found out that Sina and Dexio had forgotten to update my PokéDex, and they had taken another route to cut me off, knowing that Dr du Bois was headed to Ambrette. Next, a Bagon nearly brained me, and it was injured, so I had to help out with taking it down a set of cliffs teeming with wild Pokémon to Ambrette Town. Third, Nurse Joy reported that Dr du Bois's words were true, and I had no idea what she meant until Nurse Joy showed me the bullet wound.

The Bagon lay on a table with one of the Centre's machines hanging over it, separated from the public by a glass window and solid doors. I refused to think of it as an operating table, because that would be just sad. There was a bloody patch around a small hole nearly the size of a coin in the Bagon's thigh. Its head was intact, at least.

“It's a gunshot wound,” Nurse Joy whispered when she came out. “Thank you for bringing him down in time, we could save the leg.”

“How can anyone...” I whispered. “How can anyone do this to a Pokémon?”

“No... the worst should be, how did we miss it at first?” Nurse Joy shook her head. “Is that your Pokémon?”
“It’s a wild one,” I answered, almost automatically. “I just... I just can't imagine it. In search of a dream...”

I must have found myself at a crossroads then, at that place and time. That there were people so cruel to Pokémon was reality when Team Rocket was around, as Mom had mentioned when drunk. True, abuse cases and the like had featured in the news, but there had always been a sort of kind little bubble that had shielded the awful truth from me and other Trainers like me. That humans could bear to do such things...

Unexpectedly, what had saved me from turning to a dark path of thought was Altair. You read that right. The most vicious Lucario I had ever met, Altair, the Lucario who broke Elmo's bones just a few days ago. It came in the form of a literally mental wake-up call.

*Your key*, Altair threw the keys at me, the tag hitting my nose.

“Thanks,” I growled around my aching nose.

*And, you and I are required to go to the Glittering Cave*, Altair started. *All of us.*

“Huh?” I echoed. “Why?”

*She has established that fossils were stolen from the laboratory before we came here*, the Lucario reported. *She theorises that the case of the injured Bagon and the theft are linked. So, all three of us are to enter the cave to search for evidence.*

*Evidence?* Darkrai asked, extremely curious. He'd been curious ever since a terrified Sina and Dexio got around to explaining the PokéDex system to him. It was almost endearing.

“Wait,” I held up a hand. “Then Dr du Bois?”

*She is headed for the Ambrette Cliffs once more with the ghosts to search for evidence. She believes that Pokémon poaching may have been taking place in line with the thefts.*

“Hang on, that's dangerous!” I protested. “Dr du Bois is doing this?! The cold-blooded Dr du Bois is doing this?!”

*Perhaps one day you will realise that she constantly wears a mask*, Altair replied, a touch frostily. *That many people must wear a mask for their own safety.*

“We can call Daisy, right?” I waved a hand. “Right?”

*There is no time*, Altair informed me. *And only Trainers can access the Glittering Cave. So, if you please.*

Kalos Route 9, also known as Spikes Passage, truly lived up to its name. It was more or less a cliff face, carved by retired Rhyhorn racers with nothing better to do. A retired racer, complete with saddle, was the only way to clamber through the unsteady, Pokémon-infested Passage and not dash any body parts against the rocks. Darkrai had it easy; he just floated above the spikes. Altair simply stood on the Rhyhorn, behind me, as the Rhyhorn clambered and smashed rock obstacles with its Tackle, sending a few stray shards to cut my face and hands every now and then. It was no picnic; a Helioptile shocked us once. We stepped on a Hippopotas, and a Sandile tried to eat us. Darkrai put them to sleep.

“Thanks!” I shouted to Darkrai as we left the dozing Sandile. We finally made it into the Glittering Cave, where a Ranger relieved us of the reins to the Rhyhorn, giving Darkrai odd looks that the
Pokémon ignored. Patches of light lit the way in as we entered. I gingerly touched one, the emerald light cool to my hand and slightly slimy.

*The famous Luminous Moss,* Altair shook his head, kneeling down to check the soil with a brush of his paw. *Let us go deeper.*

“*I can’t see,*” I said through gritted teeth, glaring at the glowing ice-blue of Darkrai’s one visible eye and Altair’s silhouette on the cave walls.

*You have a torch, do you not?*

“*I...*” I did. I felt foolish as I rummaged through my bag, clicking it on as I pulled it out, to be greeted by a wide pair of jaws once the pale beam came out. “AHHHH!”

The jaws opened. They closed. Or, they tried to close, but then Altair punched it. Yes, he punched it.

*That Bulbasaur would be a great help now,* Altair commented as the jaws closed and the Pokémon ran, whimpering.

“*W- What was that?*” I whimpered, trying to steady my breath and failing. “*What was that?*”

*Mawile, the Deceiver Pokémon,* a low snort came from his snout. *Hurry.*

With shaking hands, I opened my PokéDex and searched for Mawile. *Attached to its head is a huge set of jaws formed by horns. It can chew through iron beams.*

“*Bulbasaur, I need you!*” I called, releasing him. My Bulbasaur greeted me with a low croak, before putting itself next to me. “*Erm, why do I need you?*”

*It can see in the dark, unlike you,* Altair explained, although I must have hallucinated the condescension. *And, this is a cave. Filled with Rock-type Pokémon, by all accounts.*

*Very true,* Darkrai commented. “*Shall we?*

“*Bulba,*” Bulbasaur growled.

“*Thanks, Bulbasaur,*” I knelt down to rub his bulb. “*I know you must hate dark places, sorry.*”

“*Bulba,*” it echoed, somewhat softer in assurance, before it tugged me along and we continued walking.

Our footsteps, or rather, mine alone, echoed throughout the eerily lit cave that smelt of damp earth.

Altair stopped for a brief moment, testing the moss with one paw. He sniffed. *She is right.*

“*About?*” I asked.

*I do not imagine that most miners would choose to smoke, not with the proximity of Onix in this cave.*

“*There are Onix here,*” I echoed. “*Of course* there are Onix here, and then Dr du Bois forgot to mention that little titbit. If I get eaten by a giant rock snake, I will haunt Dr du Bois for the rest of eternity.”

*I imagine you shall,* Altair commented dryly. *The end of the cave is our target. Darkrai, are there others?*
Not currently, the other relayed. What are we searching for?

The smell of alcohol, human cigarettes, digging equipment, disturbed soil, Altair listed as we entered a larger, more spacious mine shaft. Abandoned trolleys occupied the far end, tracks leading from there towards a way to our right. Test the walls if you must. We must prove that there was a human presence here.

Gingerly, I tapped the walls, merely feeling a hard sort of feeling and barely any echo. Bulbasaur joined me, using its Vine Whips to check. The rocks made thuds, solid and reassuring and hardly indicative of a tunnel, or anything like Secret Power.

“What was I thinking?” I muttered, pounding ineffectually and self-conscious that I was taking orders from a madwoman via her talking Lucario. “Bulbasaur... today I saw an injured Pokémon.”

“Bulba?”

“It wasn't from a battle injury,” I whispered. “That Bagon... it wanted to fly. It wanted to fly, and it tried to jump off of a cliff multiple times to achieve that dream. And, it's wounds... it was from a gun. It was us humans who crippled that Pokémon, and I could only feel anger.”

“Bulba bulba?”

“Anger towards those people who dared to hurt an innocent Pokémon,” I whispered. “Before I started with my own Pokémon, I didn't think much of it. But that Bagon... it wanted to fly. And now, with that leg... I don't know whether it can.”

The ends of that Vine Whip slapped me. I looked down, my Bulbasaur giving me a considering look. “Bulba bulba. Bulba bul bul ba! Bulba!”

Then quit whining, Altair translated. Find them, beat them. Voilà.

I stared down at it, the Bulbasaur that was a crazy maniac waiting to happen. I grinned. “I needed that.”

“Bulba.” The sarcastic little shit somehow managed to communicate his depreciation right through.

My hand brushed a patch of moss, which was lingering right next to a hole dug out of the cave wall. I had no idea what a fossil was supposed to look like, but I imagined that the regular-shaped hole was a fossil directly dug out of the wall. Frowning, I felt the hole, and my hand came out with red soil. I rubbed it, and felt it, and I realised that there was something very wrong. But what?

Finally, we get somewhere, Altair mentally communicated. The footprint of a Lairon.

This cave, and the cliffs, are mostly limestone, Dr du Bois supplied in my mind. Limestone is composed of the dead skeletons of marine organisms, and it is vulnerable to water erosion... steady diet of haematite, iron ore... the only population of Lairon in Kalos is at Victory Road.

“Lairon don't naturally exist here,” I spoke, nearly excited. “One of the diggers?”

At this, Altair gave me a look, but Darkrai beat him to answer me. Steel-type Pokémon, I know from experience, are not oft used in mining. They are too temperamental.

I opened my PokéDex. Lairon, the Iron Armour Pokémon. Lairon feeds on iron contained in rocks and water. It makes its nest on mountains where iron ore is buried. As a result, the Pokémon often clashes with humans mining the iron ore.
I rubbed the red soil between my fingers. “Altair, is this iron ore?”

*Your Bulbasaur can tell.*

I knelt down to be level with Bulbasaur. “Bulbasaur, can you tell if this is iron ore?”

“*Bulba!*” Bulbasaur licked the soil off of my hand, its tongue rolling around, before it solemnly nodded.

*A Lairon would not have left iron ore.* Altair affirmed. *Not without a Trainer.*

*I also cannot imagine one of the scientists bringing a Pokémon that would eat their samples,* Darkrai suggested.

“Now, the best way is if we can find a passage,” I leaned back as I spoke.

“*Bulba!*”

As I toppled back, I realised that Bulbasaur's eyes were wide with concern. Then I realised that its Vine Whips were the reason for my continued existence. Lucario and Darkrai worked together, yanking hard enough to send me flying out of the hole to hit the wall, getting a face of Luminous Moss in the bargain.

_Congratulations,* Altair's sardonic mental voice supplied. _It looks like you have found it._

Having been a Trainer, I generally packed light when going anywhere. In fact, more than once I had left the Sycamore Laboratory directly to camp out on Mélancolie Path with nothing more than a knife, a fishing rod, and my Pokémon. More than once, a meal of Basculin caught from the stream and cooked by Flamethrower had sufficed, since I gave the blood to the ghostly trio and then we made a feast of the fish between the remaining. Liz had trail mix; even I was disinclined to make a Floette turn omnivorous. Thus, I had run to the Ambrette Cliffs with nothing more than my Holo Caster, my wallet, PokéDex and a set of keys, along with a pocket knife and my Pokémon sans Altair.

I released the ghostly trio once I had ascended level to the cliffs. “Listen up. We're going to be searching for poachers in the region.”

Aegis clattered, Jelly burbled at me in great offence, and Crystal hissed. It sounded like a steam kettle.

“A Bagon was shot,” I explained. “And the fossils at the Fossil Lab were stolen. If I am right, the next target would be the restorations machines, but I need evidence to present to Officer Jenny. Otherwise they're just going to be stuck with mere poaching charges. Crystal, you take to the air, be careful not to draw too much attention. You'll be our spotter, use Flamethrower as a flare if any of us find something and give a signal. Jelly, you take the sea point, interrogate as many Pokémon as possible regarding strange activity. Hot and cold pockets, vibrations, funny-tasting water, water that is too clear to be seawater or from any underground spring. Aegis, Liz, with me.”

Jelly burbled, and I patted her head in apology before she headed for the cliff faces. Crystal hissed, but rose obligingly towards the skies. Aegis clanked, and a tassel wrapped around my arm in support as we started our search. We must have looked like an unusual trio; a female Trainer in red and black, an Aegislash tagging along, and a Floette guiding the way.

“Why shoot a Bagon?” I muttered to myself. “Bagon can evolve to Shelgon, and Shelgon to
Salamence – there is no point in injuring a rare and valuable Pokémon like Bagon. Not unless there was something far more valuable at stake.”

I watched the cliffs now. “Ambrette Town has always fallen in military significance. Unlike the other major coastal settlements of Cyllage, Shalour and Coumarine, Ambrette is naturally protected by its cliffs from coastal invasion. It was only during the past decade or so, when fossils were discovered, that Ambrette Town began to develop. Trainers began to flock here when the Fossil Lab was built, because the creation of the Spikes Passage meant access to the Glittering Cave, which meant access to Fossils and the restoration machines. Thus, access to Fossil Pokémon.”

Slowly, I climbed up the cliff I had found, ignoring the wordless clatter of my – quite literal – sword and shield. “If I am right, then both the fossils at the Glittering Cave and the Lab must have been stolen. Fossils by themselves have no value; Ambrette Aquarium sells Kabuto fossils as souvenirs. But, they are valuable in another sense... with the machine. The Ranger at the entrance of the Glittering Cave would have noticed if too many fossils were stolen through the Spikes Passage; even the Rangers are not that obtuse. Though, if there was another way?”

At the approximate spot around the Spikes Passage, Jelly flew back to me, burbling and gesturing. I took it to mean that some of the sea-dwelling Pokémon were complaining...

Jelly blew a small spout of water out of her mouth, to the ground. She made a noise like a kettle, and motioned to the water on the ground which was flowing back to a pool set in the rock, too blue to be anything but over-saturated in calcium ions.

… about the underground stream.

“The water tastes funny?” I asked her. “I told you so,” I commented upon her nod. “Jelly, I need you to dive to check if there is a cave around this spring.”

My Jellicent burbled in complaint, but sank easily into the water anyway. Soon enough, she resurfaced, blowing a spout of water with enough force to wash off part of the limestone from the cliff.

“There,” I murmured in satisfaction, having located the rather small entrance partially hidden by the spring and a rather artful arrangement of rocks. “Liz, Flash.”

My Floette glowed, her light shining into the cave-

“Argh!”

-and onto the face of Donar, Altair and Darkrai, who shielded their faces. I peered down and spotted Bulbasaur.

“I am right,” I said to no one but myself. “Go for broke...”

“Doctor?” Donar murmured.

“Liz, down,” I called. “Altair, Darkrai, Donar. I see you must have finally managed to locate the other entrance.”

You were right, Altair relayed. I found signs of the Lairon. The boy actually remembered your onslaught of information long enough to notice the iron ore present within the cave. We found the connecting passage and walked along it until we reached a set of tracks, and we followed them into this cave.
“No miner is stupid enough to use a Lairon for mining, not when Machoke can do the same job without risk to the ores being mined,” I replied primly. “With that said, we shall thus report to Officer Jenny and then expose the operation. Quickly, before the sun sets.”

“What happens... when the sun sets?” Donar gasped as we all broke out into a run, skidding down the cliffs.

“Ars longa, vita brevis,” I answered, pulling out my Holo Caster and preparing the camera function. “The greatest heist in the history of Kalos... or, it would have been. Now, lead me through. We’re going to surprise that Ranger outside.”

There was no way everyone could have fitted on a Rhyhorn – not even the heavyset Pokémon had that capacity. Dr du Bois actually recalled all her Pokémon save for Aegis into their Pokéballs quickly, berating the cringing female Ranger for having neglected the fossils within the Glittering Cave with vitriol such as ignorant, dumb and slow-witted. She took the reins of the Rhyhorn, apologising to the Rhyhorn gently as she shoved them at me.

“Well?” Dr du Bois snapped, a hand. “Get on!”

I stared at her, and the Rhyhorn. “But-”

“You take the Rhyhorn past with Darkrai,” she ordered. “I'll meet you at the gate. Aegis, Shadow Sneak me.”

She actually sank into her own shadow, disappearing with the Aegislash. I stared at the spot where Dr du Bois had been before I slung myself over the Rhyhorn, patting it on the armoured back before it started its slow crawl.

Overhead, Darkrai floated. Please explain. Why do we not stop the evildoers immediately?

“What?” I gasped, trying to hold onto the Rhyhorn. “It's... not done. We need Officer Jenny to arrest the bad guys.”

Would it not be more expedient to immediately move to stop the... bad guys, as you call them? Darkrai questioned. Otherwise, we may be too late to return. They would have left with the resurrected brethren.

“Cloned,” I corrected. “Or... whatever. Mad science aside, Dr du Bois and I are only two Trainers, with nine Pokémon between us if we include you. We don't know how many are involved. Best to find backup.”

Ah. That explanation made more sense than any other answer that I may have gotten.

“Other answers?” I asked.

This is hardly my first foray into the human world, Darkrai archly replied. I have met many humans. None of them stand out as much as the one you address as Doctor.

“Yeah, she stands out,” I nodded jokingly. “If she's going to Officer Jenny, though, then her heart might be in the right place. For that Bagon, and for everyone.”

Is that why you follow her? Because she is to be emulated?

“Huh?” I blinked. “She's following me for some sort of Trainer study. I'm not quite sure what for,
but this is exciting!"

Finally, in a long time since forever, we reached the end of the Spikes Passage between Dark Voids fired by Darkrai towards unsuspecting Pokémon that lay in wait. As we passed, I started to avoid Hippopotas – bloody Sand Stream and everything slowed me down – and I was getting sand in embarrassing places when we finally reached the gate.

“I’m sorry for the trouble,” I whispered to the Rhyhorn, leaving it by its water trough. It gave me a growl of farewell as I ran with Darkrai trailing behind.

Dr du Bois was already waiting there, her Aegislash spinning in the air and screeching. “Yes, fine, I’ll give you some Iron when we’re done- oh, you’re here.”


“Return, Aegis,” Dr du Bois commanded, holding its Pokéball as red light enveloped him. “This is only the start, Aegis. Altair, I choose you.”

The Lucario appeared from the Pokéball, clearly raring to go. Shall we begin?

Compared to most of the town, the Ambrette police post looked rather newer, a building of steel and concrete compared to the wood and corrugated roofs that made the Ambrette skyline. A familiar sight of Officer Jenny, blue hair and cap and all, was stationed at the reception counter, and she stood up as we entered. “Bienvenue au poste de police de Roche-sur-Gliffe. Comment puis-je vous aider?”

“Est-ce que vous parlez anglais? Le garçon ne comprend pas le français,” Dr du Bois answered her promptly.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” Officer Jenny corrected herself, now in something I could comprehend. “How may I help you?”

“Today we reported a case of a Bagon shooting,” Dr du Bois spoke. “Just afterwards, I heard about the theft of several fossils from the Ambrette Fossil Lab. I have reason to believe these two cases to be related.”

Officer Jenny's posture straightened, and the woman herself looked alarmed. “That is a very serious-”

“We have photographic evidence of this connecting passage between the Glittering Cave and beyond the Ambrette cliffs, at the very edge of the Muraille Coast,” she elaborated, producing the relevant images on her Holo Caster. “Furthermore, I would like to draw your attention towards the Bagon today.”

“The Bagon?” Officer Jenny echoed. “That was shot? A horrible crime. A boy and a woman brought it in, right?”

“Exactly, we brought it in,” Dr du Bois nodded. “A rare and valuable Pokémon like Bagon can command nearly any price on the black markets if caught and raised properly, and if evolved, a Salamence would command far higher prices. There is no point to shooting it. Not unless there was something far more valuable at stake. Where do Bagon live? At the Ambrette cliffs. Wild Bagon are common at those cliffs.”

“What kind of idiot would shoot a Dragon-type Pokémon?” Officer Jenny nodded. “Please, continue.”
“The theft of the Fossils at the Fossil Lab is, again, notable,” Dr du Bois continued. “Fossils by themselves have no worth. A Bagon is more valuable intact than shot. With that said, the two incidents are marked by the apparent lack of individual value to our mysterious thieves, hence both could assume a relation due to being an outlier in the motives of most criminals. The concierge at the Hotel Ambrette mentioned that Bagon jumps had tripled for some reason. Could it be, that the Bagon themselves were evacuating the mountains? Either way, all incidents point to there being a presence in the mountains. Hence, I went there with four Pokémon to search, and I sent my student into the Glittering Cave, thus uncovering this passage.”

“This... if these two incidents are related...” Officer Jenny frowned, a furrow line appearing on her soft features. “So who are the thieves? What are they after? Who are you?”

“I am Dr du Bois, anthro-Pokémon specialist regarding the Pokémon's impact on human society, affiliated with the Sycamore Research Laboratory in Lumiose City. This is Donar Oak, the Trainer serving as my case study,” Dr du Bois frowned. “Were you listening to a single word I was saying, Officer?”

“I was,” Officer Jenny nodded. “But... the Fossil Labs gives them away for free. A Bagon shooting and the fossil theft holds links... are you trying to tell me that these two incidents are linked?”

“I am telling you this now, because the greatest heist in Kalos history will take place soon,” Dr du Bois snapped back. “The fossils are useless... without a restoration machine.”

Officer Jenny nodded. “I'll go inform the staff at the Fossil Lab immediately.”

“If you please.”

I watched Officer Jenny run out, leaving the two of us in the lobby.

“Budget cuts have taken their toll upon Ambrette Town,” Dr du Bois observed. “So it seems. Well, if Gary Oak is there, our thieves would probably take the restoration machine over his dead body. It is time for dinner.”

“Doctor, what about the rest of the thieves?” I protested. “They're still running around, and Officer Jenny is the only officer here!”

“We have done our civic responsibility as citizens of Kalos,” Dr du Bois shrugged, calm, uncaring and cold once more.

“What about the thieves?!” I shouted back.

“Gary Oak is there,” Dr du Bois replied. “I hope you have heard of Professor Oak's grandson.”

I flushed. The world had heard of Gary Oak, and the revival of the first Aerodactyl. That reminder also gave me a thought. “What if they're after the Aerodactyl?”

“Of course they're after the Aerodactyl, you silly fool,” Dr du Bois muttered. “More than one, if they're lucky. Controlling the Kalos supply means being able to flood the market with fossil Pokémon. They might be able to run Alto Mare out of business.”

“Pokémon aren't commodities!” I shouted at her. “Knowing that such horrors are going to happen, that people can be so horrible to one living Pokémon and steal the bones of dead Pokémon to resurrect and sell them – can you stand by and do nothing?”

“I am hungry,” Dr du Bois answered. “When we get there, the Lab personnel shall have been
informed, and then we can take a wild guess at the thieves coming to steal the device under their noses. For now, we refill our stomachs, we plan, and we wait.”

“They're going to steal it!”

Carefully, Dr du Bois eyed me, such that I could stare into the green depth of her pitiless eyes. “You may do as you wish,” she spoke, a cold and awful truth. “But eat with me, at least, and listen. I would not like to bring your corpse back to your parents.”

List of things to get in Cyllage: Portable stove. Possibly a short-wave radio set. And a laptop. So I browsed over my possible shopping options as Donar called out his Fletchling as we stood at the gates of the Glittering Cave.

“Fletchling, I need you to watch from the air if people enter this building,” Donar instructed, background noise within my Holo Caster. “From any direction. If they try to exit, you have permission to stop them.”

The Tiny Robin Pokémon chirped in alarm.

“Use that speed,” Donar said. “Hit them in the face. We are doing this for the sake of the fossil Pokémon inside. Alright?”

“Might get confusing,” I commented once the background noise faded. “If there are two of the same Pokémon.”

“Not to me,” Donar answered. “Dr du Bois... so, I'll run in and then ask about fossils, right?”

I glared at the Holo Caster. How Donar had gotten to the roof was narrated simply with three words: Altair, Extreme Speed. “Repeat after me. I am not holding the idiot ball.”

“Erm... I am not holding the idiot ball?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Why set yourself up to be held hostage? People who enter the Lab through the Ambrette Town entrance are asking to be shot. And killed. Your job is to incapacitate Flyers. Using the three Pokémon you have, I judge that your Frogadier could do fine, and Darkrai would manage to hold up the precious few up within the lab. Ready?”

“I'm not exactly comfortable with this,” Donar's voice shook. “There are easier ways than this, right?”

As he spoke, all of the lights shone brightly from the windows, magnesium-white glare whiting out the stars overhead, so it seemed.

I activated the circuit breaker I held. The glare shorted out, leaving sparks dancing in the wake of complete darkness, before the screams began. Beside me, a guard snored, long having been knocked out by one of the thieves long before the plan had even been put into motion.

“Smartest things I had ever done,” I mumbled as a particularly loud cry rang out from within, the corrugated metal walls barely holding back the cries for Maman. There was a particularly loud crash and then, the bellow of the dreaded beast.

I held up my Holo Caster. “Donar, we have an Aerodactyl alert. Tell Altair to standby.”

“Y- Yes!” Donar sounded more panicked. “T- There was a gun, and Altair... Altair broke the guy's
spleen!”

“I hope not literally,” I murmured. “Blood evidence is so hard to clean off of his fur. How many?”

“Erm, Fletchling just came back, there was a Lairon, like you said, and the- a Crobat, shit! Fletchling, dodge! Wait, get back! Holy- Altair shot it down!”

A moment of static, before the screams died off. A heartbeat later, Donar's voice came back on, shaky. “A Frogadier nearly got me... Frogadier got it with a Water Pulse...”

Beside me, the guard was stirring. I unleashed Liz once more. Under the lull of Liz's Aromatherapy, the guard fell back into enchanted sleep once more.

“Thank you.” I recalled Liz, and then I let out Aegis. Under my direction, Aegis used Shadow Sneak to guide me through the pitch-dark halls of the Fossil Lab to reach the roof, where Darkrai loomed. He held a sleeping man, whose face was contorted in nightmares.

“Tie him to the spotlight,” I called to Altair. “How were you, Darkrai?”

It is... satisfying. Many thanks.

Between the two of us, we managed to tie the criminal, who stirred only briefly before he went back under the spell of the Dark Void. I then switched the spotlight on, artfully tugged the man to contort his shape better, and then, the others returned.

“Good work,” I nodded. “Recall Fletchling.”

Donar recalled Fletchling, and then Altair looped a paw around his waist and the Lucario and Trainer leapt off, disappearing on the way down. Aegis used Shadow Sneak to take me away as I saw Darkrai disappear, and I smirked to myself when I landed on dry cliff-side land once more, watching the cloudy skies over the sea.

Hours ago, we had started on the pâte course as I used the shakers, bottles, menu and her napkin to demonstrate my plan.

“If I was a thief looking to steal the fossil machine, I would flee towards the direction no one would expect,” I started to explain. “Altair, you mentioned that there was a Lairon?”

One of the Aron line, definitely. I found a Lairon footprint, but only one.

“This is a construction of the Ambrette Lab and the cave,” Dr du Bois used a plate for the Lab, and a napkin for the cave, with a menu laid out across to show the Spikes Passage. “Given that at least one Lairon is confirmed, and that so far our mystery would keep themselves secret until after the heist, we could probably hypothesise that our thieves would be exiting through the Glittering Cave. The Ranger and the neighbouring hikers would have retired for the night, hence they could get through the Glittering Cave and past the Spikes Passage using that Lairon.”

“Is that... possible?” Donar asked. “I mean... a Lairon has got to be pretty heavy.”

“Not that far off from a Rhyhorn,” I dismissed. “Usually the Fossil Lab would be empty save for a few, so either they would steal the whole machine and rebuild it somewhere else, or they would take over the Laboratory for however long it takes to revive the Fossils and store the Pokémon away. Given the specs of the Ambrette restoration machine, though, I am inclined towards the latter. At the speed of restoration, it would not take long at all, especially if the few scientists on night duty are press-ganged into service.”
“But Gary Oak is there,” Donar pointed out.

“Gary Oak is one man,” I shrugged. “They have guns. From there, I would assume that they must reach the ocean, where presumably a boat awaits to take them, and a lot of fossil Pokémon, away. As for the Bagon, it was shot because of an accident. Although I do not feel quite sure about the Kalosian Sûreté, I presume that a ballistics test would reveal who shot that Bagon. He's not going to go away for a very long time.”

“So, the plan?” Donar asked.

“Using him,” I pointed to Darkrai, who had loomed as a shadow.

Me?

“I will throw the circuit breaker attached to the laboratory the moment any restoration machine is activated,” I explained. “Darkrai shall be the main force to infiltrate the building and take down our thieves in the resulting darkness. Donar, Altair and you shall be on hand to take down flyers; Flying Pokémon and Smoke Balls are unfortunately common associates with such heists.”

Thus the plan had unfolded, with nearly every factor, even Donar supposedly freezing up out of fright accounted for, and the result was present in the whine of sirens and men being unloaded out of the Ambrette Fossil Lab and towards the waiting cruisers from neighbouring towns.

Over the cliffs and upon the cloud-line, shone a spotlight amidst the ring of emergency sirens, arranged to show a vaguely human face and a single, visible eye.

The more I had listened to Dr du Bois’s plan, I was realising that it was a lot more violent than anyone should have intended.

“Fletchling, I need you to watch from the air if people enter this building,” I instructed my only flight-capable Pokémon. “From any direction. If they try to exit, you have permission to stop them.”

The Tiny Robin Pokémon chirped in alarm.

“Use that speed,” I answered. “Hit them in the face. We are doing this for the sake of the fossil Pokémon inside. Alright?”

“Might get confusing,” Dr du Bois's voice commented from my Holo Caster once Fletchling took to the skies. “If there are two of the same Pokémon.”

“No, me,” I replied. “Dr du Bois... so, I'll run in and then ask about fossils, right?”

“Repeat after me. I am not holding the idiot ball.”

“Erm... I am not holding the idiot ball?”

“‘Yes,” her voice drifted, a crisp tone like the one that had laid out the plan that involved Altair bringing me to the roof via high jump. “Why set yourself up to be held hostage? People who enter the Lab through the Ambrette Town entrance are asking to be shot. And killed. Your job is to incapacitate Flyers. Using the three Pokémon you have, I judge that your Frogadier could do fine, and Darkrai would manage to hold up the precious few up within the lab. Ready?”

“I'm not exactly comfortable with this,” my voice shook. “There are easier ways than this, right?”

From the roof, I could see from the windows below, all of the lights glaring with a stark white that
seemed to blink out the stars.

At the same time, they blacked out right as the first screams began.

“Mam mia!”

Crashes echoed, along with shattering wood, bent steel, and the constant gunfire that forced me to clap my hands over my ears. Darkrai was clearly enjoying himself there, and yet the sounds of violence somehow sickened me, somehow made me wish to run away and not look back. There was a particularly loud crash and then, a loud, constant bellow like a metronome as the roof access doors fell apart.

I mean, fell apart. A single slash made their fate as I came face-to-face with a row of teeth, sharp and clearly meant to rip prey to bits. It roared. I screamed, scrambling back. Fletchling hurtled from the darkened skies, futilely trying to do her job.

“No, get back!” I yelled at her, brave little bird that she was before the purple-skinned monster backhanded her, and I caught her, seeing the Pokémon dive towards me, jaw wide.

I rolled, and the teeth chomped down on empty air. As I unsteadily got to my feet, I saw the clanking behemoth growl, and then the stocky, armoured form of one Pokémon I had seen just once on a Hoenn Championship match erupted, screaming.

A crack, and both Pokémon fell down, whimpering. Altair's form hovered, clearly just finished with planting his elbow into some guy's spleen. Behind Altair, a human shape hung from one of the aircraft warning lights on the roof.

My Holo Caster pinged. “Donar, we have an Aerodactyl alert. Tell Altair to standby.”

“Y- Yes!” I shouted. “T- There was a gun, and Altair... Altair broke the guy's spleen!”

“I hope not literally,” was her reply. “Blood evidence is so hard to clean off of his fur. How many?”

“Erm, Fletchling just came back, there was a Lairon, like you said, and the- a Crobat, shit!” I yelled as the Crobat shot out of the empty doors like, well, a Zubat out of hell. “Fletchling, dodge! Wait, get back!” I suddenly changed tack as I spotted a familiar light shot towards the Zubat out of hell as it cried out, half its wings fried as it dropped with a piteous cry. “Holy- Altair shot it down!”

“Here I thought it must be Gary Oak, and it's just a hotshot Trainer,” someone growled behind me. “Frogadier, sic him!”

The sudden weight drop caused me to stumble, falling onto my front, the foetid breath, cool and sticky bubbles popping as the Frogadier came up close and personal, and licked me.

“Geroff! Get off!” I wasn't ashamed of admitting that by that time, Dr du Bois had cured any and all instinct towards danger within my pre-teen head if it would only save my life. I fell down, paralysed as the Bubble Frog Pokémon began to tighten its grip around my throat. It was another Trainer's Pokémon, but at the moment all I could see was my own Pokémon beginning to strangle me.

Fletchling screeched, diving down for a Peck attack that got slapped to one side. The Frogadier tightened his hold, prepared to hunker down and strangle me slowly. I was going to expire on the roof of the Ambrette Fossil Lab, and what a way to go.

“Chinder!” Just like that, I wasn't going to die.
From above, a Pokémon dived, a new Pokémon having just left its evolutionary glow. The bird's plumage was orange and black on white, my Fletchling turned bigger, faster, fiery. My second Pokémon had evolved.

It spat an Ember towards the Frogadier, who merely spat a pulse of water at it. Some of the water trickled down my face. A laugh resounded, before a silver light that was Flash Cannon cut it off, and something like a gunshot echoed. “Fire can't stand up to water, boy! Kill him!”

My Pokéball burst open, and my own Frogadier landed on my back with a war cry, unleashing a volley of noise that nearly burst my eardrums. Most of the torrent, though, blasted the Frogadier off of me, with a crack as its skull collided with the roof railings before it toppled over the edge. The croaks of panic as the Pokémon fell down the two storeys was piteous, especially compared to its Trainer's screams as he faced the wrath of a cheesed-off Darkrai within the darkness once more. From the sheer volume of sound, he probably fell down about two flights of stairs.

“Thanks,” I panted to my first Pokémon, scrambling to all fours and jabbing at my Holo Caster. “A Frogadier nearly killed me. Frogadier got it with a Water Pulse.”

Only silence answered.

The violence and clanks were lessening, replaced gradually by the whine of sirens in the distance. Altair landed beside my prone form, almost cat-like in silence, before he looped an arm around my waist. Time to go.

“Frogadier, Fletchling!” I shouted, recalling my first Pokémon in time before I was dragged along at horrendous speeds with the Lucario, Fletchling squealing in alarm behind me.

We landed on solid ground, Dr du Bois standing opposite a satisfied-looking Darkrai. None of them looked mussed, bloody, or messed up like me.

“Good work,” Dr du Bois nodded as Fletchling dived down behind me. “Recall Fletchling.”

I had barely recalled my Pokémon before I was whizzing again, back to the Hotel Ambrette, and past where Dr du Bois had started talking to the concierge desk, loudly and in a way to garner attention. As an alibi, I gathered, but the speeds left me dizzy even before Altair dumped me onto the doormat.

You're heavy, the Lucario commented as I gasped for breath. Can you manage?

I crawled up to my feet, muttering a curse as I rummaged through my pocket for the key. I unlocked the door, leaning on the walls as I fell into my rather stark hotel room.

“You're a bastard,” I snarled at the Lucario.

He responded by slamming my door shut.

I was shivering as I half-fell into the washroom and slammed the door shut. My blood was pounding in my ears, the fear coursing through me. The soft lighting, Spartan décor and the clean but nondescript smell of cleaner was of little comfort.

I looked to the mirror and stared at the ghost there. The ghost stared back. I continued staring at it, and it continued staring back. I had no idea how long that lasted, but it felt like the whole night long. The creature didn't blink, or move, or breathe. The only light came from the soft lighting overhead, bathing us in a warm caramel glow that did nothing to soften it. It stayed a ghastly white, devoid of life, with its black eyes staring at me intently.
I drew a breath, and the spell broke, tearing myself away from my reflection. To realise that this was real, the danger was very, very real and that I could have died was a sobering thought to me.

I called out my Pokémon, staring at all of them. The wings of Fletchinder was messed up, half of them lying in different directions and some of them orange as the flames they conjured. Frogadier just looked like someone had died.

“Bulbasaur!” Bulbasaur exclaimed in alarm at my state, Fletchling's ruffled wings and Frogadier's grim expression.

Well, not Fletchling. Fletchinder. The PokéDex says: The Ember Pokémon. The hotter the flame sac on its belly, the faster it can fly, but it takes some time to get the fire going.

I began to set out saucers of water from my bag with trembling hands. “I'm so sorry. Fletchinder, Frogadier, you're not hurt, right?”

Apart from being slightly shaken, Fletchling looked fine, so then I turned my attention to Frogadier, trying not to flinch as I held out my hand. “Hey. It's fine.”

Frogadier looked miserable. “Ge, ge, Frogadier.”

“It's all fine,” I soothed. “It's fine. I'm fine... I think.”

“Ge,” he replied nonchalantly, turning his head away.

"Don't you do that to me. Tell me what's wrong,” I reached out a hand to keep his head from moving. Now he had to face me.

Frogadier narrowed his lidded eyes and butted his head against my hand, effectively moving it. “Ge,” he said in the closest thing to an actual growl I'd ever heard from him.

I was a bit alarm. Short of Fletch-Fletchinder pecking me on the hands, Bulbasaur and Frogadier were some of the nicest Pokémon I had met, and they had barely given me any trouble. “Are you angry?”

After a bit of thinking, he bobbed his head. “At me?”

A shake.

“At Dr du Bois?” Another shake.

“Altair?” Yet another shake.

I couldn't very well ask who he was angry at, but I was running out of suspects. “Um... Are you angry at us?”

Frogadier grimly nodded. I tilted my head, puzzled by his behaviour. “So it's a Pokémon. Fletchling?”

The thought of him being angry at Fletchinder was laughable, but he was ignoring her... Frogadier just shook his head sharply, glaring at me. I smiled apologetically. He definitely wasn't mad at her. “Bulbasaur?”

“Frogadier,” he grumbled with another shake of his head.
“Dr du Bois's Pokémon?” Another no.

I was beginning to get frustrated. “You're impossible. Who are you angry with?”

“Frogadier frog,” Frogadier said in a tiny voice, butting his head against my leg. “...Ge.”

He looked up at me with his usual blank expression.

“...You?” I moved beside him, unsure of how to take this answer. He was angry at himself? Why? I couldn't ask that, though, unless I wanted another hour of guessing.

“Frogadier frog,” Frogadier mimed himself, then another self, and even stuck out his tongue for effect.

I shivered. Now I was getting the message. “You're not representative of your race, Frogadier. Yes... the Frogadier tried to kill me, but you saved me.” I reached out and scratching him behind the head. He made a discontented sound but didn't pull away. “You saved me, Fletchinder and you both. Bulbasaur did good work too in the mines.”

“Fletchinder!” she strutted her stuff.

“But, Dr du Bois has a point,” I sighed. “If we have to give you a nickname... I'll just call you Frog, Bird, and Bulbizarre.”

Bulbasaur slapped me with a Vine Whip. Fletchinder made an attempt to peck me. Frogadier just slapped his forehead with his palm, almost in exasperation.

“That's not right, no,” I nodded. “Fletchinder... you've evolved. We should tell Dr du Bois, and celebrate. Then discuss some new names. And then sleep.”

“Fletchinder!” she chirped.

Across the bathroom, the door slammed open to reveal Dr du Bois. She looked slightly messier; her hair was slightly mussed, and her shirt torn at the sleeve. Other than those two things, her green eyes bored at me, clearly bored.

“Dr du Bois!” I nearly jumped in fright.

“Congratulations on the evolution of your Fletchling into a Fletchinder,” she flatly commented. “If you don't mind, I need water for Altair.”

“What happened to him?” I faced her.

“A graze,” her expression revealed nothing as she reached this sink and began filling a basin with hot water. “Not from a bullet – he skimmed his paws on the roof floor, apparently. I'm going to start first aid.”

“Doctor...” I started. “I'm sorry.”

Her motions slowed, if only for a second. “What for?”

“For screwing up,” I sighed. “When you tried to stop me... it was for my own good. I'm not good at coordinating my Pokémon. I could barely think of a plan beyond charge in and challenge to a Pokémon battle. Today... a Frogadier nearly killed me. Not my own, but one.”

“Are you planning to regularly throw yourself into danger?” she archly replied, still filling the basin
and then walking out. I followed her into an equally bland hotel room, where Altair occupied the bed, laid out flat on his side. Darkrai hovered with Crystal above, the Ghost Pokémon's light illuminating the room far more. By the side, Aegis clanged as Liz hovered over Altair worryingly, spinning at dizzying speeds. Jelly hovered nearby, almost jumping for the water before Dr du Bois pushed past her towards Altair.

“You're getting slow,” Dr du Bois remarked, first dabbing with a hot wet flannel on a bloody patch of skin.

*It is nothing.*

“Minor injuries, no one died, excellent job overall,” Dr du Bois agreed with the air of someone who had long acclimatised to violence. “Donar came by to say *bonsoir*.”

“Thank you,” I bowed my head towards Dr du Bois.

Slowly, she considered. “What for?”

“Preventing me from making a stupid mistake.” I nodded.

“In this mission, I hoped that by my case study, I could examine the forces that a Trainer's life is governed by,” Dr du Bois explained. “The society, the weather, the Pokémon habitats, the history of any place. I have walked the path of a Trainer in three regions, but the Kalos region's path eludes me. Perhaps it is merely the illusion of familiarity, that people don't notice what is familiar to them. But, as a researcher, I require a mirror. A rookie Trainer, a blank slate who does not know what he ignores or is ignorant of—”

“Oi,” I muttered, without heat.

“-and from there, that information shall be incredibly helpful to me,” Dr du Bois ignored me. “Like I said. Future generations shall learn from your mistakes. A dead body, though, is inconvenient, especially when it comes attached with parents still alive and caring enough to make a lawsuit.”

She then eyed me. “Sina and Dexio have received the same treatment. They froze up, like you. I believe that to be the reason they do not like me.”

“Why didn't you stop me?” I rasped.

“All of you chose. All of you are Trainers, with the implication of responsibility towards yourselves and your Pokémon. Who am I to dictate what you can and cannot do?” Dr du Bois waved, having finished tending to Altair's wound and was now pulling out a small bottle of iodine. “You are alive, and in one piece. Perhaps this shall be a lesson to you.”

“What do we do now?” I asked, lost.

“We prepare to sleep,” she volunteered. “Tomorrow, we go to visit the Muraille Coast outside of Ambrette Town, to the beach. Perhaps we could drop by and visit the unfortunate Bagon we got into the Pokémon Centre. From there, I suppose there's exploring the town and preparing a training regimen for the Cyllage Gym. But sleep tonight, boy. You'll need it.”

“Night, Dr du Bois,” I walked back to my room via the bathroom, closing the door behind me. Then, I scooped up Frogadier and I hugged him, perhaps for the first time. At least, I knew it was the first time I hugged him and meant it.
Chapter Summary

It took a while, but I have brutally taught Donar the meaning of violence in the Pokémon world. Hopefully, he shall learn.

Please tell me you haven't cooked that Clauncher,” I automatically asked in concern. Dr du Bois might be cruel, but cooking a wild Clauncher was just cruel and unusual.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Day 16 (am): It took a while, but I have brutally taught Donar the meaning of violence in the Pokémon world. Hopefully, he shall learn.

“I always have doubts,” I told my partner Lucario as I began to ready evening ablutions. “Especially with taking a research assistant. And now I find myself with the same issues concerning the boy.”

Let him walk his own path. Although, that was a nice move, to guide him into a plan.

“Most of the heavy lifting was done by Darkrai and you,” I answered, having already changed and prepared to turn off the lighting. “Darkrai?”

I am here.

“Do you require a place to sleep?”

I shall be fine, provided that my Bad Dreams does not adversely affect you.

“I have my ways,” I turned to the ghostly trio. “If I hear a single complaint regarding hauntings, we will have words. Bonne nuit, Liz, Altair, Crystal, Aegis, Jelly, Darkrai.”

It would be easier if I had a Pokéball.

“I refuse,” I answered, and that was that.

Perhaps I had exaggerated. The extent to Bad Dreams could reach over cities, according to the relevant information I derived before I had left Camphrier Town. It could also be limited. By placing myself between Darkrai and the rest of my companions, I shielded them.

So I fell asleep with the knowledge to expect a bad dream.

It started at Geosenge, of course. Tunnels dug into the earth, deep under the sleepy town best known for the burning of Jeanne d’Arc, where her Sylveon perished with her. A constant repetitive beat echoed my running footsteps, merged with multiple layers of instruments that made it disturbing and discordant, echoes of a single song being played over and over again on different instruments at different speeds.
Beside me, Delphi screeched, glowing white with power, bright and great as a million-watt light bulb, especially after our defeat of Malva, the traitoress.

I heard the pattering of footsteps, and I laughed.

“Well, Altair?” I heard my own voice, feminine and pitched low.

*Both wings have been evacuated and cleaned, Altair nodded. I had no need to be present, not with Mme Drasna on hand.*

“I got it,” I nodded. “Shall we, then?”

*Yes.*

“Delphi, let us,” I ordered, turning on one foot to set off at a brisk jog. I must have turned many corners of darkened hallway before I came across the grunts of Team Flare. They posed, then they let out their Pokémon, howling for blood and an ideology that was never real. None of it was real, but an elaborate masquerade, after all.

“Go, Liepard!” they released the purple-and-mustard feline Pokémon,

“Altair, Swords Dance!” I ordered.

“Fake Out!” the female Trainer with the Liepard called as the purple and yellow leopard leapt forth to stop Altair.

“Good,” I praised with the sure certainty that Altair was already awaiting the next order. “Aura Sphere!”

A glowing ball of light was shoved up its nose. This probably had the effect of breaking cartilage, since I heard a *crack* of bone and the Liepard flew off into the distance.

“Bisharp!” the Trainer now called, releasing a living menace of blades. I just snapped my fingers. The skylights overhead crashed, a curtain of glass descending with the speed, colouration and claws of a Flygon.

“Delphi, Future Sight,” I ordered as Vega growled. “Vega, these Flare administrators. You're the fastest one here. Well?”

The dragon grunted in acknowledgement, a sphere of light charged within its maw.

“We're counting on you,” I nodded. “Dragon Claw at close quarters. Earth Power at far quarters. Anything in between is up to you, as long as you don't use Hyper Beam or Sandstorm. Altair, Delphi. The Legendary Pokémon still needs to be freed.”

The Delphox and Lucario murmured in acknowledgement, running as we took off for the next room.

Soon, we arrived at a circular vault, wires trailing from the ceiling sparking and showering us in stray bursts of heat and light, and there six Flare grunts took us on at once, falling prey to the various Future Sight attacks Delphi had long readied.

“Found them,” I breathed a sigh, approaching the platforms where the sleeping forms of the two Pokémon were. “I'm going to let you two out, alright? It's over.”

I stepped back. “Altair.”
Understood. He broke a steel cable.

Sparks scattered over the metal casing, and yet the Lucario did not flinch. Not as the tree shook, not as the egg began to crack. Not as pink and white light merged with red and black. Not as the branches of the tree began to shake, as the trunk splayed out into spindly legs. As the eggshell cracked, wings spread, and a beak formed to cry out.

As auras mixed, then he flinched.

Both Legendary Pokémon, began to scream, the walls shaking with their mirth and something larger and undefinable. The horns of the cervine Pokémon grew larger, the jewels upon it glowing with the colours of a rainbow that it swung as Delphi used his wand to defend me.

I screamed as my first Pokémon, the one that started this all, was beheaded in an instant.

The other, aquiline Pokémon, bellowed, the dark red aura flying out to strike that Altair and I dodged.

“Everyone!” I screamed, unleashing three more Pokéballs.

Sealeo began to attack the Pokémon of Destruction with Ice Ball and Icy Wind. Deneb stood as my defence, and Banette was laughing at the ensuing carnage.

“Use Phantom Force!” I hollered at him, to which he complied. I then raised my arm. “Deneb!”

The Venusaur bellowed in answer.

“We're going to have to chase the Legendary Pokémon away from this town,” I called. “Understood? Altair, Sealeo and you, double team the other with ice and fists. Banette, you're weak to darkness, you're going to support Deneb with Will-O-Wisp.”

“Ne, ne!” the Marionette's mouth unzipped to show its teeth in a sharp grin.

The Venusaur cried out again, but there was no time, not since one of my Pokémon, no, my first Pokémon, had died, and then now... now I had a town to protect. I had a region to safeguard.

I raised my arm, and around my left wrist, I saw the jewel upon it begin to glow. “Evolve, Deneb! Venoshock!”

The flower on the back of the Venusaur expanded, glowing purple before it spat a mass of poisonous smog at the cervine demonic monster glowed with a pearlescent light before it jumped, lightning-fast, and then a pink Moonblast knocked Deneb back before it charged. The Venusaur bellowed as the flower upon its head was gored through, and the Banette was little better, the ghostly fire it used barely scratching at the true monster, the one shrouded in pink and waving its horns and then it attacked me.

I screamed as the pink blast nearly got to me, but Deneb had tanked most of it. My Venusaur was suffering, because this Pokémon didn't understand-

Sealeo backed slightly, its breath whistling.

“Icy Wind!” I called to the seal, who blew a spiralling gale that enveloped both shadowed, legendary monsters.

The horned one growled, as it lowered the proud arrangement of horns that glowed with the colours
of the rainbow. I recognised the move as Megahorn. It was going to hit Deneb.

My Venusaur charged a Solarbeam, aware that this was going to be its last attack. Aware that it was defending its trainer to the last. He was going to die.

My Venusaur bellowed in defiance, but could not move within the vortex created by the Solar Beam it was about to fire. Around it was the mangled remnants of some of the Flares' Pokémon, Delphi amongst them.

“Deneb!” I screamed, swinging out. I stumbled, landing in front of the charging Pokémon. The horn stabbed through my spine and came out in the other end.

I looked straight, into Deneb's dying face where the pointed end of the horn had breached his skull. “Fire!”

The Legendary Pokémon tried to move, but I held it down. Venerated Pokémon or even infamous companion of Jeanne d'Arc, it could barely do anything but dig its heels and tug, and compared to holding onto a dying Venusaur for support, the cervine Pokémon was going to stay.

“L...” I began to cry. “Banette. Can you create a Destiny Bond between people?”

It nodded solemnly. A zip pulled across its face in a broad, jagged grin that belied its panic.

The deer screamed, trying to rip its horns out, but the many points it held proved to be its downfall. Especially as I clung onto them in my stomach, in my stained hands.

“Why did our comrades die?” I whispered. “I don't want this. All of this... Delphi and Deneb-”

Across the room, the bird was glowing a reddish-black. It threw a glowing red wing out, Sealeo throwing herself in Altair's path, tackling the Lucario off course but taking the brunt of the attack. Her empty eyes greeted me as the thick, fatty body slapped the floor.


What are you thinking?

Deneb cried, too tired to do anything but watch. The deer-like Pokémon, perhaps sensing death or the Banette's power in linking destinies, began to cry.

“For every wish these Pokémon granted, an additional curse was inflicted,” I gasped. “Altair... go! This is our best chance!”

Your spine-! Your body-!

“When you get back...” I whispered. “If they're still alive, Flash Cannon. Flash Cannon everything. Steel is the only way to kill the immortal. Now!”

The bird-like Pokémon screamed at the deer and I, trying to move if not for that one of its wings had broken under one particularly vicious attack.

“I gave you fair warning,” I growled as Altair hurriedly left. “I... do you think yourselves as gods to rain judgement upon humans? Just because you rule life and death? You lost responsibility the day we gained free will.”

It screamed some more, a low, musical cry of rage.
I saw the ghostly chains of fate intertwine in Banette’s hands, and I fell down, leaning against the wall, half-dangling between Deneb’s corpse, the horns, and the wall. I could see the bird Pokémon try to attack, move, do something, but I guessed that its bones were broken since it could barely do more than lift its head and bellow in impotent rage. Blood spattered on the ground; Altair must have drawn blood, and since arteries composed a major part of a bird’s wings-

“I’m sorry our time is so short,” I whispered as I patted its head. “Thanks, Banette.”

Altair entered the room again, perched on Vega’s back just as the bird managed to get off an attack to me. As I saw the Oblivion Wing approach, I reflected, how ironic that the immortal shall die with me.

A second chain fell, and my Banette embraced me. For once in my life, it was smiling, really and truly smiling. I held it close, like a doll. Just a girl, prepared to fall asleep with her favourite doll, knowing that she might never wake again.

“Banette love their Trainers,” I whispered towards her. “Banette bear a grudge, not for being discarded or how they are created, but love their Trainers so much to despise anyone who stands between their Trainer and the goal. They will not be alive... to enjoy this.”

The horned one screamed, along with the cries of the winged one. An Oblivion Wing shot at me, a Moonblast found its mark directly overhead. I laughed as I raised my head to stare into crossed eyes and slanted pupils in front of me.

“My name is Marguerite Linden du Bois,” I spat into the faces of the Legendary Pokémon who had plagued Kalos since time immemorial, the pain incredible. “I am the latest of the Kalos Champions, the princess abandoned by her people. If you wish to stop me, try, if you can go beyond my despair. Begone!”

I awoke. Ten years later, the physical symptoms were readily apparent; rocketing heartbeat, cold sweat, quick breathing. And fear that was banished.

The sun shone outside, carrying with it a hint of brine. Crystal hung suspended overhead, still cooing and clinking.

I sat up slowly, watching Jelly hang from the windowsill sleeping, Altair meditating on her head, and Aegis practising his shield-use. Liz was perched on Jelly, just enjoying the sunlight, with Darkrai. The Pitch-Black Pokémon turned to me. Did you sleep well?

I yawned. “We have proven a viable sleeping arrangement. Now, what time is it? I would like breakfast, and quickly. Altair, how are your wounds?”

They have closed. We will not require the Pokémon Centre.

I nodded, almost to myself as I rose, stretching. “We need to visit that Bagon and inform him that justice was done. I would also imagine that Officer Jenny shall be wandering about soon.”

I knocked on the adjoining door. Silence answered, hence I pushed it open. I stepped into the empty bathroom, locked the opposite door, and then performed my own morning ablutions. Halfway through my shower there was an insistent knocking on the door, which interrupted any chance at morning reflection. I stepped out of the shower stall, wrapping a towel around myself before I opened it to a blushing face.

“D- Dr du Bois!” Donar sputtered, looking away or at least trying to look anywhere but at me. “I’m sorry, I- erm...”
“Bonjour,” I answered him before I closed the door and finished my shower and left. After a moment, I stepped out fully dressed, and I got my Holo Caster to begin writing, marking every bit of information I should not be able to know to be resigned. My Holo Caster beeped incessantly as I typed, so I quieted it.

What is that? Darkrai was staring at my Holo Caster.

“A Holo Caster,” I automatically answered. “It’s a form of data interface by which humans can manipulate data to serve their needs.”

I do not quite comprehend.

I paused for a moment, shelving away the memories that could only be eliminated by drowning in work, and got to lecturing. It was very therapeutic, to focus on an aspect of life further removed from my own “How much do you know about human recording? Books, writing, all of that?”

I know that humans have short memories, hence they record. The other purposes of human records eludes me.

“That’s... one way of expressing things,” I decided. “Perhaps, humans do not have short memories as much as... a lot of information, too much for memory alone. For example... scents. Wild Pokémon have their own methods of outlining an individual by fur colour, scent, markings, etcetera, yes?”

Yes.

“Well, humans have height, weight, eye and skin colour, etcetera, and on a journey each individual human is guaranteed to meet at least a thousand other people,” I diplomatically replied. “And then in history, we have keeping historical records, dissemination of knowledge through the media, the formation of legal systems etcetera. There is no way to remember everything except via recording. For example... here,”

I produced my PokéDex. “This device scans every Pokémon in its presence and provides a brief summary of its existence as representative of its species. For example...”

“Darkrai, the Pitch-Black Pokémon,” it beeped as the mechanical voice read it out. “It chases people and Pokémon from its territory by causing them to experience deep, nightmarish slumbers.”

“Originally, Pokémon records were kept in books as well,” I raised my hands to indicate the dimensions of such editions. “Digitisation of information allows humans to collate the sum entirety of our knowledge, and technology has extended the reach of mankind to possibly the stars, no, perhaps more. So, in a tiny device like this PokéDex, people can actually collate the sum dimensions, features and habitats of all known Pokémon they encounter, usually specific to a human-defined region, although my edition is the National PokéDex.”

So this device allows humans to identify which Pokémon are native to which region or habitat, Darkrai supplied.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Amongst many. On a more general sense, the evolution of writing also allows for the storage and distribution of information. For example; why are the Fletchling localised around Santalune?”

I do not know.

“So to answer that, we go to Kalosian history,” I then flicked the Holo Caster browser to Bulbapedia. “And look, Santalune Forest was used in the Dynasties Era for hunting, which also
included the specialised art of falconry. It notes here that humans have been known to do things like transport whole populations of passage Fletchling for use in falconry, and thus resulting in the half-wild domestication of the Fletchling population. Hence, the localisation of the Fletchling line around Santalune Forest is not, in fact, natural, but a human effort.”

I then switched my Holo Caster back to its word processing program. “Of course, records also reveal more than just the facts of our ancestors; they allow us to transmit knowledge, that in the candle-flame of a human lifetime we have collated, published and handed down knowledge to the next generation in exact format to ensure no ambiguity in presentation of the facts.”

*This lies beyond our comprehension,* Darkrai answered. *Man is mortal, and doomed to death and failure and loss. Why do you not despair?*

“Are you talking about us as a race, or on an individual basis?” I asked.

*As a race.*

“I don’t have a satisfactory answer to that. I can only suppose... for most humans, they ascribe to their lives a meaning from a higher power, usually Arceus. That life drives them to greater heights, to let them pursue much more. A human life could thus be said to be much more than mere survival. And even if we are gone... we have left a remnant. Human civilisation is the sum total of everything our ancestors accumulated, hence it is not a lone effort.”

*I do not know...*

It should be strange, to be explaining to a Pokémon such things. I did not reflect much on the strangeness of such, more than curse why had no one developed such lines of thought before. Doubtlessly because in the pre-Revolution era, intellectuals were subject to summary execution. “You know these truths, Darkrai. Perhaps not consciously, but you do know.”

*I have spent much of my life upon Newmoon Island. I know of another of my kind within a small town in my home region, and yet... I do not know where it is. The woman I followed to the girl before I met you, she came to my island for some reason. I had hoped to shadow her long enough to arrive upon the main region undetected, but...*

“Cynthia went to Newmoon Island?” I murmured. “Shocking. Continue.”

*I believed her to be searching for Cresselia, rather than I, and yet I followed her nightmares, and her, across an ocean. I was far away from home before I could latch on to the next... host. Thus I ended up in this region.*

“Your kind are primarily attracted to nightmares, so Cynthia and Iris must have had nightmares...” I shook my head. Of course they had had nightmares. “Cynthia would have guaranteed your return to your home.”

*There is nothing awaiting me.*

I paused to consider all of the implications of his words and the questions I could provoke. *You are a Pokémon. Why would human knowledge matter to you? You would live forever; why care about these matters when in the end you would not change your fate? “Are you the only Darkrai upon Newmoon Island?”*

*I was never lonely. Yes, there are others of my kind. Yes, they exist upon Newmoon Island, bringing the scourge of nightmares once as the moon wanes. So it is us, and our way.*
“You don’t want that life for yourself,” I guessed. “Forgive me if I state this, but that is a very... human thought.”

I have come to realise that... perhaps, I am not typical of my kind. That I have been changed by humans, by you.

“Thank you,” I frowned. “I am... not very sure. You are clearly capable of independent thought, no matter how incoherent, like Altair is.”

Darkrai considered my meditating Lucario. The Lucario?

“Neither of you are typical of your species,” I answered simply. “As for your situation... A Pokéball is not the answer I wish to resort to. If you are to continue to follow the boy and I, then there are consequences. Your presence shall be remarked upon. It shall be noticed. You will be alone, the only one of your kind within this region. And the knowledge I shall teach will change you, isolate you further. You will be neither human nor Pokémon, a Pokémon bearing the knowledge and mindset of both worlds. I will not cover knowledge; it will be stark and ugly truths that you may uncover, and most of the time those truths might scar you more than motivate you. Despite all of this, you would still embrace my offer?”

At this, Darkrai met my eyes, his own icy blue glowing. You have the effrontery to dictate at me the consequences already readily apparent, he thought at me. We are what we are. We were supposed to be cruel, cunning, heartless, and terrible. But this much I can tell you – the face pressed even closer, so that I was staring into the pitiless depths of his eyes – we never burned and tortured and ripped one another apart and called it morality. I will learn your knowledge. I will accept your methods. I do not care for morality either way, just a way to escape this foolishness.

“ This absurdity... perhaps we have the same goal,” I smiled, offering my hand. “Then you are a partner, and I must find another companion. Welcome to the party.”

You wouldn’t realise it, being in proximity to Dr du Bois, but she was a performer at heart. Perhaps her unusual introduction using a Chandelure to scare us should have been a hint, but it took a while before I realised that she was... well, maybe harbouring a secret desire to enter the Contest scene. If the Kalos region ever held Contests, she’d probably win. She did win in dragging my Pokémon and I out to the beach, that was a point.

Nearby, a group of Trainers stared, gaping, as a whole troupe of Ghost-type Pokémon made its way to the beach. I tried to linger behind, but Fletchinder pecked me in reminder, and I was then grabbed by the arm and forced to frog-march alongside the figure swathed in a black towel-robe towards the beach. The now-clean tarp had been laid out as an impromptu blanket, my Bulbasaur misappropriated as a weight by a grinning Jelly, who then proceeded to unleash a Hydro Pump at me, grinning. As I coughed and sputtered salty water, I could hear Darkrai sniggering. That’s right, Darkrai.

“There is a game to play,” Dr du Bois declared with complete seriousness to my Pokémon, the traitors. “Volleyball!”

I stripped off my shirt and hat, laying it out on the branch of a nearby tree to watch.

“Are you alright?” it was one of the starers, a rather pretty girl with hair like a Whimsicott and a grin to match the pranksters. “I’m Sophie. Those jokers-” she indicated the staring pack of wolf-men obsessed with Dr du Bois’s thighs “-and I work at the Fossil Lab.”
“Donar Oak,” I groaned. “The mad woman is Dr du Bois. She's a sadist, prone to ordering people around, and nasty in general.”

“She sounds terrible,” Sophie agreed with me, eyeing Dr du Bois laid out on the ocean surface.

I blinked, before I turned my head. Yes, she was lying on that pink menace of a Jellicent, sunbathing, the paleness of her skin in contrast with the coral of that Jellicent and the black of her two-piece swimsuit. On one of the rocks nearby, a black robe hung, seemingly unwatched. I say seemingly, because I find it unbelievable that she didn't put any of her minions on the case.

“Is that a Jellicent?” one of the guys, this one wearing a towel draped over his shoulders and a tiny brief-like swimsuit squinted. “I thought they were native to Unova!”

With a groan, Dr du Bois sat up. “I've been to Unova. Quite close to Undella Bay.”

“It looks strong,” the guy offered. “I'm Pierce. How 'bout a Pokémon battle?”

“You really don't want to,” I hurriedly intervened. “She's crazy and vicious. Really.”

Dr du Bois looked down to her own Jellicent. “Your opinion?”

It burbled at her.

“I thought so,” she nodded to Pierce. “Very well.”

“Go, Accelgor!” Pierce released the Pokémon. It looked like a ninja with a giant pink head and dressed in black bandages. It glared as it landed safely upon the sand, the expression made all the more intimidating by the green and black markings it bore upon its face.

I made an immediate move for my PokéDex. Accelgor, the Shell Out Pokémon. *When its body dries out, it weakens. So, to prevent dehydration, it wraps itself in many layers of thin membrane.*

“Is that so?” Dr du Bois murmured. “Will you use only that Accelgor?”

“Let's try,” Pierce smirked. “Accelgor, go, Double Team!”


“Blu, blu-blu,” it burbled, before the boundaries of the field expanded, glowing with light that trapped both Trainers and Pokémon.

“This...” Pierce gaped.

“Jelly, Brine,” Dr du Bois ordered, barely flinching.

“Accelgor, Giga Drain- Accelgor!” Pierce yelled as the pink menace suddenly reappeared to throw a barrage of water towards the ninja-like Pokémon.

“I applaud your decision to use Grass-type moves against my Water-type Jellicent,” Dr du Bois pronounced, still perched on top of Jelly. “Toxic.”

Accelgor was drenched in a purple liquid this time. Coughing, Pierce covered his nose. “Accelgor, don't breathe it in!”

“Use Recover, Jelly,” Dr du Bois indicated, as the Jellicent glowed.
“Pierce, don't be stupid!” Sophie called from the sidelines.

It continued for that moment; Jelly dancing and recovering while the Accelgor hit, tried to hit, and eventually succumbed to the Toxic.

“Accelgor, are you with me?” Pierce finally asked the Pokémon, who gave an affirmative nod. “Good, Focus Blast!”

“Are you an idiot?” Dr du Bois dismissed as the chi blast Accelgor charged simply passed through the pink menace. “More than that, look at your Pokémon.”

Pierce looked down at last, to see that Accelgor keel over. “Accelgor! What's wrong?”

“Accelgor has fainted,” Dr du Bois declared. As she spoke, she was stringing a fishing line. “Jelly wins. The membranous coverings of an Accelgor are currently disrupted by an excess of salt water. Furthermore, the Toxic attack would slowly eat through the membrane in time. When that happens... who knows what would happen. Leave the winner's purse, and go to the Pokémon Centre.”

“Somehow this cheeses me off...” Pierce growled. “Why didn't Focus Blast work?”

“What kind of idiot are you, Pierce?” Sophie called. “It's a Water/Ghost type Pokémon! Normal- and Fighting-type moves don't work on it! Anyway, hurry up and take her to a Pokémon Centre!”

“Fine,” Pierce handed over his loss carefully. “Sophie, I'll be taking Accelgor to the Pokémon Centre.”

“That Jellicent is hideously strong...” Sophie kept staring at it as it floated back out towards the sea. “Battle me!”

“You just saw her dominate that Accelgor, and now you want to battle?!” I exclaimed. “What if your Pokémon gets poisoned?”

“That won't happen,” Sophie smiled. “Go, Escavelier!”

“I see,” Dr du Bois pronounced as the large helmet-like Pokémon with attached red-and-white jousting swirls appeared from the Pokéball. As she spoke, the fishing line started twitching. “Unlike Accelgor, which is a pure Bug-type, speed and offensively oriented Pokémon, Escavelier is a slow and defensive Pokémon even though its physical attack is high. So the Trick Room and Toxic strategy won't work. If I am right... you owned the Shelmet that later became that boy's Accelgor.”

I pulled up my Pokédex to look. Escavelier, the Cavalry Pokémon. These Pokémon evolve by wearing the shell covering of a Shelmet. The steel armour protects their whole body.

“Yes,” Sophie fiercely answered, with a Trainer's smirk as her Escavelier burbled in reply. “Pierce is as direct as they come, that's why Accelgor can't match up to your strategy. Escavelier won't be weak!”

Dr du Bois clicked her tongue, hoisting up a small blue Pokémon with large claws, grabbing it by the body to hold up its fainted form. “Donar, this is a Water-type Pokémon native to the Kalos region, Clauncher.”

“Clauncher?” I echoed, looking up the entry. Clauncher, the Water Gun Pokémon. Through controlled expulsions of internal gas, it can expel water like a pistol shot. At close distances, it can shatter rock.
“Jelly, Scald,” Dr du Bois then ordered, the comment having caught Sophie off-guard.

In answer, the pink menace shot a stream of steaming clouds towards the Escavelier, the armoured Pokémon bellowing in alarm as it was pushed off-course with the stream.

“Escavelier, Iron Defence!” Sophie quickly called.

“Ca!” the Pokémon answered, its armour shimmering as it strengthened in the face of the hot water.

“In Kalos, the hard shell of the Clauncher line protects its soft body,” Dr du Bois began with the sort of half-dreamy face that was so eerie that opposing Trainers must have crapped their pants before. “So, to cook it, the original way is to boil a pot of water, and add salt and flavourings to the water. The Clauncher and its like is then immersed head-first into the boiling water, and the pot is closed. The Clauncher struggles, but slowly, within the same hard shell that protects its soft body, the Clauncher is cooked alive by the hot, boiling water."

“Escavelier!” Sophie screamed as the stream let up, the armoured knight-like Pokémon tottering about. “Are you alright? Say that you're alright!”

“Escavelier are bugs contained in a suit of armour,” Dr du Bois commented darkly. “It's so befitting, is it not? That a Pokémon as armoured as the Clauncher line be boiled alive.”

“I grabbed a towel from my bag, offering it to her. “Use this. We need to get Escavelier to the Pokémon Centre!”

“She's... she's a monster,” Sophie gasped as we ran up the steps that would lead to the Ambrette Pokémon Centre, Escavelier bundled into the towel and moaning. “A monster...”

“Sophie, what is it?” Pierce called from the counter, Accelgor presumably having been taken by Nurse Joy's Wigglytuff.

“Oh, this is-” From the reception counter, Nurse Joy squinted at the Cavalry Pokémon. “A burn!”


“Will Escavelier be fine?” Sophie frantically asked Nurse Joy as the armoured Pokémon was taken away.

“It'll be fine,” Nurse Joy quickly assured. “May I ask... did you two trade a Shelmet and Karrablast to evolve your Pokémon?”


“No wonder they have such good bonds,” Nurse Joy commented. “I thought they came from a Double Battle...”

“No, they were defeated one by one by the same Pokémon, a Jellicent,” Sophie insisted. “This is cruel... Escavelier was almost boiled alive!”

“Accelgor was poisoned!” Pierce insisted.

“Well...” Nurse Joy chuckled. “It sounds like the two of you just left a very terrifying Trainer...”
“She was!” Sophie vigorously nodded.

“What's her problem, anyway?” Pierce commented. “Donar, how did you end up travelling with her?!”

“She's... very pragmatic,” I answered. “I think she just likes to finish battles as quickly as possible.”

“She was talking about cooking Clauncher...” Sophie shuddered. “While ordering her Jellicent to use Scald on Escavelier... it was terrifying. I thought... I thought she wanted to eat my Escavelier...”

“Oh, you're the boy with the Bagon, right?” Nurse Joy suddenly started. “Bagon just woke up.”

“It did?” I exclaimed. “Can I see him?”

“Sure,” Nurse Joy led us from the reception counter to a hallways of doors, then choosing one door. “Here.”

Till today, I had no idea what a Pokémon Centre room for Pokémon was supposed to resemble. There were padded baskets of sorts, arranged like bunk beds around. Most of the baskets were of different sizes, with the larger ones arranged below. Tiny steps on either side of the baskets completed the arrangement.

“Thanks to the doctor's first aid, Bagon could be moved to the general ward after twelve hours,” Nurse Joy chattered as she approached one of the lower baskets. “This basket is for younger and smaller Pokémon like Drifloon and that Bagon.”

“That Bagon was young?” I blinked.

“Well...” Nurse Joy paused to recall. “About a year old, actually. Pokémon might be born ready to fight, but young Bagon are quite solitary, since Salamence parents aren't known to parent much.”

We approached the basket. “Bagon,” the Bagon wrapped in a warm-looking blanket within reported. Its head, armoured plate and all, was wrapped in bandages.

“It's a bit risky for this Bagon,” Nurse Joy frowned. “That doctor said that it has the Sheer Force ability, so maybe that's why it actually got injured.”

“Ability?” I asked. “Is that important?”

“Some Pokémon can have a different ability,” Nurse Joy explained. “For example, in the case of Bagon, most Bagon have the ability Rock Head, which protects their head and also prevents them from taking recoil damage in battle. But, this Bagon has the ability Sheer Force. It gives certain moves more power, but without secondary effects activating.”

“So it hits hard?” Pierce commented. “That's great!”

“Bagon with Sheer Force usually don't develop the same hardness of their companions,” Nurse Joy sadly related. “So, when they do their cliff jumping... the chance of their skull splitting on impact is actually very high.”

“That's dangerous,” Sophie said.

“Precisely,” Nurse Joy answered. “And tomorrow, we'll have to release him. When we do, he'll climb the mountains, and then, he will jump again... and who knows if he would return.”

I reached a hand out to Bagon. “Hi. You nearly hit me on your jump down.”
“Ba, Bagon,” it replied, before accepting my hand as I petted it.

“It likes you,” Nurse Joy commented. “Well, will you be seeing him off tomorrow?”

“I will,” I nodded. “Bagon... you'll fly one day. Definitely.”

“Ba, Bagon!” it cheered.

“It looks quite cute,” Sophie commented.

“True,” Pierce was eyeing the Bagon. “Sheer Force, huh... that's a rare ability. This Bagon would be very popular in battling circles.”

“Ba...” the Bagon yawned, and rather pitifully at that.

“... see you, then,” I nodded to Nurse Joy as the four of us left it alone.

When did Dr du Bois actually drop in with that information? I wondered, but I couldn't remember.

“Ahh!” I started. “The Clauncher!”

I had not known Dr du Bois much. However, I had the feeling that she might actually go through with eating the Clauncher. And she actually might boil it alive.

Dr du Bois was exactly where we had left her; sunbathing on top of her Jellicent, except that somewhere along the line Liz and Altair were perched on the rocks. Aegis and Crystal were playing chase with Fletchinder, and Frogadier and Jelly were splashing near the coast, though Frogadier stayed further from the tide line than the pink menace. Altair and Darkrai were tending to a pot set over a camp-fire, somehow hot enough that steam was floating off the surface. I had a suspicion...

“Please tell me you haven't cooked that Clauncher,” I automatically asked in concern. Dr du Bois might be cruel, but cooking a wild Clauncher was just cruel and unusual.

This? Darkrai lifted the blue relative of a Krabby by its tail, preventing the pincer claw, or the Water Pulses that the Pokémon was feebly firing, from injuring any of us. She promises to teach me a new method of human food preparation.

“Wait,” I breathed. “I thought... that babble you spouted at Sophie, the Escavelier... that was real?”

Dr du Bois turned to consider me with lazy eyes. “Hmm? Oh, yes, of course it was.”

“I thought you were psyching her out!” I yelled in shock.

“I was,” Dr du Bois shrugged. “The fact remains that Clauncher are eaten boiled alive is real. A dangerous pastime, but no less true. The coasts of Kalos will offer many more before the loss of one is remarked upon. I have hardly ever needed to twist the truth.”

“You're really going to boil it alive?!” I shouted, appalled. The Clauncher was struggling in Darkrai's claw. “You're going to... cook it here?”

“Is there a problem?” Dr du Bois commented. “Pokémon eat other Pokémon. Humans eat Pokémon. In the world of Pokémon, this is the ecological system of the world. This food chain is balance.”

“It's horrible!” I swallowed. “There must be another way!”

“...knock it out before stewing,” Dr du Bois relented.
“Or don't eat it,” I retorted.

“Why should I not?” Dr du Bois asked.

“How would you feel if you were the one being boiled alive?” I said.

“How I would feel may or may not be comparable to how a different life form feels,” Dr du Bois actually retaliated. “Similarly, using excessively graphic descriptions with misleading vividness to evoke a negative reaction is a logical fallacy. To equate lobsters to humans, to project our emotions and reasoning capabilities onto a large crustacean is a fallacy; a fabrication, based not on reality, but on ignorance, delusion, and deception.”

“It's a Pokémon,” I whispered as it struggled there, somehow aware of its imminent and painful demise but unable to escape.

“Mmm,” Dr du Bois cocked her head, and accepted the Clauncher from Darkrai.

“Altair, stop her,” I pleaded with the Lucario.

He did not answer.

“Darkrai!” I then turned to the Pitch-Black Pokémon. “That's just wrong!”

_I have eaten other Pokémon as well_, Darkrai flatly answered. _Eating is part of the cycle of life. Are you saying that I am wrong?

Of Dr du Bois's own Pokémon, Liz was floating by the side, clearly avidly paying attention; the Ghost-type Pokémon looked unconcerned. Frogadier looked at me calmly, waiting; Fletchinder was avidly staring at the Clauncher, and Bulbasaur looked indifferent.

“Bulba?” it blinked.

“Dr du Bois, there are other options,” I whispered.

“But it is food,” she answered, confused. “Open the pot. Shall we begin?”

I saw her hand lower, with the Clauncher's struggling form still within her grasp. I saw Sophie's hands, scorched from contact with boiling hot seawater. I saw, as I had then in her face, a desperate, fervent desire that recognised the significance of that injury and death, while in no way feeling any sympathy for the loss.

The hot water steamed as I tipped it over. It went into the sand, the dry wood surrounded by aluminium foil, the flames. The camp-fire crackled and popped, the steam scorching hot, burning my hands. I hissed as I drew them back, looking into the wooden expression of Dr Marguerite Linden du Bois. She had yet to let go of the pathetically wriggling Clauncher.

“You are not cooking this Clauncher,” I flatly replied. “None of you are eating this Clauncher, period.”

Handing the Clauncher to Altair, Dr du Bois turned her back, walking back towards Ambrette Town. She had neglected to take her robe along, so a woman in a black bikini drew some odd looks in the midday sun.

Silently, Altair dropped the Water Gun Pokémon. The Water-type, perhaps sensing freedom at hand, scuttled, trying to reach for the waves before a stray Wingull swooped down and caught it. Soaring
high above, the Wingull cawed, making off with its prey.

*Such a waste,* Darkrai murmured, floating towards the laid-out tarp. *It would have been reborn once the bones were flung into the mother ocean. Now you have simply given away our dinner.*

As I saw him go, I spotted the blue speck of a Clauncher dashed against the rocky cliffs, the joyous cries of the Wingull as they swooped down upon its carcass echoing across the beach.

A problem that has plagued me all my life was with regards to impulses. As a child I found my temper was barely helped by moving across regions in Maman's pursuit of Rhyhorn racing, and Grace Linden was hardly in any mood to settle down until her imminent divorce from my father, the late diagnostician Dr Hugo du Bois. I often found myself falling to new impulses, and from the ways that all of my plans usually went, those impulses had saved my life. Years of Pokémon battles had refined them with knowledge, and had also contributed to my eventual decision to enter the medical faculty as Daisy Linden. Upon the creation of Marguerite Linden du Bois, I had changed to the social sciences on a whimsy. She had been an accident, an impulse creation, a new identity... and what I had been looking for. Professor Sycamore, Augustine, knew, but had said nothing. I had information to wreck his standing in the world, after all.

Either way, most of my revenges were also petty impulses, but in some cases, I wanted Donar to remember it. I wanted to make such a lasting impact that he would think thrice of offending me. What if I had had less scruples? I would have called Augustine for a new test subject already, and Donar's body would have been feeding the sea-dwelling Pokémon.

So I walked into the hotel and ordered room service. Bouillabaisse, the specialty of the day, and advance orders. I waited at the restaurant, where my Pokémon greeted me, having packed up my things. For those wondering about the efficiency of my camp, I would say that teaching Pokémon how to set up and dismantle shelter was some of the most precise things I had taught them. Aside from unlocking doors.

Donar was uncomfortably trying not to meet my eyes; not an easy feat, especially in a rather empty restaurant. The bouillabaisse was served, with the boy picking at the food. “Erm...”

The Pokémon was seated at the same table, as was all of us. The concierge had given in after a bribe. I dipped a sliced baguette into the plate in front of me, sprinkling on some of the shredded cheese before handing it over to Darkrai for a taste, and preparing another for Altair. “Hmm?”

“I... I'm sorry, doctor,” Donar confessed. “For... what I did. That was immature.”

“It was my fault, too,” I gave in. “I should have killed it, lest I offended your squeamish sensibilities. Take the soup before it gets cold. You'll need strength.”

Donar shuddered, before starting on the soup.

*This is an unusual dish,* Darkrai sighed halfway through crunching. *Indeed, the flavour of spices and fish contrast with this unusual crispiness. What does it consist of?*

“A stock of Magikarp bones boiled in seawater, mixed with the flesh of a Shellder, chopped potatoes, egg yolk, garlic, Oran oil, pistils of the Maranga flower, salt and Tamato slices,” I listed, watching peripherally as Donar's face slowly turned green. “Since someone disrupted the feast of cooked Clauncher, tomorrow we shall have the local specialty of Clauncher bisque, where the imps are sautéed lightly in their shells before being simmered with wine and aromatic ingredients, strained and then added with cream. After all, we must always cook the bottom feeders well first. Oh, and
perhaps if there is time, I would have the concierge rough up a cooked Clauncher.”

Donar now looked fully ill, as if he expected to vomit up the soup.

“People used to eat Bunnelby in the Kalosian Revolution era,” I mused. “I wonder if I can get one for roasting. But you won’t eat it, would you, Donar? Because that would be hypocritical of you.”

“Thanks for the meal,” Donar stood up, and left without a word.

This is revenge, is it? Altair tapped onto the entire point why I was now splurging on room service.

“The boy needs to learn,” I shrugged. “That this world is not as kind as he chooses to believe.”

“People sell it,” I told Fletchinder. “People actually sell Fletchinder like you to be... cooked.”

It chirped, half in confusion and half wondering. Frogadier gave a croak of understanding, having touched just the bread and water carafe. I had set Bulbasaur in the shower, and was currently brushing his scales after having rinsed out my own mouth.

“The fact isn’t in the... eating,” I swallowed. “It’s that people actually turn this into a business.”

“Fle, fle,” Fletchinder chirruped in agreement.

“Eating a sentient being has got to have limits.” I groaned, trying not to remember the warm bouillabaisse in my mouth. Or the menu over the subsequent days. Or Dr du Bois and her ghostly retinue currently feasting on the remains of innocent Pokémon.

Dr du Bois, needless to say, really gave me the creeps.

I left the hotel room with my Pokémon, without a word to the lady at the concierge. Dr du Bois was probably still in the restaurant, so I considered as I walked down the beach in the hot sun. I did not see Pierce or Sophie around; they’d probably left.

Somehow, my feet had taken me to the Ambrette Fossil Lab. I stood outside, blinking at the peeling painted exterior and at the rather plain construction. If it weren’t because we conducted something like an anti-crime heist here, I think the only reason I’d approach it was to get a Fossil Pokémon.

“Oh, you’re...” I turned around to see Officer Jenny. “You brought in the injured Bagon.”

“Yes, Officer Jenny,” I greeted. “Donar Oak.”

“Bonjour, Mr Oak,” Officer Jenny tersely answered. “Did you need something?”

“Erm...” I swallowed. “Just... wondering about the Fossil Pokémon.”

“Well, at least someone might actually be interested in that,” Officer Jenny sighed. “Most of them seem fascinated by Gary Oak. And the Darkrai, the entire town was buzzing with the Darkrai. Come in, then.”

With Bulbasaur whining beside me, I walked into the lab. Stainless steel shelves holding rocks, bones and stuff I would need a geological degree or Dr du Bois to explain were displayed in the main foyer, and that was when I came face to face with Gary Oak, aged from his Trainer days and in a lab coat.

“M. Oak,” Officer Jenny greeted. “I’m here to return the evidence that those thieves were after last
night. Thankfully they were caught red-handed, although the fact that there's a Darkrai flying around is... rather suspicious.”

“Oh, no prob,” Gary replied, accepting something stuck in a paper bag. “And this boy is...”

“Donar Oak,” Officer Jenny introduced us. “He was with the woman who reported the link between an injured Bagon and the thefts of fossils from the laboratory.”

“Dr du Bois did all the work,” I protested.

“Anyway, I'll just leave the two of you to stay and chat,” Officer Jenny lifted her hat. “Au revoir!”

“Du Bois... Marguerite du Bois?” Gary commented as Officer Jenny left. “Huh. Think I've met her before.”

“Did she verbally eviscerate you?”

“Nah,” Gary shook his head. “Probably not her, then. Donar Oak, eh?”

I shrugged.

“What's an up-and-coming Pokémon Trainer hanging around a Pokémon researcher for, then?” Gary wrinkled his nose, almost frowning. “Last I heard, Sycamore was still conducting his experiments in Lumiose City.”

“Erm, she's doing a study on young Trainers or something like that,” I answered.

Gary's face then fell. “Oh. That Dr du Bois.”

We shared a look of shared pain. It seemed readily apparent that for some reason, she had intimidated him into submission.

“I think her field was in the arts, though,” Gary commented. “Why is she exactly following a young Trainer around? Guess it's a holiday at the Sycamore Lab's expense.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I think she's serious.”

“So, what are you here for?” Gary smirked, but changed the subject. “If it's a Fossil Pokémon, you're going to have to find a Fossil yourself.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I just... needed to get out for a bit, before we start for Cyllage City. Second badge.”

“Ah,” Gary nodded. “Doing a League run, then?”

“Trying.”

“Well, the old man always said that a journey would show you a way,” Gary nodded.

“I just...” I paused. “I can't understand her.”

“You can't understand...” Gary cut off, staring at me. “You're ten.”

“Thirteen,” I corrected. “She... she's just unusual. It's... it's my first time in a strange region I've never seen, away from the Indigo continent, you know.”
Gary knelt down to my level. He looked rather baffled, something in his eyes curious. “Erm... do any of your friends know that you're in Ambrette?”

“Serena's in the next town, getting her Braixen seen to,” I answered. “Shauna might still be in Camphrier with her and Serena's dad, or she might be in Cyllage. I haven't seen Tierno or Trevor around since Camphrier. We started at the same time, but... Dr du Bois makes them uncomfortable, especially since our first impression was with her Chandelure haunting the Vaniville Pathway. Why?”

“She doesn't...” Gary paused. “...make you... uncomfortable?”

What? What?! “No! She's not like that! She's just... very mature and confident and she scares me. Today she tried to cook a Clauncher by boiling it alive, and I said not to, and... and then I upset the cooking water and then she went to order room service, all the seafood soups while elaborately detailing the Pokémon that goes into the food, and I- I can't get around that idea.”

Gary looked down, nodding with sudden comprehension. “I think I get what you say. It's like you're faced with a Pidgey for a companion, but then you realise that other Pidgey get cooked into crispy fried drumsticks. Or worse.”

I nodded, rubbing at my eyes that had decided to water for some reason.

“I... I'm sorry.” Gary shook his head. “It's just... well, I know a few Trainers who decided to become vegetarian for that exact same reason. Or they create alternatives, or they just choose not to think about it. It's a harsh topic for any Trainer, especially when you begin to realise that in some cases, whatever steak you were eating could have become your partner in battle, right?”

I nodded.

“And she chose to cook a Clauncher in front of you, knowing this?” Gary asked.

“Yeah.” I shrugged.

“Did the Sycamore Laboratory let her out alone like this?” Gary asked quietly.

“Professor Sycamore told me to call him if something went wrong,” I answered, studying the floor. “But, Dr du Bois was right. If they could serve Pokémon so... so normally... maybe I'm the one who's wrong. Maybe this is just her- her way of educating me.”

Gary Oak stood back up. “Are you going to meet Dr du Bois?”

“Not now,” I shook my head. “I wanted... to ask. About fossil Pokémon. What makes them different, things like that. I'm not going to stay at the Hotel Ambrette like she is, still at the restaurant.”

“I'd like to meet her,” Gary smiled, a wan expression. “She's still at the Hotel Ambrette?”

I said yes, and then Gary flounced around. “Oh, right, the fossil Pokémon. I think Professor Martin can show you the two Pokémon we've found native to Kalos.”

“Native to Kalos?” I followed him eagerly.

“Pokémon like Aerodactyl used to be thought of as native to the Indigo continental shelf,” Gary explained. “Imagine our surprise when we found that nearly all known Pokémon fossils, including Old Amber, were found in the Kalos region, along with two newly discovered fossil Pokémon.”
Leading to the end of a hallway, he slotted a key-card through a wall-mounted scanner. The door opened to reveal an enclosed valley, surrounded by possibly an extension of the cliffs and there, Gary led me in, closing the door behind me. “Look, here’s one!”

Approaching us on unsteady legs was a quadruped, dinosaur-like Pokémon. It had a long neck and a short, stubby tail. Above its large, deep blue eyes are two billowing structures, yellow fading into pink towards the tips in an iridescent fashion. Its skin was a sky-blue, its belly white, with a single dark blue crystal on each side of its body. “Mara!”

I held out a hand, completely still as it huffed, a wave of cold air washing over me.

“The thieves last night, their aim was this, amongst many.” Gary’s voice took on a sheen of disgust. “This is Amaura, the Tundra Pokémon. So far, it's the only Rock/Ice dual-type Pokémon known in the National PokéDex.”

Sensing nothing wrong, Amaura let me pet its head, its gentle blue eyes fluttering. “It's very nice,” I commented.

“‘We believe that it lived long ago in a cold land without violent predators, since its temperament seems very even,” Gary explained. “‘We've found the corpses of its evolution, Aurorus, trapped in ice at the deep end of the Glittering Cave. Right now, the prevalent theory was that these Pokémon were living without the threat of predators around the Sinnoh region, before continental drift brought violent prehistoric predators like the Aerodactyl and Tyrantrum into contact with the Aurorus population.”

I sighed, my breath crystallising in the air in contact with Amaura as the Ice-type Pokémon cooed, the iridescent structures of its head shifting more to a green colour. “What happened to them?”

Gary hesitated. “‘They met that.”

I turned around, seeing another Pokémon. Unlike Amaura, there was nothing nice about this one. Being a stony greyish-brown colour, with lighter grey on their bellies and lower jaw, its jaw looked intimidatingly huge with a ridged snout. Its back bent over in a peaked hump, ending in a short and pointed tail. Tiny forelimbs with only two white clawed digits contrasted with robust hind legs ending in three white claws and a grey rear claw. Spiky, white fluff surrounded its head like the petals of some demented flower.

It blinked large white eyes. Orange, triangular horns extend from above each eye and point backwards shifted as it opened a proportionally large jaw to roar and make to bite Amaura.

“No,” Gary smacked the brownish carnivore on the snout, severely forbidding. “This is Tyrunt, the Royal Heir Pokémon. It’s another Pokémon with a unique type combination, being classed as a Rock/Dragon dual-type. It's one of the few known Pokémon that are truly carnivorous, and we believe that it died out due to overfeeding. Well, that theory sort of holds water, but loses out when we realised that Ice-type Pokémon would not have been targeted by the Tyrunt.”

“Because of the type disadvantage?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Gary nodded. “Its body structure also means that a lot of food is needed to maintain him, hence the species and its evolution Tyrantrum theoretically could have died out of starvation due to some ice age related to the Amaura and Aurorus.”

I looked as the Tyrunt grumbled, but accepted Gary's petting and the offer of a Sitrus Berry along with Amaura. That magnificent Pokémon could have resurrected and returned... they were amazing.
Incredible.

*S o w h y d i d t h e y d i e,* a tiny voice asked, a sudden thought. I banished it. It sounded like what Dr du Bois would say.

I left the lab with Gary Oak, smiling.

I kept my hand in with Pokémon battles, of course. Somewhere along the line, I had realised that Altair and Vega were not exactly emotionally stable. My suicidal stumble upon Crystal in the Mélancholie Path was a stroke of fortune that later led to a field trip to Unova, a sojourn around Parfum Palace and stumbling along Liz in Lumiose City's Magenta Market. However, I had a more unusual way of training. Or perhaps not so unusual. Games had been utilised by Trainers across the ages to train Pokémon, after all.

“Altair, spike!” I called. Altair bounced the volleyball, the projectile reaching the apex of its ascent before falling once more. “Darkrai, dive!”

Jelly shot a Water Spout up, interrupting Darkrai’s diving smack to wall the volley, which was manipulated by Liz casting a Grass Knot. I smacked the ball straight, and Altair countered, or would have if Crystal had not chosen that time to manipulate her arms to smack the ball back, allowing Jelly an easy counter.

Aegis clashed as the ball touched the ground, and there were groans. I made a curse, picking it back up to check for marks, punctures, burns and associated damage. I kept waiting for the time when I had to hand the deflated skin back to the owner from whom I rented the ball and refund him. “Right, Team Red two-two. Ready?”

The Dark-type and Fighting-type Pokémon present gave looks to each other, counted Aegis’s tasselled fingers displayed, got my meaning, and began planning. I knew there was a way for such Pokémon with violent inclinations to bond with each other.

Aegis threw the ball, which arced into a hit that caused Darkrai to leap, smacking it. Jelly blocked it with her own body, causing it to bounce, and I slapped it towards Crystal. Altair raised though, using his paw to adjust the ball before smacking it back, and ending the tie.

“Dr du Bois!” Donar called, waving as he descended the stepped pathway that led from Ambrette Town to the coast. His Fletchinder hovered near his head, squawking. “Someone's here to meet you!”

Behind him, I spotted Gary Oak trying to, and failing, not to stare at me. Or, rather, slightly lower down. His head came back up, though, so I merely assumed that moment of human weakness as someone unused to Kalosian dress.

“Doctor, this is Gary Oak,” Donar introduced. “Gary, this is Dr du Bois, I was talking about her to you.”

“We've met,” I cheerfully answered.

Gary's face scrunched up. “We have?”

“The Viridian Conference on Anthro-Pokémon Relations about three years ago, in which you were a keynote speaker for the Rowan Laboratory,” I supplied. “Of course, I was a huge fan of how your Arcanine also managed to set fire to the displays.”
Of course, I had also attended his talks on medicinal practices for the Rock-type, but there was no way he would remember.

“Oh, yeah,” Gary nodded, blushing. “You were there?”

“I was your opposition,” I gently replied.

Gary stopped, and then paled. “Oh. Right. About the possible impact of fossil Pokémon on the present ecosystem.”

“I find that, while science can indeed perform miracles, the humanities explain why miracles might not be such a good idea,” I demurred. “I do hope that Trainers would elect to learn from mistakes rather than be injured in the process, do you not? I imagine you are very acquainted with the tragedies of a Trainer.”

Any will that Gary Oak had had was gone, cut down to size. “I am. In fact... I believe that there is another Trainer headed to Cyllage City. Perhaps he could follow all of you.”

I looked to Donar. “Your decision?”

“That sounds great!” Donar answered with a sort of genuine cheer.

“Then I hope this Trainer shall be able to fend for himself,” I concluded with grace, before grabbing my Holo Caster. “Beginning Trainers have a tendency to gravitate in groups, possibly a form of herd instinct that allows them strength in numbers traversing the routes of Kalos. Reference here the origin of criminal organisation formation via social learning theory.”

“Huh?” Gary blinked. I ignored the two of them until they went away.

*The older one thinks that you bear ill will to the boy,* Altair communicated.

“Hmm,” I noted. “Tell me something I don't know. Aside from that Canalave style is a pain to use on a Holo Caster.”

*Polyandry is common amongst the wild of my kind.*

That discovery would have allowed me to one-up Professor Elm's status as the authority on Pokémon breeding patterns. “Well, that makes sense. A known seven-to-one male-female ratio would have made it such that females would be protected. Also more protection for the eggs. Although I believe that single-ratio pairings are more common, are they not?”

*I do not understand,* Darkrai cut in. *How is this discussion relevant?*

I blinked, considering Darkrai’s perspective. “Darkrai... how do your kind reproduce?”

*Reproduce? I was not referring to the diversion into the breeding practices of Lucario,* Darkrai clarified. *I was talking about the man, and the boy. Neither of them were looking for me, since I felt... my involvement has endangered you.*

“I anticipated that Donar would talk to an adult,” I answered. “An adult in Ambrette Town would know that Clauncher are listed under the Kalosian Code for Edibles as suitable for cooking. Either he would realise that there is no legal basis for his protest, or he would find someone conscientious enough to bring to me, at which I shall then proceed to argue with them, no matter who they are. He brought Gary Oak, who I know through the grapevine faced the death of a Raticate in Kanto and proceeded to give up Pokémon training after that death preyed on him throughout his Johto League
run. Despite that right now Gary Oak believes me to be a form of child predator or perhaps placing
the boy under psychological abuse of a sort, he wants to assign another Trainer to come with us
under the guise of travelling in numbers. Presumably to gather evidence to bring before the Sûreté
and Augustine.”

*I thought he could report to that officer. Jenny?*

“Despite my questionable brain, I still hold tenure within the Sycamore Research Institute,” I
answered. “Gary Oak is passionate, but he is also an academic. He is well aware that to speak out so
directly would ruin his research. For a boy he barely knows, he will try, but no further.”

*How eminently practical.* Hovering to my eye level now that we were alone, Darkrai’s eye stared
towards the direction where Donar had left. One more variable to be introduced... I contemplated the
data at hand. Perhaps either the self-control theory of crime or the social control theory could come
into play. Also look into the extent that anthro-Pokémon socialisation could be limited by individual
journeys.

Promising data all. No closer to discovering the root of the problem, the propagation of the Trainer
system... especially for those who reach the top, the costs such a system has placed on us all.

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*Edit: he has not. His illusions persists. The subject is a naïve child yet; or perhaps... I am the one left
out of touch with reality within my own head.*

*Delete last comment.*

Chapter End Notes

The French word ‘gendarmes’ is used for a military police force. It is usually used to
cover small towns and the countryside. There is the National Police, better known under
the old name of the Sûreté Nationale. That covers towns and cities. Looking at the
spread of cities, I believe that the Kalosian police would take a more urban approach as
well, hence the police is referred to here as the Sûreté.

On a side note, French policemen are nicknamed as chickens, not as slang, but rather a
homage that the Central Police Station was set up on a former bird market. This
information was possibly played upon with the Mega Blaziken in the Pokémon animé.
Chapter Summary

Donar Oak was not the reason why Daisy Linden lost half her team... nor, why their deaths had to be kept from the world.

I mean, it can't be good to be told that you're going to join a couple of travellers on their way to the city next door and then be exposed to someone like Dr du Bois. Especially like Dr du Bois. Noël Duval certainly looked like he was considering that, when he was confronted with her and her Lucario.

Day 17: Today there were two notable events. One was the third member of our party, an up-and-coming Trainer possibly earmarked to become part of the Île-de-l'arc Conference. It would hail the day we met Noël Duval.

The other was the fourth member of the team.

Maybe I should have pitied the guy.

I mean, it can't be good to be told that you're going to join a couple of travellers on their way to the city next door and then be exposed to someone like Dr du Bois. Especially like Dr du Bois. Noël Duval certainly looked like he was considering that, when he was confronted with her and her Lucario.

“Will your Snover be a problem?” she declared once introductions were finished.

“H- Huh? What?” Noël blinked, eyeing me and then her.

“Not a lot of boys carry an umbrella,” Dr du Bois pointed to his rucksack, from which the knobby, battered handle was sticking out. “A Snowbelle City-guaranteed canvas umbrella. Since you are already wearing waterproof gear, I can only imagine that the umbrella was used in frequent training to shield the Trainer from hailstorms. The only place with frequent hailstorms in the entire Kalos region is Route 17, Mamoswine Road, within the Montagnes de Kalos. The only Trainers who go there on a dedicated basis to need an umbrella are Trainers either using the hail to train their Pokémon in hail. No other Pokémon requires training of hail such as the Snover and the Amaura, and if you already have an Amaura, then what are you doing in Ambrette Town? Hence, the Snover.”

“That's really creepy... just so you know,” Noël confessed. “That's all you got?”

“I'm not exactly inclined to study you too much at the moment,” Dr du Bois answered as we loitered by the Ambrette Pokémon Centre's reception counter. “After all, we were supposed to leave an hour ago.”

I had realised that I forgot to tell Dr du Bois about the Bagon until an hour before checkout and leaving, thus delaying the trip. Yes, whatever. Noël had turned up at the Pokémon Centre with Gary's letter that Dr du Bois read with an unreadable expression.
“At least I took precautions,” she muttered darkly, handing the letter of recommendation back to Noël. “Is your birthday on the twenty-fifth of December?”

“Y- Yeah, how'd you-”

“An old Kalosian tradition, to name a child born on Noël as its namesake,” Dr du Bois dismissed. “Noël is the Kalosian word for Yule.”

“You mean like how some kids are named Wednesday?” I asked.

“Something like that,” Dr du Bois replied indelicately as Nurse Joy finally rang the counter bell.

“Oh, you're here!” Nurse Joy greeted us with a practised smile as she approached us behind the counter, the small blue dragon following behind her. “Your Bagon has been so attentive, you know! Dr du Bois, thank you for the tip on its injury the day before.”

Dr du Bois kept a poker face as she nodded. “Yes, we wouldn't want anyone to know how the Pokémon Centres seem to be missing injuries, wouldn't we?”

Nurse Joy's smile faltered slightly.

“Oof course not,” Dr du Bois serenely commented as behind her, Bagon slowly waddled up to me.

“Well, thanks,” I patted its head. “So, you're going back to the cliffs. Try not to land on any more people's heads, right?”

It head-butted me on the leg.

“Ouch!” I hopped to the other foot, clutching at my leg and jumping. “What was that for!”

“It likes you,” Noël chuckled as Bagon squabbled. From my belt, Frogadier burst forth, giving a stern look and a series of croaks that Bagon quickly ignored.

“Bagon, ba!” It yelled.

“Do you want to come with me?” I asked.

“Bagon, ba!” it agreed.

“Then...” I produced a Pokéball, my heart thrumming. This would be my first Pokémon that wasn't a gift, or an accident from the menaces Dr du Bois kept as Pokémon, or something. It would be a companion. “We'll be counting on each other now.”

The Pokéball fell, slowly in an arc, the button-side mashed against the Bagon's head. The metal-lined apicorn burst open, swallowing the Pokémon in a burst of red energy before it closed over once more. It bounced, beeping an angry red as the ball shook, before it was calm and still. The beeping stopped with a click.

“Thank you, Bagon,” I murmured, opening the Pokéball once more. Bagon reappeared, this time rushing, or waddling to hug me.

“Well, that's nice,” Nurse Joy commented. “If you're going to take that Bagon into captivity, then perhaps I could issue a full course of medication. Just antibiotics, of course, to help with a possible infection. If you're travelling, I recommend keeping that Bagon out of its Pokéball during its recuperation period. Walking is a form of physiotherapy as well.”
“Thanks, Nurse Joy,” I answered as I filled out the requisite form and received a packet of medication with the prescription attached. “Bagon, the Nurse just said that you'll have to be kept out of the Pokéball for a week, alright?"

Bagon responded with a cheerful cry.

“Dragon-type, eh?” Noël looked interested as we left Ambrette Town to begin on the Muraille Coast. “Interesting. Why don't we show our Pokémon when we stop for the night?”

“You're on!” I challenged. “Which city did you come from, anyway?”

“Erm, Mozheim- I mean, Couriway Town, but we moved to Snowbelle City before I went to school,” Noël answered casually. “I attended le lycée in Auffrac-les-Congères, and from there I got my advanced Trainer certification from the Gym.”

“So you got your Trainer license at eighteen?” Dr du Bois looked slightly pained as I asked that question.

“Technically I got it at ten, but I became an Ice-type specialist after certification from Leader Wulfric,” Noël replied.

“What's the difference?” I patted Bagon's head as it lumbered along beside us at a sedate pace.

“Well...” Noël frowned. “With the basic Trainer's license, you basically acknowledge that you can keep any Pokémon as a companion and battler, an advanced type specialisation requires knowledge on a specific type, its strengths and weaknesses and being able to cover ourselves in battle, and yet use our chosen type to its fullest advantage.”

“No, that doesn't quite get it across,” Dr du Bois clarified. “With an advanced Trainer license, knowledge in first aid for a specific type is often amongst the topics tested, as well as knowledge of habitat, care and advanced dietary needs. Type specialists like Gym Leaders usually end up in the field of Pokémon medical research after retirement, due to how often Pokémon medical research and type knowledge overlaps.”

“Er... right,” Noël swallowed.

“Doctor, you're going to scare him,” I reproached.

Dr du Bois sniffed in the face of an ocean breeze, and said nothing else.

“So, you're going on a League run?” Noël asked. “So am I. Maybe we'll face each other in the Île-de-l'arc Conference.”

“Is that... fine?” I asked. “I mean, anyone who realises that you're an Ice-type specialist would have the type advantage.”

“Type advantage isn't everything,” Noël shook his head. “Besides, I am not a pure Ice-type specialist; my license also covers dual-types.”

“With that license, you could probably set up a Gym,” Dr du Bois commented.

“No way,” Noël shook his head. “Snowbelle City has no need for two Gyms. I will become an Ice-type master, and then I will take over the Snowbelle Gym.”

“Quite the high bar you've set for yourself,” Dr du Bois commented. “Ramos and Wulfric are the...”
oldest and most experienced Gym Leaders of Kalos. The life of a Gym Leader is also fraught with risks, subject to the whims of the Pokémon Inspection Agency, the League, and the inter-regional Pokémon laws. Compared to the Elite Four and the Champion, Gym Leaders have the most responsibility in guiding young Trainers and testing them for the Pokémon Leagues. The requirements to hold a Gym in Snowbelle City, the last Gym before Île-de-l'arc would be even more rigorous.”

“If it was an easy dream, then it's not worth it,” Noël rebutted. When he said so, I felt like he was someone to be admired, for at least having a dream to work towards instead of aimlessly flitting about.

“And of your plan, Donar?” Dr du Bois finally got around to commenting on that.

“I'm going to use Frogadier and Bulbasaur,” I answered.

“Wise decision,” Dr du Bois commented, almost airily. “If you can hit them on time, that is.”

“Oh...” Noël smirked as we approached a rather rocky part of the cliff. “C'mon. If you can stand up to these critters, we'll have a look. Use that Frogadier.”

“These critters?” I asked, pulling out my Pokéball to call upon Frogadier. We started battling with a lump of rock that Noël chucked in my direction.

I got my answer when the little critter from hell erupted. I had no idea why, but there were pincers and rocks and the critter fought hard. Frogadier's jumping ability could only go so far before a Smack Down blast floored him once more, and then the critter used Bug Bite.

“Frogadier, use Water Pulse!” I called, as Frogadier shot a pulse at it. The Zubat from hell not only endured, but then proceeded to smack Frogadier around until we finally beat it. Dr du Bois’s expression was all I needed to convince me that no, I was not ready for Grant.

“...I see what you mean,” I sighed. “Dwebble are a pain.”

“I think Graveler are the biggest pains,” Dr du Bois muttered. “If we're setting up camp here, perhaps it is time to introduce our last member to M. Duval.”

“What last-” Noël stopped as Darkrai arose from her shadow. “A- A Darkrai?”

Darkrai raised a clawed hand. His blue eye glowed. And then... Hello.

“W- Why do you guys have a Darkrai...?” Noël stuttered. He would probably have crapped himself if Darkrai wasn't on his best behaviour today.

“Oh, I think M. Oak must have forgotten to mention that fact,” Dr du Bois airily spoke. “Will you have a problem?”

“Is it going to sleep in a Pokéball?”

“I am offended by the lack of trust that implies,” Dr du Bois huffed, acting like what an offended Pidgeot might have looked like. “Darkrai is his own person.”

“Meaning it's wild,” Noël blinked.

Come here and tell me that, Darkrai muttered darkly, causing Noël to shiver.

“We have our own ways,” Dr du Bois's hand-waved the questions Noël must have had, and it was
readily apparent that Noël was not going to get his questions answered.

“Still, if we're having trouble with the Dwebble, we need practise,” I added. “Can't be helped. Bulbasaur, I choose you!”

Bulbasaur greeted me as I released him, scowling at the next Dwebble I set him on.

“Well, Dwebble usually have the Sturdy ability,” Noël added as a stray Vine Whip made short work of the Dwebble. “It's not that simple to defeat one.”

“Speaking of which, I keep hearing about abilities,” I commented. “I don't get it.”

“You...” Noël gaped at me. “Well, Pokémon have special abilities, abilities that are related to them that can exist outside of battle as well. Say, between... between Bunnelby. One can pick up items more easily, another can regain health from eating any Berry. Then, there are some that can hit ridiculously hard.”

He indicated Bulbasaur, still holding off the spawn of hell. “Your Bulbasaur has the ability Overgrow, which increases the power of its Grass-type attacks in trouble. For someone whose strategy revolves around straightforward battle, it's the best solution. Some Bulbasaur have the Chlorophyll ability, which increases their speed in strong sunlight, so those Bulbasaur feature in teams revolving around the use of the Sunny Day move. Of course, abilities can change across evolutions, but those cases are rare and spontaneous.”

“I see,” I looked down at Bagon. “Nurse Joy said that Bagon had the Sheer Force ability.”

“That's great!” Noël encouraged. “Sheer Force allows Bagon to use Ember with double its normal power. It's a very prized ability.”

“Fletchinder... can Fletchinder have different abilities as well?” I asked, unleashing my Fletchinder. She greeted me with an affectionate peck.

“Well, I can't tell...” Noël doubtfully studied her, perched on my cap. “I think...”

“And Frogadier?” I asked.

“Most Frogadier have the Torrent ability,” Noël commented. “I don't know. Frogadier are rare Pokémon, even within Kalos. Even though they're usually given to Trainers as starter Pokémon, they're usually available through Breeders. But your Fletchinder...”

“W- What about her?” I bristled.

“No...” Noël squinted, reaching out to brush her wing with one hand. “I thought so.”

“What?” I asked.

“The most common ability with the Fletchinder line is Flame Body, usually indicated at the Fletchling stage,” Dr du Bois provided. “But, in the history of Santalune Forest, there is a select group of Talonflame with special hunting ability and skills, lost to the forest during the Kalosian Revolution era. Certainly, this Pokémon is the descendant of those great hunters. What Noël was trying to say is that he's certain that your Fletchinder has the ability, Gale Wings.”

“T- That's good, right?” I stuttered.

“It's good,” Dr du Bois nodded, a hand reaching out to Fletchinder on my head to run a finger across
its wings. “For a Flying-type, certainly. Now, your Frogadier.”

“H- huh?” But I called out Frogadier, who submitted to a cursory examination. “I- Is there something?”

Dr du Bois’s eyes narrowed. “Altair.”

Frogadier defended me from the blow aimed at me, immediately firing a Water Pulse that dissipated in contact with the bloodthirsty Lucario.

“What was that for?!” I bellowed as Frogadier growled at Altair.

“Tell it to use Pound next,” Dr du Bois stared before indicating a small, fragile-looking rock.

“Erm...” I nodded. “Frogadier, Pound!”

Frogadier’s fist immediately shattered it.

“What is it?” I asked as Noël and Dr du Bois immediately studied Frogadier.

“This is the first time I've met one...” Noël commented, still looking at Frogadier, who immediately hid behind me. “I- I need my PokéDex.”

“It won't change the result,” Dr du Bois commented. “At least it's not a female Froakie.”

“Is there something wrong?” I defended.

“Hmm? Oh, no,” Dr du Bois wryly answered. “To answer, your Frogadier has the infamous ability named Protean. That ability allows the Pokémon to change its own type depending on the last move it used in battle. For example, directly before the Pound move was used, your Frogadier changed its type to Normal-type.”

I looked down at Frogadier, who merely gave a croak in response, still eyeing me with a gimlet eye that was also friendly. “So... it changes its type every time it uses a move?”

“Yes,” Dr du Bois answered.

“So...” my head nearly burst. “It can hold a type advantage depending on whatever move it uses, as long as it can learn the move.”

“It can also have a same-type attack bonus off all its moves,” Dr du Bois added.

“So...” my head was spinning. “Lick, turn Ghost-type. Pound, turn Normal-type. Toxic, turn Poison-type.”

“Pretty much,” Dr du Bois allowed. “Though, Protean is a rather rare ability, so... never allow anyone else to know its ability.”

“Because then Pokémon thieves could come after Frogadier?” I asked.

“Amongst many reasons.” Dr du Bois sighed. “The most famous documented case of a Greninja with Protean involved a serial killer and the Kalosian perfumery industry.”

“I don't think I want to know anymore, thanks,” I quickly replied, sensing another factually accurate horror story on the rise. “I'll keep mum about it.”
I got in some more target practice as Dr du Bois marked out a spot and began setting up camp, now pulling in my Bagon for assistance. In this case, Dr du Bois pulled out her tarp to stretch to a nearby rock and a telescopic pole, making a small shelter from the night winds over the beach. A boundary was marked in the sand, its use apparent as soon as I spotted the Dwebble purposely avoiding the small ditch dug by that foldable multi-purpose shovel Dr du Bois had, and training Bagon to mark out spots, which my newest Pokémon was doing with great enthusiasm.

I unleashed my various Pokémon, earning Bagon a celebratory cacophony as my team surrounded their newest member. Fletchinder greeted him with a peck.

“No,” I swatted at her in warning.

“We'll have to give him meat,” Dr du Bois commented, almost airily.


“Bagon will evolve to Shelgon, and then to Salamence,” Dr du Bois waved, as if my question was unworthy of comment. “During the Shelgon phase, Shelgon tend to eat little because they possess a small mouth. The reason why Salamence tend to be angry soon after evolution is because of hunger caused by the spontaneous bodily change of evolution. At this stage, berries and fruit are fine, but Bagon would definitely need more protein than compared to the rest of your comparatively herbivorous Pokémon.”

“I...” I looked down. Ambrette Town was way back, and Cyllage still some distance away. Unless I wanted Fletchinder to burn down a Wingull, I was going to have to fish to feed Bagon. I was going to have to consign Pokémon to death to feed my own Pokémon.

Dr du Bois started setting up a fire-pit inside the bivouac for some reason. “Feeding a Pokémon well is also another responsibility you take as a Trainer. If you cannot accept that, and the reality that comes under it, then you should release that Bagon right now.”

I eyed Bagon, who shook his head and smiled. Well, as much as his rather cute and reptilian face could manage. “Ba!”

“You... you would wish for that?” I asked. “I... I don't want to deprive you of anything.”

“Well, if you were really desperate, Bagon could subsist on human food,” Dr du Bois commented.

“Oh, I wouldn't say that,” Noël shook his head. “But yeah, that Bagon looks like it should be developing the start of its Dragon Breath sometimes, that could work. But I wouldn't recommend it.”

I grimaced, deciding to shelve the subject aside for the moment. “Noël, are you going to bring out your Pokémon?”

Noël pulled out a Pokéball, unleashing an Amaura first. The Tundra Pokémon cried with joy as it appeared, and Noël patted it on the head. “Borealis is a Pokémon, sponsored by the Snowbelle Gym courtesy of Leader Wulfric. As of two days ago, he became my Pokémon.”

“Ah?” I blinked as he drew out another Pokéball. It opened to herald a blast of cold air, and then I spotted white and green and a tail on what looked like a walking tree about half my height, its green eyes shining under a white cap with three points, its bottom half and feet a woody brown, looking like a snow-covered pine.

A second later, I realised it was raining. A solid splash and the sudden cold informed me that the rain was far heavier than I thought.
“I told you,” Dr du Bois muttered, picking up the rather small Pokémon under its... arms to stare into its eyes. She looked more resigned than pissed off, and I probably had a good idea of what was pissed off, after the Clauncher Bouillabaisse Incident two days ago. “This is a Snover. Part of the Mountain Kalos habitat, its entire evolutionary line is a walking hailstorm. Trainers using one usually have a hail-based team, which also limits them to locales or continued travelling so as not to permanently affect the local ecosystem. But, since we're by the sea, it's not much of a problem.”

“What? Huh?” I gaped at the tiny Pokémon. It was hard to imagine that such a Pokémon was responsible for the current hailstorm.

“Snover and Abomasnow have the ability Snow Warning,” Dr du Bois explained, seated warmly under her bivouac with her Chandelure out. “What that means is that wherever they go, a hailstorm will follow.”

“So why is it not much of a problem now?” I asked as a volley of hail cascaded from mysteriously overcast skies.

“The ocean water takes longer to cool,” Dr du Bois explained. “The maritime winds coming from the ocean are warmer from being over the water. This will increase the temperature near the coast, and cause less precipitation in the form of snow, but much more in the form of rain.”

“What- the- wha- huh?” In the distance, I could see swimmers already coming back into the coast, getting away from the rain of hail.

“It's hotter over the ocean that over land,” Noël chipped in. “Snow can't form, no hailstorm. But a tonne of rain can, yeah.”

“Well then,” Dr du Bois murmured. “You could look at the ocean and the pretty hail while I get comfortable. Jelly! I need to see what you're about to eat!”

The pink menace of a Jellicent was diving into the water, a wriggling sort of thing in her flipper-tentacle that she was patting with a sort of carnivorous interest. She used one tentacle and flung the wriggling thing upon the beach, where it thrashed about. I might be a novice Trainer, but Tentacool were amongst the most common Pokémon up there with Magikarp.

Dr du Bois studied it from where she hid under the bivouac. “Fine.”

The pink menace loomed, and was about to chomp down before Noël swooped it up by its blue, squishy non-stinger head. “Hold on!” The silver-haired Trainer scowled. “You're serious.”

“You know that it's poisonous, right?” Dr du Bois commented, watching the two tentacles flap about in the hailstorm's breeze. It might have been my imagination, but the Tentacool looked rather relieved not to be Jellicent chow.

“It doesn't matter,” Noël shook his head. “I'll take care of it.”

Dr du Bois shrugged. “Suit yourself. Jelly, keep hunting.”

The Jellicent wilted, now sinking back into the ocean to come up with a Magikarp. The poor Magikarp sunk back down into the sea with the pink menace, unaware of its approaching fate, while the Tentacool looked way more relieved as Noël pulled a bucket of water from the sea and dropped it inside.

Humming a ditty of a sort, Dr du Bois caused Noël to step away from her as she called out her Chandelure to set up a fire. “Donar. If you're going to call out Fletchinder or Bulbasaur in the hail, I
advise against it. This is not suitable flying weather.”

I scowled, my breath steaming. “This is cold. Really, really cold.”

“Can you give Sapin back now?” Noël asked.

“Sapin?” I asked. The answer was given as the Snover was handed back to Noël, who promptly hugged it.

“This guy saved me when I got lost in Auffrac-les-Congères,” Noël reflected, almost in a dream. “He's my starter Pokémon. Snover usually live in secluded mountain areas because of Snow Warning, but they are very curious about humans. Sapin, this is Donar.”

“Er, nice to meet you,” I greeted as Noël held him up to face me. Sapin sniffed, and then reached over and hugged me with bristly arms that felt thick and smelt comforting and fresh. It then plucked something off of his midsection and offered it to me.

“W- What is this?” I was stunned.

“The Snover line has a unique type combination of Grass/Ice,” Noël commented. “That's Snover Berries, berries that grow on Snover.”

“It can... grow Berries...” I babbled, accepting one in my mouth. “It's... cool.” It was like an ice lolly, except slightly sweet like an Oran Berry or something, cool and refreshing.

“It's an Ice-type Pokémon, obviously it would be cold,” Dr du Bois murmured.

“It's like a walking food supply,” I added.

“Well... yeah,” Noël accepted my praise. “But, in this weather it might not be a good idea.”

“Dessert, perhaps,” Dr du Bois waved to dissuade Sapin from giving her some. “Ça me dit quelque chose. Donar, your mother did call you in Ambrette, right?”

I swallowed. The resulting conversation with Mom hadn't been fun, since I had forgotten to contact her in Camphrier Town. “Right...”

“She authorised me to buy this.”

This turned out to be a portable stove. It looked like a giant pot with a rimmed base, and in the middle was the circular brass burner, set into the solid aluminium base with vents poked in the side presumably for air flow. It came with two lidded pots, a tea-kettle, and a special grip inside.

“As you might have noticed, firewood is not readily available in some instances,” Dr du Bois waved to the sandy beach stretching out from the coast, with the Ambrette Cliffs as a backdrop overhead. “Your mother authorised the buying of this Trangia stove with that in mind.”

“Oh...” I gaped at the entire package she began to disassemble. “Erm... thanks, Doctor. But... is there fuel?”

“Of course,” Dr du Bois reached back into her seemingly bottomless bag, pulling out a beer can. I gaped as she cracked it open and then poured the entire thing into the circular burner. “Crystal.”

A flame set it alight, ring jets aflame as she lowered it back into the wind-screened stove, and then set the stove into the fire-pit. With a completely serious expression, she then pulled out a bag of rice and three normal, brown eggs. “Pull out the giant bottle of water I made you bring.”
I was very thankful, as she poured the water into the pot with the rice and began watching them.

“Because alcohol tends to burn slower and with a lower heat output, there tends to be a lower cooking time,” Dr du Bois advised. “Alcohol tends to be freely available if you walk into any outdoor store and get fuel on the other hand. Since you are also underage, you could just buy kerosene and use this stove with your Fletchinder’s Ember or a lighter.”

“T- Thank you very much, Doctor!” I nearly shouted, huddled under a warming bivouac with Noël and her, and all the Pokémon sans Jelly.

“With that in mind, we are safe from high tide, and we can begin cooking,” Dr du Bois nodded. “Since it is obvious that we are not going to be together forever, I will teach you a few basic recipes to feed yourself.”

“Thank you!” I bowed.

“In camping, food preparation is usually done in a settlement first,” Dr du Bois explained. “Of course, if you have the stomach for it, you could also cook Pokémon. But, since you obviously can’t, then today I will show you egg fried rice with cheese.”

“Yes, Doctor!” I nodded.

“First, the Pokémon,” Dr du Bois waved.

“I think... I might need help as well,” Noël volunteered. “Sapin, Borealis, careful.”

I reached for the bag of kibble, setting out four bowls for all my Pokémon. I mournfully studied the bag of general kibble, resolving to have a look at the PokéMart in Cyllage. “Erm... Doctor. It's technically possible to take an entire journey without camping out, right?”

“Yes... at an exhausted dead run or with a bicycle,” Dr du Bois answered. “Running from city to city tends to have that effect. And sometimes, there are tourists who abuse the Trainer system, so Pokémon Centres are usually fully booked.”

“Yeah, the Centre always was booked unless I could get an early room,” Noël agreed. “So, camping, was it? Killer on the back, though.”

Altair gave a gentle snort. I think the Lucario just managed to lose all respect for Noël.

“It is entirely possible for us to camp out without a fire,” Dr du Bois began. “Food can be either hot or cold, but we must all plan meals ahead of time. A cooler is troublesome to pack, so it's best to finish perishables like eggs and meat quickly if we don't have one.”

As the pot began to steam and bubble, Dr du Bois waved towards her bag of rice before putting it back into her bag. “Preparation is always done in an urban settlement, at home or in a Pokémon Centre or even in a PokéMart kitchen, if you ask nicely enough. Then, utensils and number of pans used are to be cut as much as possible, and it is possible for one Trainer and six Pokémon to eat entirely human food out of the same pan.”

She indicated the bubbling pot with one finger. “Cast-iron pans are thicker than the normal pans used in a house, so in the hot flames of a campfire they heat up quickly. They distribute heat more evenly, so it's easier to cook with. In a pinch, you can also use the pan as a weapon against small to medium-sized Pokémon.”

“Doctor...” I sighed.
"Meat and fish can also come from wild Pokémon, but that's for next lesson," Dr du Bois murmured. "The true difficulty in setting up a campfire is the heat, but the Trangia stove is amongst the most idiot-proof of camping stoves, and as I had mentioned, fuel and lighting are readily available between the two of you. Cooking and eating utensils can be one and the same, but use metal forks. Next time I'll also show how to set up a wood campfire, but now to essential foods to pack."

"You know, I never thought that camping involved so much brainpower..." Noël muttered. I agreed; it was nearly always after a campfire meal that I really admired her expertise.

Altair snorted, earning him a look from the good doctor as she opened the lid and started cracking eggs into the bubbling meal.

"Water is a must; always have a two-litre bottle on you," Dr du Bois began lecturing as she tossed some dried green onions into the pot and stirred with a metal spoon. "Quick-cooking grains like rice, and ready foods that can be packed easily like pasta and flatbreads, are essential basics. Oats and wheat biscuits make good breakfast cereals. Canned foods exist for travelling purposes, and in a pinch you can just cook the food directly in the can. Dehydrated foods are an idea, if you can find someone willing to loan you a dehydrator in any part of the Kalos region, but I don't recommend too much processed foods. Fresh foods are to be used up quickly, so buy fresh fruits and vegetables from local farms on your journey. Drinks like milk, water, juice, and beer as you need them, since usually you won't need anything else more than drinking water on legs between cities. Seasoning comes in a small kit, and bring only stuff like olive oil, salt and pepper, soy sauce, and one seasoning of choice in tiny bottles not exceeding twenty millilitres or so as the basic cooking kit. Darkrai, you don't have to listen to me, unlike these two."

The Pokémon timidly raised his hand. Why do humans cook their food?

"Meat and other foods naturally contained microbes harmful to humans when ingested, which are destroyed through the application of heat," I pointed to the campfire. "If you're asking that question, then I guess your kind aren't as immortal as we think. The long-winded version is somewhat related to the Arcanine in mythology, but the simple version is that, fire is the first weapon of mankind against nature."

The smell of egg cooking was mouth-watering, but even more than that, Dr du Bois finally started to stir the rice with great care. "In camping, there are two big meals of the day; breakfast, and dinner. Lunch is always just a snack to get through the day."

"And the kettle?" I held it up.

"Fill it up," Dr du Bois lifted the pot of rice from the fire. "Tea bags and instant coffee pouches are useful, and hot water is always appreciated."

Waves crashed against rocks and the beach as the filled kettle cooked on hot flames.

"Never leave an empty kettle over a fire," Dr du Bois warned as she threw in a few curls of cheese. "When water is poured into it, it'll instantly evaporate and scald the hand with severe steam burns. Also, advice only within the Kalos region; consider bringing some cheese along. With that said, bon appétit."

Noël's hands started trembling, especially as he sniffed. "Delicious..."

I agreed, but I think the most surprised of us all was Darkrai, who actually got to try some. His description of it was more eloquent than anything a human would ever come up with:
The rice is flavoured with the scallions and eggs, and the cheese adds a flavour I have never known. This is... what is this white food that brings such a flavour of nuts?

“Crottin de Vaniville,” Dr du Bois answered. “Using the Skiddo and Gogoat endemic to the Kalos region, humans have discovered the use of their milk. Since males and females of the Skiddo line lactate, males are milked and their milk used to produce cheeses across the Kalos region. A similar process is used with Miltank, producing different cheeses. Due to an event five hundred years ago that anthropologists call the Ransei exchange, Miltank also exist in the Kalos region, thus the variety of cheeses differ according to towns and cities. What you just ate was the claim to fame of Vaniville Town, Crottin de Vaniville.”

“You mean you were toting this around the whole time and you never said a word?” I exclaimed.

“I don’t have much on hand,” Dr du Bois waved off. “But it’s good?”

In my house, I imagine that Mom could make something more elaborate. Yet, there was certainly something magical about having a camping stove, eating out as the stars peeked out under a waning hailstorm's clouds, and waves crashed in some symphony of the ocean. A clink of metal, the scrape of a fork on the bottom of my brand-new stove-set thing, and idle chatting that started made it magical.

“…Isn’t that bad for Pokémon?” Donar started to object as I gave Darkrai some tea from the very handy kettle. Oddly, he liked tea. I was as surprised as anyone could be.

“Only for some. Most can have it in small doses,” Noël replied easily, though I was frowning as he did so.

“Oh,” Donar sleepily replied, laid out next to Noël Duval and his own Pokémon. A dessert of Snover Berries had taken the energy out of a half-terrified boy, leaving a fat, contented Trainer with equally satisfied Pokémon. Noël held the bucket with the Tentacool close, though; he seemed afraid that Jelly was going to make another bid for it.

Tell me another story, requested Darkrai as I started my Holo Caster.

“What about?”

About food. About how your humans understand us. How about... fire as the first weapon of mankind.

I looked at the stove, still burning with the smoky blue under the bivouac. “Arcanine is known amongst humans as the Legendary Pokémon. Even though Arceus is known as the creator god, Moltres and fire is worshipped in all the regions that know it. Yet, the root of common fire, the fire that truly started civilisation, comes from Growlithe.”

Those little Pokémon? Darkrai sounded stunned. Explain, please.

I curled up more, close to Darkrai. “Most humans are afraid of the dark. Humanity on a whole is weak; without wings to reach the skies, without a nose to differentiate foods, without claws or talons or poison to fight. Anthropological theory commonly holds that, without the domestication of Growlithe, mankind would still be living in caves.”

Darkrai’s hand shook as he pointed to the flames. This is the origin of your civilisation, he communicated. This, and that small Pokémon.
“Fire allowed mankind to cook food and warm shelters, to defend itself through flaming weapons and keep hostile Pokémon at bay, aeons before the Pokéball gave human civilisation the chance to conquer the world,” I told him. “Were fire alone the benefit accrued to mankind by the presence of this Pokémon, it would have been far more than enough. Growlithe also eat Rattata and other vectors of disease in the Pokémon world. They serve as playmates by day, and spend the nights guarding the caves where people slept. Most importantly, it was through their bonds with Growlithe that mankind first learned the basics of Pokémon training, which he would apply to more and more species, until the world was conquered. To those primitive peoples so long ago, it must have seemed like divine protection, that a Pokémon like Growlithe was around to helped man through its earliest, most trying age. Arcanine is therefore, far and away the most revered of the gods.”

The Pitch-Black Pokémon floated down, its legs appearing to stabilise it as he began pacing. There must be a reason. A reason why we, we who command the skies and the earth and the underground, bow before humanity.

“Humans themselves are curious why the Alakazam does not,” I scoffed. “You would not be the first Pokémon to figure that out.”

I... I did not have a good idea of previous life forms, Darkrai admitted. Yet I wanted something more.

“Any other Trainer you would have met would have captured you for their own ambitions,” I nodded.

You do not have ambitions?

“The ambitions I have cannot be carried out by the power of Pokémon,” I answered. “Only humans can fix the mistakes of humans. I might as well take the time to educate you when I am bored.”

Then, your own studies?

“Are human-based,” I supplied. “This stage of the Trainer programme, I have heard many of my peers refer to it as the independence run. Young Trainers rush through their first four badges at this stage for some reason, ranging from running away from home to simply proving that they are suited to a Trainer’s lifestyle.”

“Independence run?” Donar spoke while laid out on his back.

“It’s rude to eavesdrop.”


“By inter-regional law, the moment any Trainer gains their fourth badge is the mark by which they come of age in the eyes of the Pokémon League,” I answered. “For those who run away from home, they have those six months to make the run through the four Gyms needed before the authorities catch up with them. The time limit is shortened by the prevalence of communication technology, but the term stuck because many young Trainers, like you, start on this journey in search of independence from parents.”

“Oh...” Donar reflected. “Do people really do that?”

I sighed. “As a rule, Pokémon Centres tend to spot young Trainers, with a team that shows signs of under-training or of rushing through Pokémon Training, and if the Trainer shows signs of consistent abuse that has nothing to do with travelling on the road. International Police also has a specific subsidiary in the Pokémon Welfare Agency just to combat this phenomenon of the independence
“Why do you know so much about it?”

“Have you ever thought,” I archly enquired, “that the social problems that surround Pokémon Training are also part of my study? That encouraging the path of a Trainer has manifest and latent functions, and that my job is to document such cases? Anyone can get a Trainer's license at ten. That does not mean that a ten-year-old is independent enough to survive with only the company of a Rattata or two.”

“Okay, okay,” Donar sat up, alarmed.

“Then also consider that not all Trainers have a well-meaning Pokémon Professor with them, and most likely are unable to provide for their Pokémon because they are children,” I counted. “What happens when those Pokémon turn their powers upon kids? Incinerated, slashed, drowned, poisoned, crushed, stabbed—”

“I get it,” Donar groaned.

If I had been holding a Pokéball, it would have been crushed. “No. You don't. So let me put it into context. You started out your journey with four other children like yourself, and where are they? You are alone here, without a support structure, and considering that you came from Kanto, a foreigner in a strange land.”

Donar backed slightly the moment I showed my teeth. At least, at the very least, Donar Oak had no wish to be a hero.

But heroes are chosen, something whispered to me. Heroes often don't have a choice. They might think they have a choice, but very often that choice is influenced by caring for other people. If every choice was decided purely on self-preservation, the same outcome would happen that a hero must combat any threat simply in the interest to survive. And those who are heroes, Champions, are expected to set an example. The moment a Champion is crowned is the moment Kalos expects them to stay as a paragon to work towards.

A light tap brought me out of my shell.

I understand, Altair whispered. We are very close to the mausoleum. Our departed companions await us.

My hands fell apart, fingers splayed out under the frosted moonlight of night, bare flickers from the stove to illuminate. “Of course. Right.”

“D- Doctor?” Donar spluttered as I laid down on my sleeping bag, beside Darkrai.

“Bonne nuit, Donar,” I murmured, falling into the dream with the very thought that Delphi must have known that he was going to die that day.

I comforted myself with the thought that, regardless of the studies, I would have made the pilgrimage to Geosenge Town regardless. I would have contributed to the local flora industry, and arranged a bouquet of hydrangeas of all colours. Greens for Deneb, reds for Delphi, blues for Sealeo, and purple for Banette. I would have ended up sleeping by the frosted moonlight of night, bare flickers from the stove to illuminate. “Of course. Right.”

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The Tentacool grew attached to Noël Duval, hence Duval added it to his team under the nickname of Charybdis. I am concerned of what this may imply as to his mental state-

-no, I am not. Not really.
XIV: Regarder - To Watch

Chapter Summary

Throughout his years, AZ must have believed in it, the future that year by year recedes. It eluded him then, but tomorrow, he would run faster, stretch out his arms farther...

We stopped by the cliff-faces, and I groaned as I came face to face with a winding road that led from Cyllage City... all... the... way... up... “We have to get up there.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 21: Donar has established a form of training. Well, he calls it training, but the local Dwebble still beat his four members four out of five times. At least, he is learning strategy.

Darkrai and Altair engage in mock battles, however they seem to be getting along. I do not think any other members of opposing types would have gotten along so well, though I suspect it is partly due to that neither of them are typical of their species. Everyone of us does something against their nature to be useful.

It took the better part of two hours, but we worked out a system between Noël and Donar. Noël had to train the Tentacool, Scylla, and Donar needed practice in true battles. In the pursuit of such, my Pokémon were relegated to referees, enforcers, and cooks. It amazes me continually, the inability of young boys to cook.

“It's cold,” Donar hissed as Borealis let out an Aurora Beam towards Frogadier, who circled and let out a Water Pulse before it collapsed, having been stabbed by Toxic Spikes left by Scylla earlier in the battle.

“Look, you have no defence against entry hazards,” Noël explained patiently. “Grant's a tough cookie, you can take that from someone who's met the guy. You might have taken down Scylla, but after that you haven't thought of a single solution, and that's why Borealis can stand for so long. You need to try and plan out in the long-term.”

“But I don't know what to plan!” Donar nearly screamed.

“Ba! Bagon!” Bagon cheered as Liz flew to attend to the fallen Frogadier, an Antidote in hand.

“Okay, Donar... what are the characteristics of rocks?” Noël asked once I deemed with a practised eye the state of Frogadier. “Slow, heavy, hard-hitting. You can assume that you have the advantage with Frogadier's jumping power, but they can corner you, and they can also use speed-lowering moves, as well as possibly entry hazards.”

“Yeah...” Donar looked blank.

“Then, to defeat them, your Frogadier needs to be more hard-hitting,” Noël explained. “Fletchinder is going to sit this one out, no matter what. So, while you're going to train Bulbasaur and Frogadier, I recommend you ask Fletchinder to train Bagon in Ember, and then try using Bulbasaur and
“Frogadier in a battle against each other.”

“Eh?” Donar blinked.

“Can you recall all of your Pokémon's moves?” came the reply. “Right now, you're still inexperienced. These times are to familiarise yourself with your Pokémon.”

“Right...” Donar looked down. “Thank you for the advice.”

A beginner. I understood that the whole point of a journey is to find that one niche that you fit in, but a boy with the barest inkling of any Pokémon to raise... no, that was the mindset of a Trainer. A dedicated soul who had found and lost her goal in life. It was not the objective mindset of a researcher.

“Are you a Gym Leader?” Noël suddenly broke into the conversation, having left Donar to run between a mock battle between Frogadier and Bulbasaur.

“No,” I sharply answered.

“Are you intending to be one?”

I eyed the boy, who looked prepared to fight me. I reflected upon his team and his ambitions. “No.”

Noël smiled, relaxed in the knowledge that I was not about to snatch the Snowbelle Gym from him. “For a researcher, your team is horrendously strong. A Lucario who can predict all the auras within five hundred metres radius, a Floette who can conjure a Misty Terrain and still fight without breaking a sweat while healing other fallen Pokémon, and a Darkrai at your heels... for all I know, you could just be moonlighting as a researcher.”

I produced my name-card. “Marguerite Linden du Bois, Ph. D., Sycamore Pokémon Laboratory, Social Sciences Division. If you still have questions, you may take your questions to the École Normale Supérieure de Kalos, North Boulevard. They shall remember me.”

“E- Eh?” Noël spluttered, holding the card close and squinting. “You're a real researcher?!”

“What were you thinking?” I sneered, looking back to our temporary camp base. We had been here for two days, and today I had set Crystal, Fletchinder and Bagon to use by practising their Ember on the campfire with the Dutch oven suspended over it. The pot-au-feu I was intending to tutor Donar in placed the bones I had bought from the Ambrette butcher to an early use, but it also meant long boiling. Placing the campfire away from the camp this time also made sure that an errant Ember was not about to set our camp on fire.

“I thought... I thought you were like those crazy assistants of Professor Sycamore's...” Noël swallowed. “You're a real researcher?”

“Depends if you consider the arts and social sciences something worth researching upon,” I shrugged. “Right now, I am following Donar Oak under my research to find exemplary anecdotes of the path of a beginning Trainer and the social forces that govern such a path.”

“Social forces?” Noël echoed, watching Donar try to coordinate Bulbasaur and Frogadier attacking at the same time.

“During a single journey, there will be many meetings and many partings,” I replied. “Yet, these events leave their mark upon all of us. Take for example, that boy. Within a day of meeting you, he has thought of a strategy to reach Grant, and thus evolved further. Is that not a social force? When he
enters a town, and interacts with the people on his way there, do they not leave some lasting memory upon him? This research can give insight upon the motivations of criminal organisations.”

“I didn't know that it was worth investigating,” Noël snorted in disgust.

“The currently accepted theory of criminal deviance stems from the idea of social control,” I commented, ignoring his jab. “It suggests that deviance occurs when a person’s or group’s attachment to social bonds is weakened. According to this view, people care about what others think of them and conform to social expectations, because of their attachments to others and what others expect of them. Socialisation is therefore important in producing conformity to social rules, and it is when this conformity is broken that deviance occurs. Social control theory focuses on how deviants are attached, or not, to common value systems, and what situations break people’s commitment to these values. This theory also suggests that most people probably feel some impulse towards deviant behaviour at some time, but their attachment to social norms prevents them from actually participating in deviant behaviour.”

My hair was caught by a passing wind as I turned towards Noël Duval. “Now consider that most Trainers, who travel alone or in small groups, have little to no chance at human socialisation and often do not form meaningful bonds within geographical proximity. Keeping that in mind, would the radical mindsets of criminal organisations like Team Rocket and Team Flare stem from deviance, or are they simply the product of our own society?”

I left Noël to stew, my booted feet climbing on the rocks that littered the Muraille Coast to reach on the same plateau where the blue-cream form of my oldest living partner. My legs crossed before I arranged myself into the lotus position and considered the Muraille Coast quietly.

The waves that shatter rock over the ages were inaudible, a thrum of the Ambrette Cliffs felt only by skin and aura. Floating above, Darkrai appeared from the shadows. The sea. The sun.

“If it hurts, return to the shadows,” I answered lightly.

*I am one of Arceus's creations. The light of the stars are within my grasp.* Darkrai turned his single cold eye upon me. *What are you two doing?*

“Meditation,” I answered. “The art originated in your homeland, if I'm not wrong. The Riolu line, as well, are first discovered in the Sinnoh region.”

*The Lucario is meditating, certainly. You are not.*

“You have a talent for stating the obvious,” I remarked. “The ability of Calm Mind to increase its user's power simply from calming down is remarkable. I suppose taking a step back is the correct solution.”

*Both of you... Altair turned his head to glare at us. It is at these times that I wonder if you truly comprehend the meaning of the word.*

“The point of meditation is to shut out all external influence,” I corrected. “If you cannot shut out Darkrai and I, then how would you handle the chaos of the battlefield?”

*Semantics are not at stake. Merely peace of mind.*

I could barely give a witty reply, entertained as I was with a mental snort of laughter. From Darkrai.

*A Fighting-type Pokémon requires peace of mind? I believed that your type settled all fights with fists.*
This from a Dark-type Pokémon? My fearless Lucario answered. *I am part-Steel.*

So you left behind that rashness when you evolved?

*I changed. Which is far more than you could say.*

“Both of you, stop,” I declared. “For now, where should we go? Altair, I know you want to visit Shalour City, and Darkrai, you don’t have enough information...”

I froze, staring at the map I was pulling out of my bag. I sighed as I put it back and took out a battery pack. “We’ll cover travel arrangements later. First I should do my work.”

What would that achieve? Darkrai looked in curiosity as I began to type out, in a separate folder from the daily journal, my thoughts and the listed social forces.

“Darkrai...” I paused. “You are the first legendary Pokémon I believe in, and the third I have seen in my life. If you exist, I feel at peace that the legendary Pokémon truly comprehend the pain of living.”

*I have only known loneliness for my fate, and I cannot change that.* The Pitch-Black Pokémon relayed. *You are human, and intelligent, and talented. You could go anywhere. Even with the curse, you could do things only I could dream of.*

“Thank you,” I whispered, still typing. “I am very grateful. However, for an immortal, why have you sought to learn something you can never achieve?”

*We Darkrai can die. The status of a legendary Pokémon, that is an arbitrary position you humans have bequeathed upon a select number of us. Some are more powerful, and some could be immortal, but in the end we are what we are. I wish to learn, to make something.*

“The soul of an explorer...” I commented. “Answer; in your opinion, why do people lie?”

*They have an agenda.*

“Precisely,” I agreed. “Humans can lie, cheat, stab and kill, in their search for personal happiness or a goal of their own. Some pursue immortality, as a means to happiness and a fear of death. I believe that it is the very fear of death, that drives humanity to such heights, in the beliefs that they would leave something worthwhile in the world. The fear of death... the curse has stolen something that has made me human.”

I looked to the sun overhead, the sun that will, eventually, die too. “That was the turning point. Since that day, I’ve lived a lie: the lie of living. My name was a lie. My history, a lie. My dead partners, the death of my team, a lie taken over by the Pokémon League. I was sick to death of a world that couldn't be changed, but I could not give up in the despair of a lie. Sooner or later, I will cease to care whether the world shall live or not. Time will pass, that people will be born and will die, that buildings and institutions fall, that the world shall pass... and I no longer care.”

Then what will you do?

I turned to Darkrai, and smiled. Something in my smile must have been off, for the Pokémon flinched. “Legendary Pokémon... even a legend is not immune to judgement.”

Darkrai slowly inched away, to hide behind Altair. *Your owner has questionable sanity, just saying.*

Altair sounded pensive as he looked to me. *I know.*
Our conversation was abandoned later as we had to descend to camp and prepare, Donar and his Pokémon already resting in whatever shade the sunset would bring.

“Well, then,” I remarked to the exhausted teen. “Today we will be making pot-au-feu.”

“Not rice?” Donar paled.

I just sighed. After the incident with the Clauncher, it was clear that, while the boy accepted that some Pokémon were eaten on a routine basis, rice would be a substitute for anything.

“It's basically throwing whatever we have on hand into the pot to cook,” Noël explained cheerfully. “Your Fletchinder and Bagon have been practising their Embers on the thing, so we thought we might as well put them to use. At least while they can hit a standing target.”

“The day after tomorrow is moving targets,” I agreed. “But for now, comfort food.”

Noël Duval had Oran berries and, for some reason, pine nuts, which I wrapped in foil and threw into the fire to toast. The smell of cracking pine was intense as Donar rooted through his pack and came up with a pack of crackers. “Can I use this?”

“Yes.”

Instead of bread, we used the crackers to serve the marrow, balanced in texture and taste with the rough salt and the crackers. Darkrai was spinning about some unseen axis, crunch-crunch-crunch sounds echoing around him.

“This is good!” Donar exclaimed later. “Doctor, how do you know so many recipes?”

“This is freaking insane,” Noël agreed, dropping bits of crackers and marrow for Scylla to grab onto and eat in the bucket. “We’re supposed to be roughing it, and yet we’re eating like it’s a five-star hotel every day.”

“I had a picky Pokémon—”

Delphi would have roasted the marshmallows to charcoal briquettes, leaving him as the only consumer. Altair and Delphi would have fought over the marshmallows, and Deneb would end up refereeing the fight because he was the only one with no stake, being unable to consume marshmallows or refined sugar-

“To feed him, I learnt to cook well on a camping stove,” the answer sounded hollow to me. “I mastered the skill over the years.”

“Whatever, this is good!” Donar spoke through a mouthful. “You could set up a café with this!”

Despite myself, I chuckled, indulging the whims of an ignorant boy. There were road carts in Kalos that would surpass the highest standards of Kanto cooking. “You know, once upon a time the legs of a Frogadier were regarded as the highest delicacy of pre-Revolution Kalos. Cuisses de grenouilles was very popular. And when you cook it, the muscle does not resolve rigor mortis as quickly as warm-blooded muscle, so heat from cooking can cause the fresh legs to twitch.”

“Please don’t,” Donar just looked freaked out, clutching his Frogadier protectively.

“I know it's fun to screw with his head, but he's an impressionable kid too,” Noël frowned in warning as he took a stick to fish for the packet of toasted nuts.
The pine nuts were special, crumbling very softly under the teeth, and were a success amongst us. Liz floated to me, perching on my shoulder. Her flower twirled about as she placidly considered the nuts, accepting a sniff. I gave her some nuts, watching as the hedonistic Floette chewed on the pine nuts flavoured by wood-smoke.

“Donar, how is your training?” I asked in passing.

“Bulbasaur evolved!” Donar showed me the evolved form, and Ivysaur crowed in victory along with Fletchinder, Frogadier and Bagon. Bagon celebrated by head-butting Donar.

“Ow!” Donar rubbed his leg. “Bagon, when your leg and head heals, we're going to make sure you master Ember, alright?! Please don't hit me!”

Crystal made a noise like a kettle once more, spinning around Jelly's attempts at swatting her. I shook my head, leaving Aegis to break up the argument before long. “Darkrai, how is the marrow?”

_I have learned that food need not be complicated to taste good._ He still sounded amazed.

“Erm... pardon me, but where the hell did you guys find a Darkrai?” Noël commented once the partially festive mood of a campfire was dwindling down. “I thought they were native to the Sinnoh region... and they're legendary in their own right as well.”

“He followed the Sinnoh delegates to Kalos, where I persuaded him to follow us as a research assistant,” I smoothly answered, watching Donar's brow furrow in confusion.

“Pokémon can work?” Donar sounded blank. The concept of a regular income has, apparently, not made itself readily apparent to him.

“According to the Third Pokémon Convention of Icirrus City, Pokémon can, with the legal representation of their Trainer, take on jobs and actually hold representation in human society,” I explained. “In the wake of Team Plasma, the Pokémon Fan Clubs felt that Team Plasma did have a logical point, and hence the Third Convention also gave Pokémon the right to legal counsel and representation, as well as the right of choice to release following the conclusion of a pending investigation into a Trainer's dubious acts. Most of it also governs the release of Pokémon into the wild. Of course, the implications are that only Trained Pokémon can function effectively in society, and that there is a Trainer behind every Pokémon with a job.”

I added _ignorance of the law_ to the list of things Trainers seem to forget. A moment later, _implications of said ignorance_ joined it. Young idiots amazed by the dazzle and pageantry and unaware of the hard work that went into Pokémon training, and the idiot researchers that would ignore domestic economies to send the young idiots out.

Night fell, and the Muraille Coast was partially silent. Nowhere in nature is ever truly silent; even the roars of Tornadus and Thundurus would have made a sound. The camp was asleep, save for myself; my Holo Caster kept beeping, especially as I input all of the relevant data within – I missed the clicking of keys on a keyboard, but a laptop was too bulky. The Holo Caster at least came with solar cells, though I would have run the device down before long.

It would be within this silence that AZ would first appear.

Liz was the first to react as the Misty Terrain covered the field. The ponderous, heavy steps echoed, followed by a torrent of white smoke, indistinguishable from the white hair that flowed from under his cap.

I remained seated.
The Torkoal snorted, more smoke pouring from its nostrils to shroud around them. From the sea, perhaps elsewhere, and to a sleepy individual, it would have been a sea mist, and nothing more. Silence issued from its Trainer, a wandering old man.

“Vous êtes libre, n’est-ce pas?” I commented, not even bothering to greet the man. You are free, are you not?

“Le passé, je suis libre de lui. Mais pas de l’avenir,” he answered. “Le destin a un moyen de tester l’éternel. C’est un moyen aussi.” The past, I am free of it. But not of the future. Fate has a way of testing the eternal. This is a way too.

I glared back in answer. “Pourquoi êtes-vous ici, monseigneur?” Why are you here, my lord?

Will reminding you of your lost titles and fame and empire chase you away?

“Vous avez pris la place d’amis. Le destin n’est pas doux envers ceux qui perturbent les plans.” You have taken the place of friends. Destiny is not kind to those who disturb the plans.

“Cela ne répond pas à mes questions, monseigneur,” I looked to Liz, and nodded. “Je vais devoir vous demander de partir. Immédiatement.” That does not answer my question, my lord. I will have to ask you to leave. Immediately.

“Je sais que vous cherchez à détruire celui qui les a tués. Vos compagnons,” he answered. “Ils ne reviendront pas, même si le Pokémon de la Vie est mort par votre main.” I know you seek the one who killed them. Your companions. They will not return, even if the Pokémon of Life is dead by your hand.

I smiled. I wanted to laugh; revenge was a pointless endeavour to waste time upon. Let the immortal think so, though, if he so wished. It would make his presence in my life so much less. “J’ai payé de toute mes larmes, à une société qui désarme la victime, et pas le voleur. Leur pitoyable effort, ils ne savent pas qu’ils font l’amour avec la mort.”

I have paid with all my tears, to a society who disarms the victim, and not the thief. Their pitiful effort, they do not know that they make love with death.

A ghost of a smile passed on his face, yet the ghost was lost to stony silence once more. He knew the song, then. “Vous voyez-vous comme misérable, mademoiselle?”

Do you see yourself as miserable, miss?

I pondered the question. It was a good one. “Je suis malheureuse. Je suis vivante pour être malheureuse. Si vous n’avez rien à dire, au revoir.” I am unhappy. I am alive to be unhappy, at least. If you have nothing to say, goodbye.

The Torkoal snorted, a cascade of smoke sent over the Misty Terrain and the rocky parts between cliff and coast.

“The sword you hold...” he inclined his head as behind me, the Pokéball burst and a singing of a sword echoed in warning. “My regards, Durandal.”

The king who established the Ancien Régime, the one who founded the AZ Empire and the homeland of the Kalos region, thus turned his back and left with the ghostly mist he came shrouded in, the whispers and thumps of a Golurk hiding in the shadows, the clicking of the clay wings of a Sigilyph his heralds. The fog receded, dissipated and lost to the Muraille Coast and the Kalosian waters beyond, leaving nothing but coast, rock, seaweed, and the nightmare of reason.
I looked to Aegis, or Durandal, the Peerless Sword. “Really? You?”

Always inexpressive, the resulting single clang told me volumes about Aegis. That perhaps, there was a reason why I had found an Aegislash lingering around Parfum Palace in the wild.

As the moon rose higher, the cliffs began to melt away, until gradually I became aware of the coast, of the legend of the old Torterra island that must have flowered once, now disappeared into the ocean or somewhere in the waters of the Sinnoh region — a fresh, green breast of the New World, before Ransei was even broken into the Kanto and Johto regions, when Kalosian men sailed out into the Age of Discovery. The waters of Kalos and the ocean had pandered in whispers to the greatest of all human dreams; for an enchanted moment, humankind must have held his breath in the presence of this sea of unknowns, face to face with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Brooding on the old mysteries, I thought of a man's wonder when he first picked out the light at the end, the light of a weapon and to his revived comrade. He had come a long way, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity, where the Stygian fields rolled on under the dark. Throughout his years, AZ must have believed in it, the future that year by year recedes. It eluded him then, but tomorrow, he would run faster, stretch out his arms farther...

To continue, ceaselessly borne back into the past.

According to Noël, most Trainers kept their Pokémon in their Pokéballs. Apparently it was both as a courtesy, and because some Pokémon were too large to safely accommodate anywhere without damage to either themselves or the surrounding infrastructure. Which was why the presence of Darkrai and Altair confused him so much, as he told me. The mystery was solved the next morning, when we packed up camp and Dr du Bois actually had to lean on Altair to make any headway into the journey, her expression like the brewing of a coming storm that I wanted to run from.

Altair continued to get strange looks as we marched into Cyllage City, the wide streets filled with bicycles and their riders, clearly either gathering for a marathon or something.

“Cycling competition,” Dr du Bois clarified out of the blue. “Not marathon.”

Are you psychic? “Erm... this looks crowded...”

Dr du Bois gave the crowds a gimlet eye that looked fearsome and intimidating. “Grant will be somewhere inside that crowd. That cretin will be participating.”

Hearing the professor refer to a Gym Leader as a cretin, even as popular and trendsetting as Grant, was rather shocking, but that was Dr du Bois. “Oh... did you know him?”

“Anyone who did a League challenge in the past years would,” Dr du Bois muttered. “You remind me of him.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “R- Really?”

“Yes. Both of you are thick-headed and arguments simply bounce off of your skull.”

“Hey!” I half-yelled, but without heat. Dr du Bois's sarcasm slid off like water from a Golduck's back as I looked at the bicycles, gathered around a cul-de-sac with a stage in the middle, where a familiar armour-wearing man was standing.

“And we're all very honoured that Wikstrom of the Kalos Elite Four is here today as guest of
honour!” a beefy-looking man in a suit and holding a microphone, which I took to be the commentator, was standing. “Racers, get ready!”

“Bicycle race,” Noël swallowed, finally looking at the ground and watching people and Pokémon alike run out of the way. “Come on.”

“Doctor, your leg?” I urgently hissed as we began to move to the sidelines, except that Dr du Bois looked hampered by both her backpack and her leg. The woman herself was aggrieved, even going as far even to scowl in answer, but she said nothing, just limping along with her Lucario for support.

“On your mark!”

“Shit!” I cursed as Noël and I had reached the sidelines, but Dr du Bois was still a long way away. I dropped my backpack next to Noël, immediately rushing towards her. “Doctor!”

“Get set!”

There was five metres of space between us and the horde. If we caused an accident here, there was going to be so much trouble. “Doctor!”

“Go!”

A red flash landed Altair and a stunned Dr du Bois, and me, flat by the side while what felt like a Donphan horde stormed down the streets of Cyllage and out of the city proper. Dr du Bois made a sound, steadily rolling from where she had squashed her backpack to glare at the red blur, or the Scizor. “Oh, you?”

“Are you alright?” Noël rushed towards us, pausing only to look at the Scizor. “Erm... we don't mean any harm?”

“Verily,” said a familiar man. Wikstrom himself was striding towards us, the red Scizor moving to hover next to him, wings buzzing. “My apologies, fair lady.”

Dr du Bois looked irritated, a far cry from her usual icy self as she accepted his gauntleted hand and got hoisted up instead.

“A fair lady should not be carrying this much,” Wikstrom continued, lifting her backpack off with a brief struggle. “Especially not twenty-five kilograms.”

Amazingly, the unflappable Doctor blushed. “It's my work. I am a travelling researcher.”

“I know of your work, Dr Marguerite du Bois,” Wikstrom leant down, taking her hand to plant a chaste kiss on the back. “Especially your article on the Officers Jenny and Nurses Joy within the League support structure, and if their presence would block more capable individuals from entering the medical service and policing sectors. An enterprising work.”

A single eyebrow lifted. “I was not aware that an Elite Four would read them. Especially not the Baron de Rais, whose family served under the Princess of Notre Dame.”

“One must always advance with the times, madame,” Wikstrom replied. “I presume that you are headed towards the Pokémon Centre?”

Dr du Bois stuck out her hand, palm facing up. “My bag.”

“It is extremely heavy, madame,” the Elite Four answered. “As a chevalier of the highest orders, I
“My bag, monsieur,” Dr du Bois snapped.

“Come on, Doctor,” I persuaded. “You need help, and if that bag’s as heavy as he says, Altair can’t carry it. Pokémon Centre?”

“It’s filled,” Dr du Bois sourly answered. “The rooms always are filled when the Bicycle Race is under way. And—” she winced as she tentatively took a step. “My work—”

“It will not run,” Wikstrom answered severely. “I will stake my partner Aegislash that this bag shall be protected more than the artefacts that sleep within the Anistar vaults.”


Hotel Cyllage turned out to be next to the cul-de-sac, a central loop around a stage where skaters and cyclists surrounded like the moons of a planet. Many of them gave us a wide berth, or maybe it was the woman limping with a Lucario for support and the armoured Elite Four member behind her. The Cyllage concierge began spluttering as we entered, but then Dr du Bois fixed her still-formidable expression.

“M. Duval,” she sighed.

“I’m staying,” Noël offered. “Not like you can watch the kid. I’m headed to the Cyllage Gym anyway.”

“Really?” I doubtfully asked as the concierge handed over two sets of keys.

Dr du Bois picked both, examined them, handed me one. “M. Duval will be going to the Cyllage Gym, yes? You may follow him. I shall be there shortly once I have dropped my bag off and assured M. Wikstrom.”

“Oh look, I need to check in too, look at the time,” Noël drawled, filling out a form to hand to the concierge. “No worries, Dr du Bois, we’ll be escorting you.”

With a pinched expression suggesting that she did not like that, she made an imperious gesture that meant that Altair and Wikstrom – a freaking Elite Four – escort her limping self up the steps, with us meek Trainers following her. As one Pokémon, a crazy researcher and an armoured Elite Four entered the room, I caught sight of a fleeting expression on the knight’s face, that under the struggle of carrying a twenty-kilo bag in full armour was something approaching admiration. But there was no way he could... right?

I entered my room, Noël taking the one next to mine. Most of my unpacking consisted of dropping my bag on the foot of the bed, checking for my valuables on my person, and then getting out at the same time that Noël waved at me across the hallway. A heartbeat later, her room door opened, and with it some awkward atmosphere.

Dr du Bois had taken off her coat, apparently leaving it inside. Her black hair hung loose and limp in its usual bob, and by her side Altair was still hovering. Now, though, there was a new addition in the form of Wikstrom, who looked concerned and slightly frustrated.

“Oh, you got one more hanger-on,” I said.

“He is not hanging on,” Dr du Bois flatly answered. “His duty is always to Kalos first and foremost. As the heir still stands, the House of de Rais must still repent. When his duty is discharged, he will...”
disappear from my sight.”

The flat, venomous tone sent shivers down my spine, but I felt that there was some hidden history between the Pokémon League and Dr du Bois. Maybe it was her work, or Daisy... it could be Daisy. Compared to the sun, Dr du Bois was a pale imitation, imperfect and insecure.

“Why is the hotel called Relifac-le-Haut?” I asked when we left.

“Relifac-le-Haut is the Kalosian name for Cyllage City,” Noël explained to me. “Like Roche-sur-Gliffe is the name of Ambrette Town. That’s why, though on international maps we refer to our cities and towns by their new names, their traditional names still remain. In this case, Relifac-le-Haut refers to a relief, a sculptural technique, and the suffix ‘-le-Haut’, which means 'up high'. It’s a direct reference to the old cave-systems up on the cliffs, now part of the Cyllage Gym.”

We stopped by the cliff-faces, and I groaned as I came face to face with a winding road that led from Cyllage City... all... the... way... up... “We have to get up there.”

“Nope,” Noël popped the ‘p’ at the end, pointing to a roadside news bulletin. “Gym Leader isn’t in. We can climb the cliffs of Cyllage tomorrow, today it looks like Dr du Bois is going to the Pokémon Centre.”

“What?” she echoed. “I am fine, I can walk- ah!”

“Madame, that is not a good idea,” Wikstrom intervened, catching her. “Altair, grab her other arm, please. Nurse Joy should be able to fix her.”

“Let go! Altair, you traitor!” Dr du Bois shouted as she was tugged along by a knight and a Lucario, to my secret amusement. “Donar!”

“I’ll be exploring the city!” I waved goodbye.

“I will have revenge!”

Noël giggled as she left. “That is... are you sure she's alright?”

I slowly nodded. “Yeah... more or less.”

“Right,” his blond head bobbed in a nod. “So, we should get you a bike?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “But first... know any highlights?”

“Sure!” Noël cheerfully replied. “Came through here before, seen all the sights. Maybe we can hit the beach!”

“You were on a road trip?” I asked as we just wandered around the cliff-side, eyeing the finish line set up at the end. Obviously, Wikstrom wasn’t needed until the first few guys came back, hence the Elite Four’s free time spent on dragging Dr du Bois to the Pokémon Centre.

“No,” Noël replied. “Family trip to the beach. The cooked Binacle is to die for. Binacle is another local Pokémon, so you’re in for a treat.”

My stomach tried to heave out on itself at the mention of seafood, so I looked at Noël queasily. “No seafood, please. Can we get that bike?”

I got a yellow bike at a dirt-cheap price, and it was foldable. Then, I stocked up on Potions, Antidotes and Paralyse Heals, earning myself a free Freeze Heal on offer. Noël made his own
purchases, notably on Freeze Heals.

“Always good, when I have an Ice-type team,” Noël smirked, handling the spray bottle carelessly. “So, you've decided what Pokémon to use, right?”

I nodded. “Ivysaur and Frogadier should be able to stand up to Grant... and you, Noël?”

He shrugged. “Already have the badge. I just cleared out to Coumarine until I was called back home. Urgent matters.”

His tone was sad, so we dropped the subject back to purchases. I tried to get away, but the Kalosian Trainer dragged me towards the Boutique, watching with an uncanny Fearow gaze as he made me get another pair of shoes.

It was... normal. No creepy technical truths, no lectures mid-walks, no feeling like I was a child to be coddled or a Ducklett following a Swanna – and there was the lousy metaphor. I almost forgot Dr du Bois. Almost; I don't think, even at her most polite, that anyone could make that mistake.

Chapter End Notes

No, I don't think it's possible in the real world to stew marrow bones in a Dutch oven. It's just not hot enough, and it's possibly undercooked. Also, marrow is served with pot-au-feu, but on brown bread and sprinkled with salt, not on crackers.

As readers might have noticed, yes, I pay attention to detail to food. I love food, and the Culture aspect of my French classes in uni gave me an interest in French cuisine. Pokémon X and Y also featured restaurants, and food itself is an important aspect in any world. Also, the presence of Miltank and the Skiddo line in Kalos suggests to me that, at least, Kalos would have a wide variety of cheeses and dairy products.

On what Marguerite said to AZ: ‘J'ai payé de toute mes larmes, à une société qui désarme la victime, et pas le voleur. Leur pitoyable effort, ils ne savent pas qu’ils font l’amour avec la mort.’ Both lines are part of Fantine’s lament in Les Misérables. There may or may not be parallels between Fantine and the woman who lost her beloved Pokémon and continue to work for the sake of the other Pokémon still alive.
Chapter Summary

He liked it, and I smiled, and laughed, and made plans that involved leaving behind Noël Duval as Donar and I would set out to Geosenge Town. It would almost be worth all of the pain to freeze the moment in amber, a reminder crystallised in a life. Life is beautiful... why? There is my answer.

It was a half-amused Gym Leader, Noël, and the associate professor of my nightmares that awaited me. Frogadier made a croak, pulling me up with Ivysaur's assistance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 22: I did not expect to run into Wikstrom Gampi de Rais. The Elite Four member was very polite in assisting me with my leg and bag during the middle of the bicycle race, though he did comment that my bag was heavy. He also escorted me to the Pokémon Centre, despite repeated refusal on my part and Altair's assistance in helping me to the Centre.

Note to self: Get a Golett. The Golett line, as well as the legendary golems are the only Pokémon exempt from the Third Conference labour laws.

"Why are you here?" I asked the moment any stray nurses were out of earshot. The moment Wikstrom left, I was going to triage myself out, tantrum or no tantrum.

"I am an Elite Four, and thus I have obligations to Kalos too," Wikstrom mildly answered. "Part of my obligations are to protect the Champion."

"You know that is a formality," I answered tightly. My leg might have been healed, but the phantom pains were much worsened by the damp of the Muraille Coast. "I thought that, if anyone was to come to coastal Kalos, it would be Siebold."

I had anticipated that said Elite Four would not be present. The chef thought that no one would realise that he spent nearly all his free time in Camphrier Town, the putain. No, not out of historical admiration, more like admiration of the local overlord of the Pokémon Storage System.

"It is not my place to be involved in my comrade's affaire du cœur," Wikstrom answered. "It was truly obligation that brought me here, and our meeting was a coincidence."

I nodded in understanding. "I see."

"After you disappeared..." Wikstrom paused.

"I did keep up with the Lumiose press during the last few years," I interrupted. "It was rather hard not to, though I did get through the École Normale Supérieure de Kalos. It was... harsh. I will not apologise for that, though. I could not have kept up the pretence of being Champion after that tragedy, after their cremation and scattering were ordered."
“I would have stood by you,” my old mentor in the ways of the Kalos League answered.

“Your family crucified yourselves with the burning of Jeanne d’Arc centuries ago,” I answered. “It is... difficult to explain. Why I left Île-de-l’arc.”

Wikstrom indicated the electronic ticket boards, that indicated about ten more people between us and the triage nurse. “We have time.”

“After the... cremation...” I swallowed. It was not a set of memories I cared to revisit. “After that... I began to ask why. Why did the League attempt to cover this up? Why were my Pokémon denied a basic funeral, even though it was their right? Kalos and its Champion should be able to mourn, as Champion Alder and Unova had mourned for his late Volcarona. I realised I was angry and bitter, that I should give up the Championship.”

“That was not possible,” Wikstrom allowed. “Your Pokémon played a role within that, but you are a good Trainer. A single one of your Pokémon would have decimated the best.”

I nodded. “My pitiful state was apparent, but Altair and Vega would win against nearly any team that the League’s rising stars would find, and then I was being pressured to train some more Pokémon... my current team might not have been made for battle in mind, but they would match themselves evenly against my former team. And, even though I was angry and bitter, there was no way I could have given up, since throwing a match would have driven the honour-bound League into uproar.”

“Those measures we imposed following the Geosenge disaster...” Wikstrom understood, if his lined expression was anything to go by. “In whatever way possible, Kalos had to avoid the uproar coming so quickly from a Champion’s resignation. A Champion's temporary disappearance, soon to be effected as permanent... you and I, we have gone through them together, that the previous Champion, if still present, will take over in the case of the Champion incumbent disappearing.”

“I ran,” I answered. “I got myself forged papers, a forged past, I made a career within the academic world, where the battling spheres were as distant as could be possible. I found a way to persuade Augustine Sycamore to hire me, and then I set up my persona as anti-battling, as much as was possible without being too overboard. Just... I left the battling world, searching for possible answers of why. Why a strong and powerful Champion was still needed in this world, why Kalos would persist in its illusions and pageantry. Why could other Champions, like the legendary Red, leave the Pokémon League, but I could not.”

“I will not tell you to stop mourning,” the faithful knight, who had remained even though half of the Elite Four almost questioned why a child would have taken over the Pokémon League, said in that moment. “I would ask why you had never told me this, but I believe I understand. The politics of the Pokémon League are truly overboard, and I comprehend why you felt driven into a corner even though you never chose to become the heroine of Kalos, the title that became your shackle to the Rainbow Isle. Just know that if you require, you will have the strength of the Maison de Rais. So I swear as the blade of the Elite Four, Duke Wikstrom, Baron de Rais.”

“That’s... huge,” I stated, almost the obvious. What he was offering was... incredible. Perhaps, had the Kalosian Revolution been anything but engineered by a few nobles against the Last Dynasty it would have lacked power, but few other Kalosian noble houses had survived as long as the Maison de Rais in modern Kalos, its long-standing rival of the MaisonFleur-de-Lisfallen years ago with Lysandre and ensuring its pre-eminence within the Kalos region. Comparable even to the Princely House of d’Arc, where all Kalos Champions entered. Even for a modern region and part of the global nation, some things did not change within Kalos itself. “Even for a knight of fervour, serving two materialistic princesses should have ended that streak already.”
“You care for your companions far more than yourself, madame,” Wikstrom earnestly told me. “I do not think you would fit the definition of materialistic. You were the first Trainer not to laugh when I presented myself as a knight, and I have been serving Kalos as one of the Four for a long time. I hardly dared hope, but when the child of twelve merely held her beast ready, declared her challenge, and made good on her fight of the Elite Four's blade... for me, the révélation came that battle.”

Of all four Elite Four members, I commiserated the most with Wikstrom. Siebold was a very distant friend, Malva was immersed in the ideology of Team Flare to ever believe me, and Drasna was so cheerful as to be almost sinister. As someone outside, I had barely comprehended the stigma of holding descent from one of the world's most infamous ancient serial killers. It was hard to laugh at someone who was as alone as I personally felt. I was twelve, and challenging the Elite Four, and instead of a play-actor, I found a chevalier who truly believed and lived by an unknown of chivalry. He could set it aside; he had done it before, and I knew how much it cost him, but men who could admire their own conscience to save people were heroes.

I liked Wikstrom. I sympathised with him, and his ridiculous ideals of chivalry and knights and loyalty. When I asked how he did battle with an Aegislash, he truly told me, no holding back, and he let me try. It was during those years alone and studying, when I found Aegis hiding, and when I truly began practice, that those memories were... good. Wikstrom was the closest thing to a friend I had, as over-the-top and as much of a large ham he was. If I could afford to, I could learn to love him.

There was no way I could afford to.

So I nodded, gave nothing fake in my expression, chatted with the Wigglytuff nurse and then triaged myself out. No one said that Wikstrom's advice held any medical authority.

Altair gave his version of a snit, which was to cold-shoulder me towards the knight and then follow three steps behind.

“How?” I groaned, forced to lean on Wikstrom to hobble out.

“The nurse said that you needed to rest,” Wikstrom mentioned casually. “And she gave Altair your codeine prescription, already filled out. At least today, you're going back to your room to sleep for a long time. I would prefer that you slept within the Pokémon Centre, but you don't have a room within.”

The pain would die sooner or later, but the feeling of Altair's aura indicated that if necessary, my Lucario partner would see no reason not to force the horse pills down my throat. Seeing as I trained a Lucario so odd that even its own species gave Altair a wide berth, I knew he would do it. “Fine.”

Back in my own room, I found Darkrai lingering around. Why did you approach the healing building?

“Do you call all Pokémon Centres that?” I asked him. “Because they aren't really healing buildings. You realise the distinction, yes?”

Hmm. And the human?

“Wikstrom, or Baron de Rais,” I answered. “Choose one and call him that. He's... an acquaintance. I doubt he'll report to Diantha where I am, so feel free to ask him questions. I think he can answer anything with regards to the old chivalric order.”

“Indeed I may, Sir Darkrai,” Wikstrom promptly told the legendary Pokémon. “To meet the one who worries Lady Cynthia is a rather dubious honour, all things considered.”
“Well, you guys chat,” I accepted the prescription from Altair's paw, grabbed the bottle, and took the pill to wash down.

*What is that?* The Pitch-Black Pokémon asked.

“Medicine,” I gasped.

*It looked nothing like a herb.*

“It's a pill,” I explained. “Say... imagine a herb, taken to undergo numerous processes to derive the good chemicals out, and then reduced into powder and then taken in this form. That's not accurate, but it's all you would comprehend. It's relatively tasteless, but it can be mixed with food. What I took was a salt of codeine, an opiate used for numbing pain in the medical circles.”

*Are you in pain?*

“Not from you,” I assured. “Are you alright? Did I bore you terminally?”

*You have been an able host. I am the one who should apologise.*

I chuckled as the muddling effects of codeine began to set in. “Say, Darkrai, I'm not in full control of my faculties now. I'm going to be asleep for a bit, maybe for the rest of the day. Altair, can you let Liz out and then deal with the ghostly trio somehow?”

In answer, a pillow slapped my head, and I fell down. That was a good enough answer; he hated dealing with them.

Falling asleep was an unknown process to me; details were usually simple in my dreams, so awake and asleep made a difference. This time, it was a surprisingly lucid dream, one of walking in a wood similar to the Winding Woods of Snowbelle City. There was a song in the air, the arrhythmic cheerful hums of an accordion clashing with the eeriness of the woods.

That would not do. I imposed something else, a lonely, mournful cry immediately. Dissonant, unnerving, reverberation-heavy sound effects that did not quite work at chasing away the false cheeriness. I kept at it until my skin crawled, and only then did I allow the music to fade somewhat into the background of the booming voice of the forest.

*You who chose to tie yourself to fates...*

“That's rich, coming from someone who believes that their existence as a legendary allows them to rule over people,” I scoffed.

*Fool! We are legends, we are the powers that balance the world. Yet you would destroy us!*

“What made you the powers of the world!”

*We are the powers of the world!*

“That is absurd!”

*We determine what is absurd. You were meant to die that day, and you attempted to drag us down with you-*

“So, does the realization of the absurd require suicide?” I enquired. “Camus answers: ‘No. It requires revolt.’”
How dare you- how dare you rebel against us, against life!

“I choose action over contemplation, aware that I cannot succeed,” I challenged, laughing at the voices of the forest, the angered minds of Pokémon and spirit alike. “You are life?”

I will outlive you. We will outlive you. You are nothing.

“Like you said, we humans are weak. We die easily. But no matter how weak we are, even if we're being chopped to bits or stabbed to death, we still want to live.”

Having pursued everything towards that end, I could not hope. I dared not hope. That I was immortal and that I lived outside of rules, that everything was permitted was a fact. And now, freed from rules and holding onto the Peerless Sword Durandal, I screamed:

“ I'm gonna give you a little taste of what it feels like!”

Time passes, quickly; how much time before the forest was silent, how much time before the corpses of Pokémon and human alike rested beneath my blade rested, messy and choppy between I and the horned and winged one. One armed with the power of Geomancy fired a Moonblast; another fired an Oblivion Wing. Countered by King's Shield, I raised the blade without peer, and then it swung-

My eyes rested upon the plain ceiling of the hotel room. Moonlight streamed in from outside. Darkrai hovered, one intense blue eye concentrated on what I spotted to be the room service menu. Altair was seated beside him, pointing to words or, I presumed, letters, since the Lucario drew certain letters out in the air and Darkrai mimicked him. Liz gently hovered around, Aromatherapy at work. Jelly and Crystal were holding a mocking stand-off, while in a corner Aegis slung by the letter-writing team, keeping a weather eye upon my Chandelure and Jellicent.

By the foot of the bed, there lay a pair of black riding boots, that I was very sure could only be bought at the Boutique Couture of Lumiose City for a hundred grand of Poké. I smiled, taking the shoes which seemed to have come straight from the Grimm Brothers, and slid them on, the cool leather a counterpoint to the heat of my legs.

All is well.

The next day, my entire body was screaming in pain by high noon. And the reason for that was because I walked all the way up the cliffs, and then I had to climb a set of rock walls that looked like hikers were dashed against them on a daily basis.

“Can't... feel... my arms...” I groaned once I reached the stone field at the top of the

Even worse, Dr du Bois was back to normal – that is, she easily climbed up with the help of her Pokémon, and was seated by the sidelines, holding up what looked like a copy of « La Voix de Kalos », the Kalos regional newspaper.

It was a half-amused Gym Leader, Noël, and the associate professor of my nightmares that awaited me. Frogadier made a croak, pulling me up with Ivysaur's assistance.

“Thanks, guys,” I panted, trying to catch my breath and swearing that Dr du Bois's boots looked newer when they were shoved into my face and I faced them levelly.

“Not very active, is he?” Grant commented once I found the strength in me to stand, and I had downed half a bottle of the water Noël had thoughtfully brought up. “Well, are you here on a Gym challenge?”
“Ah...” I wobbled slightly. “Yes...”

Grant nodded, looking to Frogadier, who puffed his chest out in answer. “Well, you look somewhat prepared, anyway,” he commented. “Referee!”

“Let the battle begin between Gym Leader Grant and Challenger Donar Oak!” the referee called. “Each can use two Pokémon. Only the challenger may substitute Pokémon. The battle ends when all Pokémon on one side can no longer battle. Now, begin!”

“Go, you little despot,” Grant snickered at the private joke as the Pokéball he casually flung cracked open in a burst of light, revealing a Tyrunt that bellowed.

“Frogadier, I choose you!” I called as my starter took the field.

“Tyrunt, Stealth Rock!” Grant called, the tyrannical monster bellowing a reply as sharp pointed stones levitated from the ground up to surround my field.

“Entry hazards...?” I muttered. “Frogadier, Spikes!”

“You too?” Grant commented, grinning as the caltrops littered around his field, disappearing into the rocky earth. “Fine. Tyrunt, Bite!”

I lingered for a brief moment, before I called: “Frogadier, Water Pulse! Then jump!”

Frogadier did as he was told, sending the concussive wave straight into the jaw of the Tyrunt before leaping, somersaulting into the air as the jaws hit a boulder and broke it into pieces.

“That's... Strong Jaw,” Noël realised. “The signature ability of the Tyrunt line. Biting attacks gain power from it... be careful, Donar!”

“Frogadier, Water Pulse on the boulder to Tyrunt!” I commanded sharply, the wave crashing the boulder towards the Pokémon. “Then use that and Rock Smash!”

“What the-” Grant stared as Frogadier leapt, circling the boulder to land and leap off of it as a platform, making towards Tyrunt with a glowing fist. “Tyrunt!”

Frogadier might have changed slightly; I did not quite know, except that now, my awesome starter was going to be the best Rock Smasher there ever was. “Rock Smash!”

“Tyrunt, Bite!” Grant called, his expression serious.

I grinned. Maybe the Dwebble had taught me well, after all. “Batter up!”

Frogadier used his fist and swung it in an arc, making contact with the side of the charging jaw, and also sending the Pokémon careening off course. I winced as a howl of pain echoed, and a crack.

“Tyrunt is unable to battle, this battle goes to the challenger!”

“Well, at least the little despot might learn something,” Grant joked.

“Really?” I asked. “’Cause it looked like a spoilt prince. Erm, no offence.”

The Gym Leader grinned openly. “You know, Tyrunt is resistant to the standard Rock counters of Water and Grass. But a Fighting-type move used like that is new.”

“Might be appropriate.”
“Mmm,” Grant nodded, pulling another Pokéball. “This is the other Fossil Pokémon of Kalos, just so you know.”

I backed slightly as the cold tinge of the Amaura forewarned me as the Pokémon appeared, hissing as the Spikes took effect. “Really? Even if I have Rock Smash?”

“Sure,” Grant nodded. “Amaura, Thunder Wave!”

“Oh,” I heard the forewarning from Doctor du Bois as I screamed for Frogadier to get away, which he did so, just barely.

“Icy Wind!” Grant called, as Amaura summoned a miniature blizzard within the rock-wall confines of the Cyllage Gym.

“This is Borealis's strategy...” I realised, confronted with the Icy Wind and as Frogadier reared back. “Frogadier! Jump!”

My Pokémon seemed slightly chilled, but leapt anyway as the Rock Tomb narrowly missed.

“Now!” I called as he was still falling. “Water Pulse!”

The sphere of water, manipulated by concussive wave, knocked the Amaura silly in the wake of the dust cloud as Frogadier landed. It tottered about, the confusing effect of Water Pulse finally giving Frogadier a chance to leap forward, Rock Smash in hand.

“Ga-gadier, frog.” Fist raised, I allowed Frogadier a brief moment of posturing before I nodded. “Thanks, partner.”

Frogadier allowed himself a cackle, and then subsided somewhat.

“Good job,” Grant clapped his hands. “Now, within my Pokémon's battle style, did you realise something?”

I thought back for a moment. “I thought... well, I visited the Ambrette Lab once. And I saw a Tyrunt, and I thought it was pretty strong, but... straightforward. And when it charged for that last bite... it wasn't giving a thought to defence. It just wanted to win.”

“Very good,” Grant nodded. “And then?”

“Amaura... it used Thunder Wave, Icy Wind and Rock Tomb,” I accused. “I knew that strategy, Noël used it against me before. It lowers the opponent’s speed and then traps them, followed by a quick blast to finish them off. But, at the last moment... Amaura didn't move.”

“Rock-type Pokémon are usually slow, and thus they find it harder to compete,” Grant nodded. “But, they are solid, but even solidity can fall if pressure is applied. That which does not bend must break, might be the rule of the world – or that which stands fast would win. Either lesson can be taught here. It is my honour to grant you the Cliff Badge. And this TM, of course.”

I accepted the Badge and TM, thanked Grant, and then the three of us left the Cyllage Gym.

“Thank you for your help!” I told Noël. “I couldn't have done it without you siccing Borealis onto us.”

“De rien,” Noël answered, looking shifty-eyed towards Dr du Bois. “At least, someone should have been paying attention.”
“What for?” she asked, still perusing «La Voix de Kalos». “I already knew that he was going to win. Unless you battled Grant's Aurorus and Tyrantrum at this stage, you would have won, Donar.”

“Right,” I sighed. “Then... shall we?”

“Shall we... what?” Dr du Bois looked blank.

“Leave?” I hazarded. “For Shalour City? For the third badge?”

“Oh.”

“Erm... are you alright?” I asked. She had been uncharacteristically silent for the whole day. Not even a single criticism of my battle, despite that Frogadier had very nearly been frozen and defeated.

“It's the codeine, I'm afraid,” Dr du Bois gave a wan smile. “The painkillers haven't entirely left my head yet. I'm not fully aware myself. Altair, is the sun setting?”

“Erm... why don't we stay a few more days?” I persuaded. “There's no rush, right, Doctor?”

“But the food, Donar.” Her eyes widened. “Oh, Darkrai. I forgot to feed him.”

I privately thought that the legendary would find a way to feed himself, but held back from saying it out loud. “I'll feed him.”

“You'll give him fast food. He hates it,” she babbled. “It's not good for him.”

“Giving a Pokémon human food isn't good either,” I grumbled, picking up the newspaper that she had dropped. It was mostly in Kalosian, but I thought I could identify the words 'cotton' and something about rising prices, if the pictures of rioting workers were anything to go by. “Cotton?”

“Dropping prices, in fact,” Dr du Bois clarified.

“What?” How she managed that, even without most of her faculties, was astounding.


I nodded, obviously realising that she was nuts. “Erm, maybe we should go back...”

“It's the Cottonee,” Dr du Bois warbled as we pushed her behind, Altair guiding along. Noël and I had bicycles, but there was no way Dr du Bois could stay still riding pillion in her condition. “Kalos and most of the world uses synthetic polymers or Mareep wool, but cotton is a big thing in Hoenn and Unova.”

“Cottonee are native to Unova, right?” Noël commented, playing along.

“Nasty buggers, them and the Whimsicott,” Dr du Bois slurred. “Important to industry, though. The Industrial Revolution was brought about by nothing more than Cottonee and the clothing industry.”

“Then what about the Pokéball?”

“A way to contain Cottonee and Whimsicott within their farms.”

Between Noël, Altair and I, we managed to corral the doctor to her room and leave her there with Altair. Liz perched on his shoulder. The Floette floated off to land on my shoulder, and I gently nodded to the little lady. A heartbeat later, the Lucario stepped out. He held a few slender leashes, each one of them attached to Crystal – her Chandelure – the pink menace of a Jellicent, to Aegis,
and, funnily enough, to Darkrai.

“What the-?” Noël cursed as he was faced with the bizarre facsimile of a proud owner and his predatory pets.

We must walk them, Altair informed me – probably with no small amount of barely concealed amusement. She is indisposed, and you did agree to feed Darkrai.

Marguerite mentioned something known as a bisque, Darkrai murmured in agreement. Though personally I am worried, the fighter would not allow me to remain within her room alone.

She needs rest.

Yet no one protects her. She is alone and vulnerable if you intend to yank those three around with me.

“Erm…” I swallowed. “Altair, what's with the leashes?”

Your human laws that govern the city limits do not allow Ghost-type Pokémon to wander unsupervised, especially not Chandelure and Jellicent, Altair explained telepathically. I trust Aegis, but the other two are not safe.

“You mean the rest of us aren't safe,” I clarified.

The Lucario tilted his head down. I meant what I told you, and nothing more or less. Will you do it or not?

We must have looked like idiots, Noël and I, forced to lead around three Ghosts and a Darkrai on leashes. At least, Altair had relented, leaving the Pitch-Black Pokémon to linger hopefully as I got him a Beartic Ice-cream in vanilla and my own with chocolate. Noël got some odd flavour that came in purple.

I watched, transfixed, as the cone and cream and all disappeared down some black void within that form. Beside me, within the town square, Noël made a low whistle.

I had no idea that snow could taste so good, the Pokémon murmured. What is this snow?

“Ice cream,” I muttered, trying to ignore the legendary Pokémon and the eyes of all Trainers.

Beartic Ice.

“Yeah- hang on, you can read?” Noël sounded taken aback.

The fighter determined that if I was going to learn, I might as well learn something of human languages. Darkrai explained. Once I can comprehend the letters, we were going to practice writing.

“Most Pokémon... don't quite learn,” Noël murmured. “Sapin can read a bit, but... Dr du Bois sounds like a talented teacher, at least. Are you learning the English alphabet?”

Quite. The legendary Pokémon of nightmares then floated around the square some more. We are by the sea.

“Erm... Darkrai are native to Sinnoh, right?” Noël asked. “Are you going to go home?”

Home? The brilliant blue dimmed somewhat. Why?

“Why...?” Noël mumbled. “You don't want to return to Newmoon Island?”
Idly, almost dreamily, the Pitch-Black Pokémon reflected. *Where I must place myself in voluntary exile? That is not home; that is exile.*

I watched Darkrai face the park of Trainers, most of them giving us a wide berth, eyeing his leash in my hand. What must it be like, having to endure this ostracism and loneliness?

*There are no Pokémon that hates humans; only humans who dislike Pokémon.*

Having said that, Darkrai then reached out and swatted Crystal on her arm, sending the Ghost spinning like some floating top that made noises like a kettle, bobbing about. Ghostly, scary, predatory Pokémon, all in hand and playing. Even Frogadier deigned to play; Fletchinder and Ivysaur were making a game of spinning Crystal through the air by wing, gust or vine. Liz hovered by my shoulder, colliding into Crystal as she floated up and then crashing into Fletchinder, where all three ladies began squabbling that devolved into a fight that erupted when Jelly started shooting Brine indiscriminately.

**Altair greeted me the moment I awoke from codeine-induced madness. He handed me my bag, the papers off the floor, another pair of shoes courtesy of Wikstrom's stuffed-breast chivalry, and my beeping Holo Caster. Of all, the last was from Augustine, so I switched it on and accepted the call.**

*“We have a lot to discuss the next time I'm in Illumis,”* I warned the bugger.

*“Salut, Marguerite,”* Augustine's tired voice told me, amongst many things, that Sina and Dexio were skipping out on the Professor's regular sleep schedule. *“Remember your acceptance piece?”*

*“Technological Determinism and the Pokéball,”* I recalled, reaching for the kettle. I also handed Altair a bottle of water, which he accepted and downed easily. *“The piece that landed me a doctorate and my entire thesis. Yeah?”*

*“Right. It reached Kanto.”*

*“I published that piece two years ago.”*

*“Well, some journalist read it, and currently Oak is looking up information that he asked the Laboratory for just to refute your thesis, because...”* here Augustine paused. *“You're famous, or infamous. Silph Co. is looking to file a libel suit, and so is the Pokéball Factory.”*

*“The forces of economic interests at work,”* I sighed. *“No, they won't.”*

*“You have a small following in whatever was left of Team Plasma, by the way,”* Augustine commented. *“And, the League is very interested in your current project.”*

*“I thought the last time, it was your research that was more interesting,”* I accused. *“What did you call for, if not to apologise for tricking me into the presence of the Kalos League?”*

*“Well, your friend from the Looker Bureau dropped in,”* Augustine stated, ignoring the subject. *“From what I heard, a lot of people are very nervous about what you're going to publish. You may or may not be targeted.”*

*“Augustine, I work in the humanities. Do these people have little or no free time?”* I scowled, even though I had switched off the holographic function to conserve power. *“It's a little known piece, and the only reason it's notable is because I defended it.”*

*“Yeah, about that,”* Augustine commented. *“The Sûreté is very interested in that article. They're
going to institute measures about abuse based on what you published.”

A round ball fell out of my bag, and I picked it up. It was purple and white, with an M written on it in pink paint. My grip tightened on it; I had never used it since Daisy Linden saved the Pokéball Factory from Team Flare's hostile takeover. The number one reason why the Master Ball was such a threat, and why it was never released. “That sounds nice. Was that all?”

“Vega's been dropping in from time to time. Your Flygon might be lonely.” Augustine commented. “I heard you got a Darkrai that followed Iris from Unova?”

“Hired,” I clarified. “Darkrai is a valued research assistant, though I'm not keen on using any Pokéball on him.”

“Well, it might a refreshing addition to your current state of morbidity,” Augustine joked, before suddenly his tone turned serious. “Either way... be careful. I have no idea what Silph Co or the great companies might do, but you're going to be upsetting a lot of people, scientists and companies alike.”

“Politics,” I simply replied, unsure of how to proceed at this cavalier admission of concern.

“Yeah, well,” Augustine murmured. “Chérie, be good, keep your head down, and try to keep living. Dragging your cold and unmoving body out of the Lost Hotel with a Lampent to light the way is something to do only once in a lifetime. Erm... au revoir?”

“Au revoir, Augustine.” I hung up, a certain unease echoing about my heart. What was he talking about? Technological determinism was an erroneous assumption perpetuated by the influx of new technology, resulting in the decoupling of technology from political accountability and the triumph of technological rationality. If anything, those companies should be thanking me for exposing that reasonable conclusion.

Are you alright? Altair questioned.

I rubbed my eyes. “I'll be fine. How are you?”

I have sent the trio out with the boy, therefore I am not continually worried for your safety. I believe that Liz likes the boy, and perhaps we should leave them to their way.

“We'll need another medic,” I commented, already aware of that problem. “A Shiny Stone, too. A parting gift, like Capo.”

You are aware that the Honchkrow did not leave out of choice, but of obligation.

“Oh, right, you liked him,” I teased.

My Lucario smiled, as much as a canine-based face could. Shall we pick up our wayward comrades, then?

I changed my clothes to the kilted pleat skirt and blouse top of urban grey, and then set out with Altair. We found our comrades within the town square, and I nearly laughed when I saw Darkrai's front drenched in sticky ice cream before I wiped him down.

“What happened?” I asked the equally sticky Donar.

Donar scowled at Jelly, accepting the wipe I handed him to get the sticky sweet liquid off of his hands. “Brine.”
“You're going to ruin your appetite,” I sighed once the Dark-type Pokémon, Donar, Noël and the rest of the Pokémon were clean.

_Bisque?_

I shook my head. “Cream of pumpkin. Lighter on your stomach, and delicious even though it's not native. Today, my dear, we are going to discover the carbohydrate-heavy speciality of Cyllage City's _pain perdu._”

He liked it, and I smiled, and laughed, and made plans that involved leaving behind Noël Duval as Donar and I would set out to Geosenge Town. It would almost be worth all of the pain to freeze the moment in amber, a reminder crystallised in a life. Life is beautiful... why? There is my answer.

Chapter End Notes

Previously I called Wikstrom **Baron de Rais**, and later he addressed himself as **Duke Wikstrom**. This is not a confusion.

Also, the d'Arc in this story is not a reference to an actual place called Arc, but rather _l'arc-en-ciel_ or the rainbow.

However, the de Rais surname is a reflection of the real world; in my head-canon, Wikstrom descended from a guy famous for indiscriminate murder and blasphemy after his leader perished due to a perceived betrayal by the very people she protected. Gilles de Rais was a forerunner as one of the Kalos Elite Four of sorts. He turned bad.

Suffice it to say that till today, the Maison de Rais is clinging barely because its main scion Wikstrom is a respected Elite Four, and because after Lysandre and the fall of one noble house descended straight from royalty, so the Maison de Rais is down one rival.

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
“You've a very nice temperament,” I agreed. “You're right, though. Homosexuality in Pokémon isn't quite documented, mainly due to the efforts of the conservative mindsets and religions that seem based around the different regions.”

The Hawlucha somersaulted, avoiding my Fletchinder's flame attacks to head towards the Eevee. Maybe it's- “We're not enemies!” I cried out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Day 24: The history of Route 10 could be comparable of the Lavender Town Radio Tower, except that no other place in the world has a history of being a mass grave for over three millennia.*

*(delete) I found their graves.*

The hardest part of the journey up to now, I realised, was leaving Noël. Having to leave the blond behind in Cyllage, trekking across the bridge of the Pont Brière towards Kalos Route 10, Menhir Trail.

“Wait!” I turned back, before skipping to the side to avoid being bowled over by the speeding bicycle. My limbs flailed as I fell. Unlike me, Dr du Bois merely sidestepped Noël's bicycle to watch the Kalosian Ice-specialist bowl into the bushes. She held some string in her hand she was fixing.

“Noël?” I gaped. “What are you doing?”

The Trainer finally surfaced with a huge gasp. “Eevee!”

“Huh?” I echoed.

“Oh,” Dr du Bois sounded bored. “Donar, Eevee are usually protected Pokémon within a safari and owned by Trainers, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” I nodded. “Eevees are rare.”

“Menhir Trail is the only place with a known habitat of wild Eevee,” Dr du Bois flatly revealed.

“What?” I sat up quickly. “How the hell?”

“Not only that, but Kalos is also in possession of a Moss Rock and an Ice Rock,” she continued. “It's quite a subject for Eevee specialists like Sophie back at the Sycamore Laboratory.”

“Précisément!” Noël exclaimed. He was actually shuddering at the thought. “I completely forgot!”

“So I suppose you're out to find a Glaceon?” she asked. “Good luck. We'll be on our way.”

“Erm... Doctor, I think we might as well travel with him,” I offered. “I mean... where is the Ice

“So, this might help you in your research, right?!” I offered.

“How?” she looked dubious.

“I mean... how much more research do you need?” I retorted. “I decide how the trip goes, right?”

“... of course.” She had a mysterious smile as she stated it, as if I had given her some new data I had not known.

“Noël!” I called as he brought Sapin out. “Want to travel with us until you reach Dendemille Town?”

“Huh?” Noël looked up from where he was about to walk into the tall grass. “What?”

“Erm... if you want...” I gulped. “Just... well, Dr du Bois can be rather intimidating, but-”

“Might as well...” Noël looked dubious. “Is she cooking?”

“Great!” I nodded. “Today is...” I looked to her. Dr du Bois had some sort of hostile expression while she fixed the string in her hand.

“Erm...”

She bent down to pick up a rock, hefting it in her hand. She then dropped it into a small cradle attached to the string, and then she looped the string, the cradle at the opposite end. I belatedly realised that the string was woollen in texture; not a string. A sling.

The string snapped out in a fashion designed to propel stuff, and I nearly bent my head to follow the arc of a rock, were it not because she then produced a stone in the other hand, the hand not holding the sling.

“I picked up beef yesterday,” she monotonously answered, dropping it into the leather cradle. “We'll have chilli.”

I swallowed once she turned to continue walking, turning around to see Noël looking down, face-to-face with the broken corpse of a Beedrill. Its head had been smashed in. A rock lay by its side, a sort of clear liquid that also flowed from the head staining the greyish brown.

Sapin made a sound like the shifting of pine, horrified.

“That was... uncalled for,” Noël whispered. “She killed... she killed here.”

“Here?” I echoed.

“Menhir Trail...” Noël swallowed. “Menhir Trail is the largest known Pokémon graveyard. Pokémon murder... to kill a Pokémon here- to kill a Pokémon at all...”

We caught up to around a large tree, where Dr du Bois rested. She looked reflective, almost dreaming as she sat between and before Darkrai and Altair. Darkrai and Altair held a book between them; it looked like Darkrai was progressing to letters.
“What did you do?” Noël hissed.

“That Beedrill was going to attack you,” Dr du Bois replied. “I had thought that you would be grateful to have your miserable life extended.”

“I appreciate the thought, but you just killed a Pokémon,” Noël sharply replied.

“It wasn't a very nice Pokémon.”

“It was a Pokémon!” Noël protested.

“So it deserved to live after attacking?” Dr du Bois turned her head to look at him with slanted eyes. “You would forgive a Pokémon that sees nothing wrong with killing you if needed?”

“You could have used another method... you could have warned me!” Noël yelled.

“It would have been too late.” Dr du Bois replied. “Your issue is that I have just taken a Pokémon's life, in exchange for your own. I remain justified in the use of violence to terminate a life in the defence of others. If I receive your recriminations, they are of course unjustified, because I have employed them to save you. Now if you don't mind, I would rather rest in peace.”

“Arceus end you,” Noël growled. “When the Rangers come for you, I will testify.”

“The end result is self-defence,” she pointed out. “I will walk free, and you will be an ungrateful brat.”

Noël bristled, before walking away. Frowning, I faced Dr du Bois. “You didn't need to do that.”

“Are you going to share in his opinion as well?”

“Well...” I hedged. “I... doctor, I think throwing a warning would have been a better option-”

“And watch as the Beedrill stung him out of shock, knowing that my hands were clean at least?” she asked.

The razor's edge behind that dark answer made me shut up. For an expressionless almost-robot, Dr du Bois was remarkably expressive.

“No one's life is worth the sake of my moral high ground,” Dr du Bois continued. “He should be burying the body right now. If you hurry, perhaps an impromptu service could be arranged.”

I hovered around, and yet I hated her, this being of coldness and logic and facts and absurd acceptance of recriminations with guilt and without turning a hair. I left, and it made no difference to her anyway. Perhaps it didn't, since she was used to it. Maybe it shouldn't be odd, that she would resort to killing Pokémon.

“Donar.”

I turned back, only to see that Crystal had been called out of her Pokéball, and then the Chandelure had her leash attached and Dr du Bois was handing the leather loop to me.

“The origin of candlelit vigils come from the gathering of Litwick along the sides of graveyards in Unova,” Dr du Bois offered. “The Litwick line often acted as psycho-pomp figures into the Distortion World, or so it was believed. A Chandelure makes for an able master of ceremonies.”

I warily nodded to the bobbing Chandelure, accepting the leash with bad grace before the Ghost/Fire
Pokémon led me towards the clump of grass I had last saw Noël approach. “What's with her...? Do you know?”

The Chandelure shook her glass head, making a wobbly sound. Behind me, I thought that a few shadows moved, but they must have been my imagination. Either way, I found Noël a ways away, by a large upright stone. The Beedrill corpse was laid there, by the side, but Noël was cradling a brown bundle in his arms, Sapin by his side.

“Shit!” Noël swore, one hand rifling through his bag. “Antidotes!”

“What?” I knelt down, watching the Eevee curled up there.

“I found him by the stone,” Noël mumbled. “Guess the Beedrill had more than one victim... anyway, Donar, do you have an Antidote?”

“Sure...”

I handed it over, watching Noël lay the Eevee out and spray the Antidote on the sting in its flank. Both of us flinched as the Antidote had no visible effect.

“What do we do?” Noël muttered, almost to himself. “The Cyllage Pokémon Centre is too far, and the Geosenge Centre as well... at this rate, this little one will die...”

Crystal made another noise, tugging on her leash.

“Huh...?” I looked from the Chandelure to the Eevee. “Poison... maybe Dr du Bois has stronger Antidotes. She does carry around a veritable apothecary...”

Noël didn’t look too happy, but sounded resigned as he carried the Pokémon, and we followed Crystal towards the tree. Dr du Bois, as expected, was setting up camp already, dropping the bivouac tarp as we approached.

“Crisis?” she acidly murmured.

“The Beedrill got one,” Noël opened his arms to show the writhing brown-furred form.

Dr du Bois reached inside her bag for a white tarp, laid out on the sheet. “Lay it out. Altair, get here. Liz, I'll need help.”

The Lucario sighed, before nodding to Darkrai and then approaching us as the Floette appeared.

“Idiots, can’t you even pull out a Poison Barb?” Dr du Bois snarled halfway, dropping the small barb. “Can’t be helped. Flash Cannon, low setting.”

Altair manipulated the light, focusing onto the wound with a beam the size of a penlight to cut into flesh.


The Floette spun, a strange bouquet of smell that seemed to relax the Pokémon. The Eevee’s breathing rate evened out, and we heaved a sigh of relief.

“Treatment complete,” Dr du Bois murmured, already reaching for a cloth. “Altair, we’ll need some of the Pecha Berries.”
The Lucario made a wuff, but reached inside the bag for the delicate pink Berry, which Dr du Bois immediately crushed and then wrapped the cloth around the pulp before dropping it onto the Chandelure's head-flame. “Crystal, cook this poultice. We need to prevent inflammation.”

I watched the entire display of medical efficiency carried out, impressed despite myself. A woman who could not only heal, but also kill, was a dichotomy.

“Are you awake?” Dr du Bois observed as the Eevee began to stir. “You were stung by a Beedrill. That boy brought you to me for treatment. I have sterilised and removed the poison, and now we are going to use a Pecha Berry poultice to prevent inflammation. This will sting.”

So saying, she dropped the lightly steamed compress onto the Eevee, who wailed slightly but otherwise made no response. The liquid coursed over her hands, hot and steaming, but she made no response other than to check.

“A bit of rest, and we're done,” Dr du Bois nodded, standing up. “Noël Duval. You will wash that cloth and return it to me when it is clean. Now, before I charge you for medical treatment, leave me be.”

“Doctor, that was amazing!” I blurted, stunned. “How did you... that was amazing! You just did what we'd need to go to a Pokémon Centre for!”

“I did do what a Pokémon Centre usually does,” she snapped. “Cleaning the wound, sterilisation, healing and then after-care. Just because there isn't a funny little bell to signal it when I dismiss a patient doesn't mean that a single individual is any less capable. Now, if you don't mind.”

Having packed up her medicines now, she turned to face the tree once more, almost in contemplation before continuing with the setting up of camp.

“What's with her—”

“We should let the Eevee rest,” I interrupted Noël. Liz perched on my shoulder then, smiling in cheer as we laid the Eevee down. “That's a very handy skill.”

“Well, she could be...” Noël grumbled, but then relented. Noël and Sapin waited next to the Eevee for a brief moment, deliberating on their next move before deciding that we could do with some training. That was, of course, the time when I got attacked.

I had no idea how it happened; one moment I was sitting, and the next moment something was flying at me with the force of a train crash.

What attacked was a small, bipedal, bird-like Pokémon. It has red, cape-like wings connected to its tail with green undersides, and small hands ending in eagles' claws. Red chest feathers, a white abdominal area and legs with small yellow feet gave it a colourful appearance. Its green, mask-like face with an orange stripe down the middle and orange rings around its eyes ending in a small, red beak growled in a high-pitched cry, much like the rooster it resembled. E yes with black sclera and large yellow irises echoing.

“Aerial Ace!” Noël shouted in recognition. “It's a Hawlucha!”

“Huh?” I blinked from my position on the ground, I pulled my PokéDex. Hawlucha, the Wrestling Pokémon. With its wings, it controls its position in the air. It likes to attack from above, a manoeuvre that is difficult to defend against.

“Roll!” Noël's next call made me move, in time to avoid the Hawlucha about to stomp me. “Sapin,
“use Grass Knot!”

The Hawlucha floated above the skies, skipping over the ropes of grass.

“Flo!” Liz cried in panic.

“I'm fine,” I assured the little Pokémon, pulling out a Pokéball and flinging it out to release Fletchinder. “Fletchinder, Ember!”

The Hawlucha somersaulted, avoiding my Fletchinder's flame attacks to head towards the Eevee. Maybe it's- “We're not enemies!” I cried out.

The Hawlucha cried out, before it skidded, leaping up to stomp down on Fletchinder's back for a higher apex to its leap, feet pointed down. It was going to stomp on me, and I rolled as I just managed, still placing myself close to the Eevee. “We're not enemies!”

“Lucha!”

He's right, you know. Altair was approaching us, a bucket in hand. Do you know the nearest water spot, by the way?

I paled, remembering the unfortunate Vivillon and Flash Cannon. “Get away!”

Is that how you thank someone about to save your life? Altair asked, not facing me. I am informing the Hawlucha about the situation.

True to form, the Hawlucha paused, listening. Finally, it hung its head in acknowledgement.

It's alright, Altair offered an arm. Misunderstandings happen. Come now, we should inform the local guardians that the Beedrill has been disposed.

“Local guardians?” I echoed.

“The ruins of this trail is the largest and oldest Pokémon mass grave,” Behind Altair, Dr du Bois's voice dispassionately answered. “The Kalos region's graveyard of Pokémon, in a sense. Patrolling this area are the Sigilyph and Golett, brought from Unova for the sole purpose of protecting the graveyard. They have performed their commission ever since that day. How else did you think that the Eevee can proliferate here, in comparison to the rest of the world?”

She then turned to Noël. “I'm insulted in you. Hawlucha is a part Flying-type Pokémon, one Ice Shard from your Snover would have been enough. Now put that Snover back before the entire Trail is covered in snow. We're going to start.”

True enough, it was slightly nippy when we got back to camp, where another sight greeted us; Dr du Bois had pressed a Golett into service alongside Darkrai. The two of them were playing ball with a pack of Emolga. Very nervous Emolga, but still playing Emolga. We have the spectre of vengeance and nightmares Darkrai playing with cute little Emolga...

“Well...” Slightly amused, I called out all of my Pokémon too. “Let's play!”

How very unusual.

“Legendary Pokémon don't mate?” I asked. One of the local Golett had stumbled upon my little camp, and I pressed it into service almost immediately with a kind word so that Altair could be kept off duty. It was currently engaged in a game of toss-the-Light-Ball with Liz, a swarm of Emolga,
Donar and Noël and their Pokémon sans Scylla. Altair and the Hawlucha sat by the injured Eevee, ostensibly keeping guard but really talking, Altair taking the more active role as the one with actual telepathy.

*Even so, we tend to be attracted to those of the opposite... physical temperament.* Darkrai shrugged. *I would imagine that any of myself with my exact same temperament would be rather boring as a life companion.*

“You’ve a very nice temperament,” I agreed. “You’re right, though. Homosexuality in Pokémon isn’t quite documented, mainly due to the efforts of the conservative mindsets and religions that seem based around the different regions. Since the institution of the Kalosian Civil Code of the XVIII Century decriminalised homosexuality, though, such opinions tend to be freer in Kalos, and it reflects in its Pokémon... somewhat.”

*I once knew a Togekiss who fell for a Breloom,* Darkrai reflected. *They were female. The Breloom was stoned with her Trainer and the Togekiss sold to be mated.* He paused, as if wondering if that anecdote should have come with more feeling. *It was a sad fate.*

“You might be referring to the Battle Frontier case of the Suzuki lynching,” I commented. “The Togekiss later killed all of the judges of that case on orders from its Trainer and the two of them died. It became a landmark case that rose in Sinnoh to highlight the plight of LGBT individuals and thus amended the Sinnoh Civil Code instituted years later.”

*It is very sad, humanity,* Darkrai reflected. *Why is it that the laws are different here?*

“It’s actually more of regional differences rather than universal humanitarian negativism.” I explained. “Erm... in Sinnoh, did you leave Newmoon Island long enough to be aware of the followers of Arceus?”

*My greatest pursuers. Men in white who persist in carrying torches and chasing me, often with prayers to Cresselia to follow.* His voice sounded wry.

“Well, in philosophy, there is a term, cultural hegemony,” I began. “Erm, firstly, what do you understand about human stories?”

*To humans around Newmoon Island, it appears that they regard Arceus as Creator of Dialga and Palkia. Giratina and the likes of me are the darkness that Arceus and his followers seek to eliminate. That is a ludicrous sentiment, of course.*

“Precisely,” I nodded. “A ludicrous sentiment. Arceus takes residence in the Hall of Origin, and popular thought holds it that the Hall is the site of creation. That is a hegemony, a simple thought that all Pokémon were created by Arceus, despite the existence of the fossil record that proves otherwise. So why do these thoughts persist? Humans and Pokémon are not wilfully denying the truth, are they?”

*No, they are not.*

“So who benefits from the propagation of the idea as Arceus being the creator?” I asked. “Arceus is worshipped, and so is Dialga and Palkia, presumably because of their power. The priests of Arceus and their followers then condemn the worship of Giratina, decrying it as counter to the order of nature or some such, and gradually this thought evolves. Without opposition from Giratina and such, the ones who hold power and such are the ones who support the new orthodoxy, the ones who control Infernape and Lucario. In human anthropological thought, the spread of the worship of Arceus or elements of such became displaced during the Orange Wars between Kanto and Sinnoh,
and from there Johto also adopted such orthodoxy, but replacing Arceus with Mew. We can therefore class the belief in Arceus as a monotheistic creator as cultural hegemony, a unification of belief systems, roughly speaking.”

*I understand. So what is derived from this? Why would anyone villainise us?*

This is painful, I thought. How do I explain to a Pokémon that the reason for his ostracism might not be as logical as he thought? “When humans gain power... they tend to eliminate their rivals. Dark-type and Ghost-type Pokémon are the counterparts of Normal-type and Fighting-type Pokémon. It's only a theory, and I don't know a lot about Sinnoh belief systems compared to Kalosian beliefs, or Pokémon beliefs – or even if Pokémon have a religion, but... there could be a political basis. Ostracism based on a simple fear of the unreal is never a good thing, Darkrai.”

Darkrai was ponderously silent for a brief moment, before he nodded. *I understand. Not all humans are the same. It is unfair to compare them and you.*

Delphi had always been offended at such views, for reasons I had never known. Yet Darkrai's calm acceptance did not give me relief. “I hope... I hope you comprehend.”

*The fighter is an able teacher, and you are the first human to have accepted me unconditionally, without expectations hidden from sight.*

Unova and Kalos never had the same reverence for legendary Pokémon, because of different social conditions and different lines of belief. There were only different artificial social constructs in place, that the preconceived notions blinded us from. Pokémon, who had no reason or language to lie from each other, would not understand it.

Except, maybe, Psychic-type Pokémon. The Alakazam was perhaps the most choleric of intelligent Pokémon, after all.

With the smell of cooking rice and chicken stew floating to us at the moment, Darkrai did not seem to have sensed anything untoward, rather eagerly taking to chatting with the Golett and Emolga about things. From their eager sentiments and reaching for the small pile of Berries I had left by the side, I supposed that they were discussing foods and hummus.

“Can I have an Oran Berry?” I turned around to regard Noël looking to the pile.

“For the Eevee,” he clarified, scowling. “He needs food.”

“That won't make a difference,” I answered. “Take the Sitrus Berry, it's more efficacious.”

“Sitrus Berries are expensive.”

“I got them for free from the old man at the Camphrier Berry Gardens.”

“They give Berries for free?”

“I agreed to lease out his gardens when I was still a Trainer,” I answered. “Perhaps it's a habit, but the old man did me a good turn, and an investment in one of the Kalos region’s rarer commodities was a good investment. My lease expires next year, when his grand-daughter becomes old enough to inherit the Gardens.”

“Hmm,” Noël took the yellow Berry. “So you're a businesswoman, a nurse and a humanities professor? How does that work?”
“I lease the land out, let the family work on it and gain proceeds in exchange for holding the land in my name and for providing the materials, most of the details which I leave to a firm of lawyers,” I answered. “To answer, I actually had a full medical license for strong pharmaceuticals, but I let that lapse when I turned to the humanities.”

“Hmm...” Noël turned his head around, regarding the rocks that dotted Menhir Trail. “There was a song about this place, right?”

“L’auberge au crépuscule,” I agreed. “The soundtrack for the film « La fleur sans lendemain ». Part of the scene was filmed here, in Geosenge, before the male lead left the female lead played by Diantha to set off in war. It won the Smeargle Award for Best Picture, I heard.”

“There was another film planned after that one, set in Geosenge too,” Noël commented. “Course, the actual site was destroyed following the Team Flare battle, but... what was that film again?”

“« Luminosité Éternelle »,” I answered. “The song... how does it go? Le jour finissait/ dans un décor de pourpre et d'or/ sur la vieille auberge où tendrement/ L'amour nous berçait/ grisant nos cœurs fous de bonheur/ je crus en tes serments...”

Noël Duval joined in. Of course he did:

“L'auberge au crépuscule,
Où je reviens toujours,
Lorsque l'oiseau module,
Un dernier chant d'amour.

Estompant l'ombre rose,
Caché sous l'humble toit,
Où mille tendres choses,
Me rapprochent de toi.”

I was recalling more words, more of the melody, of that haunting song that was ignored when the film catapulted Diantha into stardom:

“Et tristement je pense,
À mon bonheur enfui,
Pourquoi sans ta présence,
Ai-je peur de la nuit?

L'auberge au crépuscule,
N'attend plus ton retour,
Lorsque l'oiseau module,
Un dernier chant d'amour.”

I drew a breath to begin the next verse, but Noël Duval recalled faster:

“Hélas je sais bien,
que chaque amour se fane un jour,
Tout comme une fleur sans lendemain.
Plus fort que ce lien,
Le souvenir n'a pu mourir,
Et me rappelle en vain.

L'auberge au crépuscule,
Où je reviens toujours,
Lorsque l'oiseau module,
Un dernier chant d'amour.

Estompant l'ombre rose,
Caché sous l'humble toit,
Où mille tendres choses,
Me rapprochent de toi.

Et tristement je pense,
À mon bonheur enfui,
Pourquoi sans ta présence,
Ai-je peur de la nuit?

L'auberge au crépuscule,
N'attend plus ton retour,
Lorsque l'oiseau module,
Un dernier chant d'amour.”

I ended the song with a drawl rather than a soprano, instead considering why did Noël Duval choose to mention a rather obscure song, despite its nomination for the Pokécademy Awards and winning the Pansear Award. “What did you need?”

The infuriating Trainer had the gall to cross his arms. “I just needed to see what you're really like. Why you're looking at that tree constantly, why you're setting up at an old camp-site. Even though I've known you guys only for awhile, I get the feeling that there's something very wrong. And that song, it's a funerary, tragic song. I think you buried someone here.”

“I see.” He was more perceptive than I thought.

“I understand if you need to mourn,” Noël spoke at last. “But please don't take it out on the kid. He still has a future, let's not let ourselves interfere in that.”

I just found myself confused as Noël Duval left me to join his Pokémon and the Emolga swarm in their game. A society that encouraged their minors to search for danger was a very odd society indeed. For a veteran Trainer to class Donar's future as unrelated... the illusion of agency is a fascinating study.

“The Eevee's waking up!” Donar's voice broke me out from my reverie as I looked towards my latest patient. The Eevee stood on wobbly legs, but smiled shyly up from its new position in Noël's arms, Donar having placed him there. Altair and the Hawlucha were nowhere to be seen.

Darkrai floated towards me. The fighters are currently... occupied. Does this happen often?

“Altair will return come the dawn,” I told him. “Let me introduce you to this dessert called chocolate trifle. While I have no idea how you should react to the theobremine, it seems that you should not neglect a food such as chocolate. At the worst, I shall have Liz on standby. Shall we?”

You allow... that?

“I acknowledge that the bodily needs of my partner Lucario requires outside assistance,” I answered, “even though certain couplings are permitted under special recognition by the Millennium Anthro-Pokémon Relations Convention, because of the lack of compatible parts and a lack of sexual attraction on his part. As for your reluctance, Darkrai, I understand that the Sinnoh region is a
conservative, Arceus-fearing place that recognises only one norm to the exclusion of many, yet surely you must know that male Pokémon do have sex with each other, sometimes across seemingly incompatible species.”

…it's alright. It's all fine, really. It seems... rather lonely.

“...his mate died,” I answered. “He got along with a Murkrow we met in Mélancolie Path. I gave the Murkrow a Dusk Stone after a bout of training. I was hoping... that he could find some closure.”

It seems as though he has, Darkrai told me, floating some ways around the trifle container I had. And for whatever my misgivings shall be, this... is divine.

“...you ate the entire bowl?!”

… I found a companion Golett; further arrangements to be made the moment Altair returned from his impromptu sojourn. Noël Duval got the Eevee I treated, to be evolved as a Glaceon at the earliest opportunity. He named it Jacques. For the frost, he said.

Donar and his Pokémon get along well. The Fletchinder is growing. I believe that Altair could persuade the Hawlucha to tutor Fletchinder. I shall have to suggest it to Donar.

...(cancel the last bit. I am not to interfere.)

(Nevertheless, if I were to hint at it...)

Chapter End Notes

France uses civil law, which Japan also uses to some degree. America uses common law – which is where precedent and 'stare decisis' comes in. Therefore Unova law is different from law in the other five regions, in that there is no other statute than federal law/provincial law/city law, etc. This is trivial but might be explored later.

The song lyrics are from 'L’auberge au crépuscule' by Rina Ketty. It means 'The Inn at Dusk' and the story is something about romance, meeting and parting come dusk.

The two films are fictional: the first is translated as 'The Flower Without Tomorrow' and the second as 'Eternal Light'. I find it odd that, while Diantha is stated to be an actress, that none of her films save for that one role was ever highlighted in the main storyline. So, I created a background for her, much like Wikstrom.
XVII: Imaginer - To Imagine

Chapter Summary

“It's a nice story,” I commented. “About the evils of evolution.”

Personally, I felt conflicted. An Absol was not the cause of bad luck, but rather its herald. The PokéDex also listed its habitats as the cliffs of the Muraille Coast. So... why was it around?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 25: The mysterious Hawlucha that appeared in our way has been pulled into active service. Currently, Fletchinder is learning Aerial Ace from it. This shall be good. Despite so, Donar has not neglected Bagon; it has evolved into a Shelgon after setting one Emolga swarm on fire. I am running out of Rawst Berries. (cancel)

We came across the principal filming of « L'histoire en commençant ». Although Kalos does have a film industry, the cast we came across was from Unova...

Despite that Route 10 was the only area in which wild Eevee could be found, I felt that anyone with five evolutions of Eevee needed to visit a therapist immediately. Apparently, Noël was of the same mind, as was Donar.

“What the hell?” Donar concurred in his exclamation, eyeing the Flareon, Vaporeon, Jolteon and Umbreon milling about with a single Eevee.

I spotted some equipment, and my doubts evaporated nearly immediately. “Filming,” I pointed to the camp at the far end of the row of rocks on either side of the Trail, too much equipment left around to be proven as anything but outdoor filming. “If I am right... this series of movies is based on a Johto manga, Evolution Magica.”

“Oh, yeah, the weird one,” Donar nodded, surprisingly in comprehension. “I haven't read it myself, but it sounds... girly.”

“Really?” Noël Duval commented. “I don't read manga from the Indigo Continent myself, but how is it?”

“It's a nice story,” I commented. “About the evils of evolution.”

“Eh?” Donar blinked as I hefted my backpack. Altair and his new catamite assisted me in support, and as we approached the set, which composed of a green screen, a Jolteon and an Flareon were squabbling as a Vaporeon, an Umbreon and an Eevee eyed them, and the director sighed in the face of the oncoming storm.

“Erm... what is the storyline?” Noël asked, eyeing the multiple Eeveelutions, especially as an Umbreon began to snap at everyone save the Eevee with uncannily large teeth.
"No!!" the director was yelling. "What d'you mean, we don't have the stunt Pokémon for Meringue?!!"

"Oh, that would be hard," I commented. "Meringue especially demands a Slurpuff to play the part."

"And we don't have the other stunt Pokémon? We have the Rose scene and the K9 scene due today!" the director huffed. "Try to get me a Slurpuff, at least!"

An on-site assistant approached. "We're sorry, this area has being cordoned off- a Lucario!"

I blinked, before I realised that the slim boy was pointing to Altair. From what the director just said...

"Director, we have a Lucario!" the boy yelled.

A beret floated before my eyes, before I finally thought to lock eyes with a tired-looking man with silvered hair. "It's a Trainer's Lucario, we can't press-gang it, Hopkins!" the man shouted before turning to me. "Sorry, I'm-"

"Lestrade!" Donar shouted. "Erm, I- I'm sorry, I... I'm a big fan!"

"Erm, thank you..."

"Especially of the detective series!" Donar turned bright red the moment he finished. "The snake and the Stoutland."

"I think you mean the Serperior Holmes series," I corrected. I was a fan of that as well, something I forbore to mention.

"Oh yeah, that!" Donar eagerly nodded, looking around. "Is Holmes here?"

Director Lestrade put his face into his hands at my correction. "Again," he moaned. "Now he's going to taunt me for the rest of my life."

"He?" Donar muttered as something slithered up behind Lestrade. Orange eyes narrowed as the Serperior hissed, almost cackling in delight before it got tackled from behind by a scowling Stoutland.

"Thank you, Watson," Lestrade mumbled. "Not that it'll help any."

"This is the filming for « L'histoire en commençant », yes?" I asked.

"So that's the famous detecting Serperior Holmes," Donar mumbled in admiration.

"Do it, you said," Lestrade spoke, not to me but to Holmes, who simply sniffed. "Well, you didn't say as much as refuse to act until I looked at the script, and even Watson has limits, Holmes."

It was amazing, how the Serperior got around the difficulty of not having arms or legs with simply a glare, a scowl, and much hissing that sounded like rustling leaves while gesticulating with its tail towards one of the two Eevees, then towards the Jolteon, the other Eevee, and then at Umbreon before making a thump with its body and then hissing to the assistant, Hopkins.

"Y- yes!" Hopkins produced the storyboard. "Erm, director... he's saying that you're shooting it too straightforward, I think."

The Serperior actually groaned, and I think its eyes would have rolled and then taken a bite if Watson had not subtly growled before motioning with its ears.
Holmes is trying to express, in rather offending speech, how the order for the scenes are mixed up. Altair spoke telepathically. With rather more detail and less insults, Watson indicates that it is best to do the Rose scene first, before placing himself as the K9 monster in the respective scene.

“We can't,” Lestrade sighed, barely pausing to comment on Altair's communication. “They specifically mentioned a Lucario, and no offence to you, Watson, because even though you're the only one Holmes likes, our selection's limited to single-stage Pokémon.”

“Single-stage?” Donar asked.

“Pokémon with one evolution to reach full evolution,” Noël clarified. “That includes the Eevee line, I guess. Pokémon like my Sapin has Snover and Abomasnow, so that's a single evolutionary stage between them. But, Pokémon like Stoutland have to start from Lillipup, then to Herdier and then to Stoutland, which gives them two evolutionary stages.”

“I see,” Donar considered the miserable Eeveelutions, huddled around the only unevolved member of their kind. “Dr du Bois... why don't you help them?”

“Do you understand the local filming regulations?” I archly enquired. “If we do this, Altair's image would remain forever part of this movie footage. It would haunt him everywhere. I also doubt that Altair is suited for the part.”

“What is the plot, anyway?” Donar asked.

“The messenger of X, a Sylveon named K, encounters two Eevees, E and S,” I recalled. “The messengers offer a contract in which an unevolved Pokémon can have any wish granted, in exchange for becoming an Évolué Pokémon tasked with fighting against Monsters. Meanwhile, an Umbreon named H tries to stop E from becoming a Évolué Pokémon at all costs.”

I could see Donar's expression morph into an expression of it sounds like an action film. My lips twitched. “Luckily, Altair and I are huge fans of the manga series.”

“Really?!” Donar yelled. “I mean, even the professor reads it...”

“Prepare a temporary contract and get makeup and costume on standby,” Lestrade nodded. “Er, merci beaucoup!”

“Première tickets would be good enough,” I nodded to Altair, and caught Holmes eyeing me with narrowed eyes. With a serpentine smirk, Holmes fairly nuzzled to Watson before both Pokémon followed Lestrade, though who owned whom was yet to be determined by any method other than technicalities. The Pokémon certainly seemed more independent than attached to their Trainer.

We followed the man to a trailer-car, where the director got a contract of temporary employment and I made ready the relevant documents to be e-mailed to the Sycamore Laboratory via Holo Caster.

“So... Holmes and Watson are your Pokémon, Mr Lestrade?” Donar asked as I was reading through the contract back in the trailer camp, Altair having been ambushed to the costume department with all the Eevees and the Holmes-Watson pair. “And all those Eevees?”

“Holmes and Watson are, but they're represented by Adler Media Management in public,” Lestrade sighed. “Holmes was my starter, and on hindsight the Tepig would've been a better choice. At least Watson keeps him sane, and keeps me from going grey. As for the Eeveelutions, most of them are contracted from the BW Agency based in Virbank.”

“Contracted?” Donar echoed, looking down at Bagon who was tottering beside him. “And their
“Call it... renting, I suppose, except that these Pokémon had the choice of participation,” I explained, reading through before signing to ensure everything was accurate. “Remember the Third Convention? Since Virbank City is also a hotbed for the Unova film industry, the demand for Pokémon labour and actors has increased much, allowing for the set-up of such specialised talent agencies like the BW Agency to facilitate sourcing for talent. Here.”

“Thank you very much!” Lestrade nodded eagerly, running his fingers through a greying scalp.

“Can we see how you're going to make this film?” Donar asked in an excited manner, facing Lestrade squarely.

“Sure, just don't make any noise,” Lestrade sauntered out to the set, to be confronted with the Serperior Holmes chatting with all the present Eeveelutions – with one Eevee – and the Stoutland named Watson on standby. I picked up Altair's Hawlucha, quite to commensurate with the Wrestling Pokémon. We sat by the sidelines, with a good view of the set.

“Ladies, ladies,” Lestrade knelt down to be faced with several pairs of eyes. “We're going to be shooting the K9 scene, so Thunders, you'll be with Eve. It's the scene after M paralyses H but before K9 makes its appearance, so M, you'll be up. Eve and you will be running towards the Monster's lair—” he demonstrated with his hands “—where Showers is waiting. Thunders, then you'll transform and fight against the stunt Lucario, following by which the reveal would happen. Chandelle, you'll be off-screen for the moment, sorry.”

The Flareon immediately retreated as Hopkins and a dark-skinned man rolled the camera to point it towards the area surrounded by green screens. Almost immediately, Hopkins reappeared with the Serperior, Holmes, in tow. The Serperior smirked, before it was tackled from behind by the Stoutland.

Lestrade took the clipboard and read through, before he heaved a sigh. “Fine. Then what are you waiting for? Grassy Terrain!”

I watched in great interest as the Serperior scowled, the golden markings along its body glowing faintly to scatter gold spores about. The grass underfoot shimmered slightly before the Serperior gave a sniff.

“Stations, people,” Lestrade called out. “Thunders, Eve, start dashing. It's your last scene, Thunders, right before M is killed.”

“Wait, what?” Donar echoed.

“It's in the plot,” I answered. “As E contemplates becoming a Évolué Pokémon, she learns that the life of an Évolué Pokémon is not as glamorous as she thought, and is filled with anguish, suffering and despair.”

The Umbreon appeared, growling. There would be looping added in, with human voice-actors, I presumed, but for now the body language of the Jolteon and the Umbreon had to be up to snuff. The Jolteon growled, firing a Pin Missile that the Umbreon dashed away from, but then fell to the following Thunder Wave. The Jolteon snorted, leading the Eevee away and onwards. It continued for some time with just dashing about, right before the Jolteon was ambushed.

A high-pitched cry came from the Eevee as it dashed to hide behind the Vaporeon that had suddenly appeared, right before the Monster K9 appeared. I was quite taken aback at his changed appearance;
much of its cream fur was extended, thighs slimmed, more spikes on the back of its paws, which have turned crimson. The aura-sensing appendages had been extended, the two top ones tipped in crimson. Its shoulders also possess a spike each. Black markings on its blue fur made it stand out.

I had a sudden reflection that somehow... I looked down. The manacle I wore still bore its clef du voûte, and it bore no sign of use.

Of course, my Lucario fired an Aura Sphere, that was dodged. More Pin Missiles were fired, before the Jolteon, M, it unleashed a Thunder Wave, followed by a Charge Beam and then, finally, the super-enhanced Electric-type move Thunder. The ultimate shot...

As power rippled through the air with the incredible force of true Pokémon moves that no special effect could manage, my Lucario dodged. It landed, twisting before the stunned-looking Jolteon, and finally, his fist landed. A vicious, victorious picture of curses and hate, the shadow of blue and black.

Looming up from the fallen, red-spattered form of the fallen, the cursed Lucario then began to step towards the Eevee and the Vaporeon, prompting the sudden appearance of the Sylveon by the sidelines. Of course, the Umbreon H actually took to the field, using a Quick Attack to flash about, and then with a Confuse Ray and Sand Attack, followed with a Hidden Power. The Hidden Power took the form of flames.

The Monster fell.

I sighed, despite the worried murmurs of the Hawlucha beside me. “He’s fine, don’t worry.”

“Cut!” Lestrade called. “Nice job, everyone. Thunders, M’s death scene needs work, and Eve, good job. Altair, are you alright?”

As the Jolteon got up, snorting at the fake blood on its fur, Altair gave a single, straight nod.

“Go get retouched with Thunders. Eve, Showers, Blackie, the next scene.”

The Jolteon and Altair stepped out of the screen, one accepting a good towelling from Hopkins and Altair nodding to us. Feathers rustled as the Hawlucha followed behind him. I hope the Pokémon was not so bird-brained as to try anything here...

“Why did the Umbreon save them?” Donar mumbled.

“Misunderstood hero thought of as villain,” I recalled. “Much like the Evangelie series.”

On set, the Eevee named Eve – and there was an oxymoron if there was one – was doing a good job of crying.

Quite the sad fate, I heard Darkrai comment. How does it end?

“E decides to become an Évolué Pokémon with the wish to stop Monsters before they are created, which rewrites the laws of the universe,” I remembered. “It results in E becoming nothing more than a concept, and H being the only one who remembers her in the new world that is formed. She gave Évolué Pokémon hope.”

I do not think I shall like it, Darkrai confessed. I do not like martyrs. I have seen them die.

I patted the terrifying Pokémon of nightmares on his soft head. “Chacun à son goût, Darkrai. Each to his own taste.”
Of course, after Altair had cleaned up and we entered Geosenge, the Hawlucha left, returning to the silent graveyard as we entered the town in its heart. I think Altair was sad, to be here where love had begun and ended.

The town had had a long history dating from the ancien régime and followed by successive dynasties of old Kalosian monarchy. Of course, it was well-known for the broken headquarters of Team Flare at its outskirts now, but before, the cromlêh of Geosenge had marked as the Kalos region's oldest tomb.

“It's completely surrounded in stones,” Donar whispered as we stepped on the main street, one that led up towards the main circus of the town and then branched off towards Miroir Way in the east.

“We just walked through the oldest known mass graveyard in the world,” I informed them, Noël and Donar. “The Kalosian name of Geosenge, Cromlac'h, forms the base word cromlêh, used to describe a megalithic altar-tomb, made of rough stone. They are distinguished from cromleich by being located within a stone circle. Of course, the original monument is gone, but its remains are still present.”

It was a hole. The bottom of the pit was barely visible, only due to the groundwater within, accumulated with rainwater. Team Flare had left its indelible mark upon the face of Kalos, despite its pursuit of beauty... did it? Either way, the site of the Kalos region's martyrdom was dead.

“They burned her here in the town square, you know,” I murmured. “The monument was already present when Geosenge was occupied by foreign invaders. Some of them decided that it made a nice place to burn the witch at the stake.”

“What?” Donar echoed.

“Jeanne d'Arc,” I nodded towards the gaping maw of the earth where the standing stones used to be, surrounded by houses. “The first Champion of Kalos, who was captured in the last battle of the Century War. She was placed in ransom. The MaisonMuguet-de-Mai was the ruling house at the time, and the king that she placed on the Jardin Throne refused to pay. She was burned here, we have documents dating from the XIII century. Soon after, the Muguet-de-Mai was overthrown by a fellow cadet branch family, the Morelle, who supported the Maison Fleur-de-Lis in their play for the Kalosian crown. The Fleur-de-Lis kings ruled, bringing Kalos to its height of power in the form of Parfum Palace, until the Kalosian Revolution, which overthrew the absolute monarchy but failed to remove the legitimate aristocracy, like the Maisonsde Rais and Duval.”

“Duval?” Donar exclaimed.

“Duval is the name of the ruling family of the Mozheim earldom,” I commented.

“You're an earl?!?” Donar exclaimed, pointing to Noël.

Noël flinched. “It's... difficult to get out of that elitist society. Trust me.”

“Well, depending on your view of that,” I commented. “It's quite well-established that most of the Kalos region's best Trainers throughout history tend to belong to one of the hundred branches under the Maison Cent-Feuilles, which is directly descended from the rulers of the AZ Empire. Even Diantha Carnet is from the Maison Òeillet, distantly related to the Fleur-de-Lis by common ancestor. Come to think of it, so is Daisy.”

“What about Daisy?” Donar argued. “Daisy was from Johto!”

“Her father, Dr Hugo du- her father can trace his lineage to the Maison Luzerne,” I commented,
stopping myself before I revealed too much.

Actually, I could trace my whole family all the way back to the grand ducal houses of Mandragora and Coque-lourde, but far be it to claim that my other identity held a solid claim to a throne long torn down. I was already trying to escape the House of d'Arc; no need to scupper my own efforts to make Daisy Linden disappear soon. Privilege of blood has no place in the world of meritocracy. At least, it should not.

Of history, I suppose that Geosenge Town offered even more knowledge in a tour around the circus – the town plaza, that is – than any single lesson. While I could hardly be arsed to recall the history of Kanto or Johto, the Kalos region's history was surprisingly bloody and interesting.

What? I'm thirteen. I'm allowed to know about people hacking at each other.

Either way, the summary of a three-hour speech by Dr du Bois – leading to many people gathering to hear a history they knew, interjecting with details – is as thus:

The original inhabitants of the Kalosian region were a mass of tribal collectives whose bones we stood on now, who actually gathered and formed a united country of sorts. From this – and the invasion of what was currently southern Kalos – arose the AZ Empire, ruled by the legendary king who supposedly built an ultimate weapon to finish off invaders. He disappeared.

The king's brother, who took over the throne when AZ disappeared somewhere, was a man who fathered a hundred children – the Versant Road trade and Camphrier Town's concentration of aristocracy was apparently because the king really got around – and the kids had kids, who got their shit together to overthrow him. Those kids were united under a guy called Premier – really the guy's name – who then formed the large dynasty called the Maison Cent-Feuilles, or House of Hundred Leaves, placing his own family on top.

Between one branch or another, the Maison Cent-Feuilles would proceed to rule Kalos for the next three millennia. Before that, though, Premier died in an epic battle – that he won – against a legendary Pokémon named as Yveltal, resulting in more epic battles and political intrigue until they got their shit together once again to kick invader ass with Jeanne d'Arc in the Century War of the XIII century, establishing the Knightly House of d'Arc which all Champions of Kalos lay claim to today. Even though Jeanne was a princess, her status apparently didn't put her up as true royalty.

“With peace under the Maison Fleur-de-Lis, the other families of the Cent-Feuilles dissipated to form a grand part of the aristocracy, binding Kalos together into our modern-day idea of the Kalos region,” Dr du Bois continued. “Efforts of the aristocracy plus a true understanding of noblesse oblige led to the Golden Age of the XV century, where Kalosian sailors apparently found the continent the present-day Unova region was – and resulting in the Unovan exchange and the presence of Unovan Pokémon in Kalos – and led to colonisation of places until Kalos itself became bankrupt as a result. Large famine and subsequent unrest led to the Kalosian Revolution. However, the Fleur-de-Lis still survived in branches because the power of the aristocracy remained intact, and subsequently Kalos itself might seem as a democracy, but true power actually lay in an aristocracy gathering itself around the Maison d'Arc.”

Surprising how I didn't care about Kanto's history, but Kalos's history had me waiting for more. Dr du Bois's lecture on a summary of Kalosian history even had the audience clapping, a familiar Serperior bouncing about and grinning.

“Thanks,” Director Lestrade was by the sidelines, clapping slowly. “You make a compelling lecture on the Kalos region. Are you a historian?”
“I guess you could call me a scholar of the humanities,” Dr du Bois offered. “The cause-effect of history places history as relevant, but a lot of history is decided by those in charge, without alternative views. What I gave was simply a brief summary of events.”

“Anyway, you sure know your stuff,” Lestrade nodded. “And you sure can tell it. The whole town was listening to you. Is Menhir Trail really a mass grave?”

“Oldest known,” she confirmed gravely. “The Pokémon there were nearly victims of Team Flare's gambit years ago, we could have had a second round of the destruction of Kalos. There's a good reason why « Chant de guerre pour l'Armée du Brin » is the Kalosian anthem.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“Song of War for the Army of the Sprig,” she translated. “We really should get you a guide book for Kalosian.”

“It's fine,” I shook my head as we left the town plaza for Hotel Marine Snow. “You're already paying for my food and lodging, it's unreasonable—”

Dr du Bois stopped in front of me, nearly causing a crash collision before I stopped myself, or Frogadier stopped me to be more accurate. I turned from her silk-clad back to be greeted with a signboard at the double doors:

Dear all,
Hotel Marine Snow is closed until further notice.
Apologies, from
The Management.

“My deposit...”

“Ah, vous devez être clients,” we turned around to be greeted with a middle-aged woman. “Je m'appelle Marine, je suis la femme du propriétaire et maître d'hôtel. Désolée, un petit hôtel comme le nôtre a besoin de tout son personnel pour le commerce les dimanche.”


“Certainement,” the woman nodded nodded. “Suivez-moi, s'il vous plaît.”

“Excusez-moi, quel est le menu à prix fixé?” Dr du Bois asked as we followed her in, Darkrai lingering once more.

“Ah, le menu peut être vu au bureau de conciergerie,” she replied. “Toutefois, le fromage Cromlac'h est très cher aujourd'hui. En fait, les Écrémeuhs ont peur de l'Absol... il est ridicule, le prix!”

“Oui, le prix de lait augmente chaque année,” Dr du Bois murmured. “Une Absol ici?”

“Ern, Dr du Bois?” I interrupted the conversation. “I don't speak Kalosian.”

“You don't have to know,” she told me, before turning back to her. “Désolée.”
"De rien," the woman smiled. "D'où vient-il?"

"Il vient de Kanto."

The wife of the hotel manager, Marine, as Dr du Bois later told me when she had left, spoke nothing but Kalosian. It reminded me of a nanny who only spoke Kantonese. She was nice, but in the end Standard won out. She died when I was ten, and with her all memory of that old dialect of the Kanto region. Somehow, listening to Dr du Bois talk to her made me recall that.

We just dropped our bags off before descending; there was a Sunday market, and I had money from winning against Trainers along Route 10. Quite a few had tried to challenge Dr du Bois, but they had ran when she pulled out Altair, and none of them won against Noël's Borealis.

The Lucario had run ahead and was waiting for us at the market, along with the Golett Dr du Bois had 'employed' in Route 10. It was contracted to take us through the Reflection Cave to Shalour City, after which it was free to return or continue. Dr du Bois had called it Durand on its contract. Durand shuffled along with Dr du Bois, leaving Altair free to walk ahead through the market. The market of Geosenge consisted of a few stalls around the giant hole of a plaza, each of them selling something unique. Around us, the cries of haggling, the smells of cheese and vegetables and fruits and some meat hung about. The market here was noticeably low on meat, I thought.

"We're going to be staying here for nothing more than forty-eight hours, and it'll take a few days to get through the Reflection Cave," Dr du Bois pondered. "Cheese, bread, eggs, maybe some alcohol... Donar, how much did we set aside for the Trangia stove?"

"We've got... one bottle left," I recalled. "And... erm, some beer Noël bought in Cyllage."

"His supplies are not our supplies," Dr du Bois corrected severely. "Either way, this time the road through the Reflection Cave is long and confusing. I will take along some meat, but be prepared to eat from a can for as long as we need to get through the cave and to Shalour City. There's no other way to get to Shalour from Geosenge."

"Got it..." I nodded. "Erm, Doctor... the Shalour Gym is a Fighting-type Gym, right?"

"Hmm, yes," she answered, looking over a selection of cheese wheels. The sheer variety of cheeses available quite terrified me, sometimes. "You have Ivysaur and Fletchinder, you should be fine."

"But..." I pondered. "It's... not about that. Erm... can I learn Kalosian?"

"The Holo Caster has an app, you could probably try PokéLangue."

"Can you teach me?"

"Let's start from here," she waved, holding up the cheese wheel. "This is cheese. C'est du fromage."

"C'est du fromage..." I repeated dutifully.

"Il a coûté deux mille poké." She prompted. "It cost two thousand Poké... it costs two thousand Poké for a wheel of Tomme cheese. Durand."

Dr du Bois paid for the cheese wheel, dumping the wrapped package into the Golett's arms. The small Pokémon whirled around, holding the cheese with both arms.

"Darkrai, I need you," Dr du Bois called.
Silently, the Pitch-Black Pokémon arose, somehow not drawing a single stare from the people of Geosenge haggling and buying and generally the bustle of Geosenge Town's weekend market continued. *Marguerite?*

“Beef or mutton? *Bœuf ou mouton?*” Dr du Bois pointed towards a butcher; the cuts of meat hanging on wire hooks on a wire rack were sort of a dead give-away. “For our next meal outdoors. Since the hotel is serving *gratin dauphinoise, tartiflette* and *kouign-amann* for dinner, we might as well take the opportunity to pick new things. And we need to get you a toothbrush, too. Too much refined foods without proper dental care and exercise is bad for Pokémon and humans alike.”

...oh. A pause. *The fighter?*

“Altair has a special brush,” Dr du Bois commented, checking out a selection of Rawst Berries. “You never see it because you're usually up late. Donar, did you know that Pokémon can eat human foods, but with some restrictions?”

“T- They can?”

“Most things, within restrictions. For example, the Lumiose Galette and the Lava Cookie of Hoenn's Lavaridge Town can be eaten by all Pokémon and humans. However, Grass-type Pokémon should refrain from highly refined sugars, and most Fairy-type Pokémon have to stay away from smoking, alcohol and ferrous-based foods. Spiritual-based beings like Darkrai and Ghost-type Pokémon can subsist on ambient life energy, and the Golett line plus Sigilyph have no need for food although it helps. Fighting-types Pokémon need more balance, especially since they use so much energy, but that diet also needs to be tailored. Lucario, however, has an additional restriction on chocolate.”

“Oh...” I murmured.

She continued talking to several shopkeepers, and throughout he babble of Kalosian that I did not understand, one word kept standing out: *Absol*. Even Dr du Bois noticed, as she kept frowning before she let me walk through the marketplace myself.

Personally, I felt conflicted. An Absol was not the cause of bad luck, but rather its herald. The PokéDex also listed its habitats as the cliffs of the Muraille Coast. So... why was it around?

… *There are pockets of monolingual Kalosian around, especially in Geosenge. It is refreshing.*

*I have stocked up on Berries and other medical necessities. The presence of the Absol is mystifying, but manageable. I hope whatever disaster happens does so quickly. I anticipate their necessity soon – I shall have Augustine compensate me.*

– *Marguerite Linden du Bois.*

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't notice, yes, "L'histoire en commençant" is French for 'the beginning story'. Yes, what I am describing is the anime you all think about. This point shall become relevant in a later arc, but here's food for thought for crossover writers :D.

Okay, so here, I make another note: we have the Imperial House of Cent-Feuilles, under which are several cadet branches of varying status and power. Here, I've mentioned
Fleur-de-Lis (lily), Muguet-de-Mai (lily of the valley), Œillet (carnation) and Luzerne (alfalfa). Considerations also include Platane (plane-tree), Mandragore (mandrake) and Coque-lourde (pasque-flower) – large hint right here.

These names are separate from d'Arc, de Rais, and Duval, in that the above seven are part of the royal blood – however distant, whereas these three are of lower nobility, though they survived the Revolution. Their relevance will be shown in later arcs.

A hint: is Pokémon Training really as meritocratic as the games and animé suggests, or are there deeper imperialistic connotations within the world of Pokémon Training? Evidence suggest no, or that Ash Ketchum/Satoshi is an exception amongst many.
Chapter Summary

As it appeared, the real disaster happened after we got out of Miroir Way, into Shalour.

“What the-?” I yelled as the Zapdos thrashed and flipped in the medical tent.

Day 27: Augustine called when I dropped into the Geosenge Pokémon Centre to ask about Durand. Apparently contracting a wild Pokémon to come along is rather outré, despite that Durand is a harmless creature who is also learning how to read at a phenomenal speed. Darkrai and he have been listening to the fairy tales I keep telling – and somehow, Donar's Pokémon also drop in now and again...

Day 31: As it appeared, the real disaster happened after we got out of Miroir Way, into Shalour.

It was a cold sweat but thankfully indistinct memories that greeted me when I awoke. The dripping of water off of stalactites towards stalagmites was a constant, and aside from the flashes off the rock-salt walls, precious little sunlight.

At least there were more supplies, I reflected. Otherwise this would be The Mistakes of Daisy Linden, Part 2. Hindsight was always a bitch.

Darkrai’s sapphire eye greeted me as I rose; the Pitch-Black Pokémon had lingered once again. I'm quite sure that most Trainers would have given me that... stuff... they call food.

“Pokémon food is perfectly acceptable,” I disagreed. “Just not for the picky. I learned that the hard way with my starter companion. He... Delphi was special to Altair. Even for a Delphox. They were mates, if that words could be applied across species. Delphi was the first to die against the legendary Pokémon.”

The horned and winged ones, Darkrai guessed.

I nodded. “I sent Altair to get help, and my Banette... he wove a Destiny Bond between the two of them and I. I was going to die, and in the end... I was so bitter, so thankful that I was going to take them with me. I was so convinced that it was worth it. I woke up disappointed. Neither of us can die as long as the other survives, so...”

Legends of Kalos are not so revered here, I take it.

“I think a lot of people would disagree with you there,” I answered. “I just... I grew up and realised that I couldn’t hate my enemies as much as I could support my allies anymore. No, you just met one Trainer who’s irreverent. Not everyone holds the same view. Take you; your kind have been villainised for most of the world's mythology for something you cannot control.”

Is it merely that straightforward?

“Perhaps,” I shrugged out of my sleeping bag and left it open to dry. Hobbling with a familiar pins-and-needles feeling, I headed over to the temporary fire-pit. Donar was sleeping opposite of the pit,
his Pokémon surrounding him.

Above his face, a pair of gleaming gems shone.

I beckoned to Crystal, who yawned, floated down from the ceiling, and proceeded to set a pile of kindling on fire. “The Sableye there. The boy’s not to be attacked.”

The Darkness Pokémon hissed, to which Crystal spat in reply.

“I'm sure we can afford to feed you some extra,” I set up the Trangia stove, lighting the spirit-lamp to set inside before I heated last night's candied aubergine ratatouille with extra poached eggs. “Come here.”

The Sableye faded, appearing next to me with a practised air of Shadow Sneak.

“Hand me a fork, there's a good...” I considered. “Boy.”

The Pokémon blinked. It reached into my bag. It got my fork and spoon.

It tried to eat my spoon. Darkrai got it with a Dark Pulse.

“Not a good idea, boys,” I warned as I heard Altair shifting, somewhere around the camp. Liz floated by, and I gave her some of the leftover candied aubergine, still cold, that she accepted, her flower drooping in the meantime as my Floette tried to reach something approaching wakefulness. I felt my head shake as the rest of my Pokémon awoke.

The ratatouille was steaming when Donar stirred in his sleeping bag, along with six gently cooking eggs that I divided, leaving one for Darkrai, one for the Sableye, two for Donar, and two for myself. We had met a few ACE Trainers passing through, and my supplies had placed us in good enough standing for gossip about the Kalos League that « Le Voix de Kalos » would love to have; the announcement of Siebold's rather closed outing with Cassius. It had also netted me some possibilities about the Absol sighting about, but that was neither here nor there. I wonder if a wedding was forthcoming, or if Kalos was prepared to embrace gay marriage yet. That would be nice.

“Bonjour, Donar,” I commented as the boy awoke, with a chirrup and a growl and a tiny roar from the Fletchinder, Bagon and Ivysaur respectively. “Le petit-déjeuner.”

“Wha?” he sat up, dark hair sticking up all over his scalp. “Oh... bonjour. Breakfast.”

“Dinner leftovers with poached eggs,” I ladled some out and handed it to him. “You have a potential prankster here, you know.”

Donar blinked, before he absorbed the Sableye chewing on the aubergine, runny yolk smeared on it. He simply sighed. “Why do all the Ghost-types go to you?”

“You're learning,” I nodded to the two Pokémon actually eating breakfast. “Altair?”

My Lucario, perched on the edge of camp, simply nodded in answer. I hope le bête noir would pass soon, even though Altair was not a morning Lucario. I had checked the large bag of Pokémon food; he'd eaten earlier, and drunk some water. If he continued, we were decamping to the Pokémon Centre.

Perhaps it was simply nerves at the prospect at returning to Shalour City; from what Korrina had related, it was the inability to fall to Attract that clued her in that something was wrong with Altair, as well as the local Lucarios' reactions. Not that there was anything wrong; it just had to be a male
Pokémon trying to use Attract. Valerie's Sylveon had proven that.

“We could have travelled with Noël,” Donar commented.

“We couldn't,” I interrupted. “He begged off once the full idea of what travelling with us would mean for his moral boundaries sank in.”

Donar scowled at me. “You're real cheerful, you know that?”

“Does your mother know what language you speak?”

Donar blanched. “S- Sorry.”

Boys and their mothers...

The conclusion of breakfast – and twin burps from Darkrai with the Sableye – left us with the task of packing up the bivouac and continuing our merry way through.

“The sheer faces of the Reflection Cave consist of rock salt,” I began chatting to no one is particular. “It is also the current only known habitat of Carbink. I anticipate...”

“Anticipate?” Donar questioned before something popped out.

“Wob-BUFFET!”

“...that.”

“...what the hell?” Donar blinked, immediately picking up his PokéDex. *Wobbuffet, the Patient Pokémon. To keep its pitch-black tail hidden, it lives quietly in the darkness. It is never first to attack.*

“Wobbuffet also usually have the Shadow Tag ability, which locks them into a Pokémon battle at first round,” I grumbled at the cyan Pokémon with the lip mark; a female Wobbuffet?

“Wob, wob-buffet,” it started, flapping its flat arms about, creating a blue patina upon the sheer walls of the Reflection Cave.

“I- I don't really know what you're getting at, Wobbuffet...” Donar murmured. “Dr du Bois?”

“Breakfast is cleared,” I told her.

“Wobbuffet!” It sounded indignant at this proclamation of mine.

*She wants us to follow,* Altair translated for me.

“What for?” I muttered, the illumination from Crystal's flame and the salt of the Reflection Cave glimmering like a thousand jewels.

One of them stood out to me, a soft light amongst a sea of stars.

*To a means of egress.*

“Did you just learn that word?” I asked. “Sorry, never mind. Is it safe?”

Altair caught my meaning almost immediately, which was quite good of him. *She means us no harm. I do not know if she would lead us to harm, but the intention is rather benign. There is also the fact that we are trapped in the Shadow Tag anyway.*
Now that I looked away from the gold light, I noted that our shadows led directly towards the Wobbuffet and its stubby feet and tail. “Merde,” I commented.

“What does that-”


“Huh?”

“Shadow Tag is an ability usually seen with the Wynaut and Gothita lines,” I began as he looked down and then to me for answer. “It is an exclusive ability that prevents nearly all means of escape from a Pokémon battle by literally stepping on the opponent's shadow. However, it has no effect on Ghost-type Pokémon, or other Pokémon with the ability.”

“So... we can't run from her?” Donar asked.

“Not only that, it looks like we are going to follow her,” I rearranged my backpack, grabbing the stone and placing it in my pocket. “Altair, Durand, Darkrai, come along. Crystal, light the way, please.”

My Chandelure swung overhead the entire trip, lighting our path with her flames. A passing Woobat tried to introduce himself, and Crystal set him on fire. A horde of Roggenrola wandered past, heading towards the same direction as our Wobbuffet guide. They were chivvied along as the Sableye from before – with smears of ratatouille and egg yolk on its face – led a horde of Mime Jr. and Solosis, with a horde of Carbink carrying Ferroseed.

“Merde,” I muttered again, immediately running as a horde of Woobat – including the slightly roasted one – swooped out for the light at the end. “It's not a trap. Run.”

“What?” Donar sounded curious, rather than frightened as he rushed along behind me.

“It's been raining,” I explained, increasing my pace with Altair. “Landslide. Try not to get buried alive.”

“What?!?”

We burst out to the patter of rain, the ground dangerously wet and slippery, rocks and mud cascading down. Donar gasped as the rain began to drench us, surprised and blinking.

“Back,” I recalled Crystal before the rain could put her out, and also extracted an Escape Rope. “Donar, take one end and tie it around your waist. Use a tight knot.”

“R- Right!” he did as asked.

“Make sure your Pokéballs are secure,” I warned. “You're going to have to climb. Do you have experience rock-climbing?”

“Hell no!”

“Try,” I told him, wiping the rain from my face as I considered the beaten path and the muddiness along with the overhanging cliffs. “I'm going to lower you down with the rope, but you'll be supporting your own weight. Give me two tugs when you've reached the ground and untied yourself. Okay?”

With a feverish nod, the boy began to climb down, with my assistance as slowly giving slack to the
rope of Wurmple silk mixed with Caterpie string. A few more people exited the cave quickly, along with a Hiker who stopped to help me with giving slack. Only when I felt two tugs then we turned to securing the rope on a boulder.

“You'll be alright?” the Hiker asked me as I recalled Altair, directed Durand to use Phantom Force for himself and Darkrai, and stood at the edge of the cliff.

“Yes, thank you for your assistance,” I replied before I leapt down. Using a controlled leap was hard on the hands, and would probably give me rope burns, but my feet on the cliff face gave me a guide by which I safely landed. I had learnt the skill before from a professional; don't try this at home.

“Holy fuck,” Donar gaped as I landed on my feet. My boots were possibly ruined by mud, but they were replaceable. At the same time, Durand erupted from the shadows, with Darkrai following. “Why didn't you get Durand to use Phantom Force on yourself?”

“Darkrai can't climb, and flying is suicidal in this weather, so we can't risk Durand,” I answered. “Durand being an unevolved Golett also means limited capacity. Thanks, Durand. Now come along, we've a Pokémon Centre to visit.”

Donar took stride behind the horde of Pokémon and I. “Pokémon Centre?”

There was a horrible crash when we entered the gates of Shalour City. The Yantreizh skyline was brilliant, dimmed against a darkened sky that kept pouring out libations to Manaphy and Phione. Another slide and cracking of rock, and the ground trembling beneath my feet. We got into the Pokémon Centre right as the trembling stopped.

“Oh my!” Nurse Joy was present, assisted by several nursing Wigglytuff and other hospital workers, both Pokémon and humans alike, in the injuries of several Trainers and Pokémon. “Did you just-”

“Reflection Cave,” Donar interrupted. “It just...”

“Caved in?” I prompted, glancing at my feet. The Shadow Tag was gone... the Wobbuffet... she's not here. The Wobbuffet...”

“She's not here...” Donar gaped. “I didn't see her after the Reflection Cave...”

Our eyes met.

“Merde,” we said together.

It rained when we entered Miroir Way, and rained when we got through the Reflection Cave – Frogadier had a thorough education in Spikes from the local Carbink and their Stealth Rock – and continued raining when we got out at high speed and got down to Shalour City.

Highlights included a discussion of the nature of language, Durand finally mastering Phantom Force, and learning about greetings in Kalosian. I swear, Dr du Bois must be multilingual to carry out an argument in Standard, Kantonese, Johtonese and Kalosian.

That wasn't the point. The point was that we just barely escaped being buried in a cave, at a dead run that had my heart thrumming even as Dr du Bois shoved an orange blanket at me.

“Wrap up,” she tersely informed me, dressed as she was in a plastic raincoat bearing the Pokéball symbol. “Call your Pokémon out, reassess. Durand, stay here. You cannot weather this storm. I am going out.”

“There are Pokémon out there that require help,” Dr du Bois flatly commented, saying nothing else.

“What? But, the storm- and the landslide!”

“Stay,” she walked out with a small pack at her back and her Pokéballs at her side. I then realised that her backpack was left beside me.

My own Pokéballs cracked open, and Bagon started to head-butt my leg as Fletchinder chirruped, Ivysaur yawned and Frogadier regarded me with solemn eyes.

“I'm worried for her too,” I told Frogadier, getting up. “We're going out to find her, okay? After I change and get a raincoat.”

Despite her insults, I was smart enough to leave most of my stuff with Nurse Joy at the Centre counter, before I ran out with my wallet, Holo Caster and Pokémon, plus a bag of snacks.

At the base of the cliffs where Shalour City was backed against, a temporary tent-like structure had been constructed. Flying-type Pokémon and Hawlucha hovered by the skies, and I spotted a Lucario – not Altair; it wore no scarf – directing a few Toxicroak to smash rocks. Nearly all present were Fighting-types; I suspected that the Shalour Gym was at damage control.

I found Dr du Bois at the medical tent with Altair and a blonde woman in sports attire. Overhead, Crystal hovered as a giant chandelier to light the tent, even despite the storm. Liz was performing Aromatherapy on a few Solosis and Carbink, as well as a Sableye.

“...oxygen tank,” Dr du Bois was saying. “Thank you, Leader Korrina.”

“No prob,” Korrina, presumably the Shalour Gym Leader, confessed. “Altair has a license, you say?”

“He's a bit overqualified.” Dr du Bois said nothing else as another stretcher carried by two Machoke came in, bearing an exhausted female Wobbuffet and Wynaut. “Are there any more?”

The Machoke made another sign.

“Merci. Continue digging, please,” Dr du Bois commented. “The first six hours are the ones where we could reasonably revive suffocating Pokémon and humans.”

“Doctor-” Korrina began as the Machoke headed out once more.

“Later, Leader Korrina,” Dr du Bois knelt and began to perform CPR on the Wobbuffet. A flapper-like arm diverted her to the exhausted Wynaut. After a while, Korrina headed outside in her own raincoat, presumably to help dig out more trapped.

“Hmm... oxygen deprivation, hypothermia...” Dr du Bois took the baby Pokémon with a secure embrace, bringing it to a heavy tank and strapping a mask to its mouth. “Breathe slowly, please. You'll be fine when I get a blanket on you.”

Another orange blanket swaddled the baby Pokémon, before she turned to the female Wobbuffet and began giving a cursory body check. “Did you need something, Donar?”

I started, realising that she was conversing while saving a life. “Erm... I brought snacks. Nurse Joy...”

Her green eyes flicked to the basket. “There should be a hot chocolate flask and some hot drinks.
You can distribute that. Don’t give Korrina’s Lucario any, just because they can survive despite theobromine doesn’t mean that they should. Wynaut, Chingling and Mime Jr. are baby Pokémon as well, they will need assistance.”

“R- Right!” I nodded, staring at the Pokémon before making a decision. “Fletchinder, I choose you!”

“Fletch!” the Ember Pokémon screeched in greeting, descending to the ground.

“We need a way to keep these baby Pokémon warm, Fletchinder,” I said to her. “Help out, would you?”

“It would work, if your Fletchinder had the Flame Body ability rather than Gale Wings,” Dr du Bois reminded me.

I deflated. Fletchinder scowled, before simply rounding up the tiny, weary baby Pokémon with crooning sounds.

“Smart,” Dr du Bois nodded in approval, still pumping at the Wobuffet’s chest. “They’re going to be alright.”

“Why are there so many baby Pokémon inside the Cave, anyway?” I asked, because it sounded sensible at the time.

“The Reflection Cave is a hotspot for reflection and psychic meditation,” Dr du Bois replied absently, snapping on a fresh pair of gloves. “A lot of Fighting- and Psychic-specialists and Pokémon go in for meditation retreats. Plentiful food, a flux of incenses for Pokémon breeding, and shelter from associated predators like Dark-, Ghost- and Bug-types, except for the geovorous Sableye, allow for such Pokémon to reproduce quickly. Lax Incense for relaxation affects Wobuffet, Odd Incense increasing psychic power affects Mr Mime, and Pure Incense for clarity of thought affects Chimecho, giving rise to the hordes of Wynaut, Mime Jr and Chingling respectively. Meanwhile, for the presence of so many Psychic-type Pokémon, Solosis and Carbink gather to hone their skills to evolve.”

“Carbink can evolve?”


“Huh?” I checked my watch as Liz floated towards the pile of Fletchinder and baby Pokémon; only about two hours or so had passed. The rain was receding, even as Dr du Bois poked her head out and stared at the skies.

“This rain... Come out and look.”

“Huh? What?” I walked out, careful to study the skies wherever she was looking. A flash of yellow lightning arced across the skies, and with it, blue flashed in answer-

“What?” I blinked, looking again. Lightning wasn’t suppose to arc like that, not without...

Those arcs were wings, wings of spikes and attached to great golden light that crackled with electricity. Dozens of lightning bolts descended from the stormy heavens and struck the creature, summoned by its smaller movement. The bird squawked, and thunder boomed in tandem before clouds drifted over the face of the skies once more.

“Rain Dance,” Dr du Bois identified, uncaring that a freaking Legendary Pokémon was flying
above. “Increases the accuracy of Thunder such that it never misses. Also unleashes rain upon the surroundings.”

“So Zapdos caused this?” I turned to her. “Why?”

Below us, more and more workers were looking up, pointing at Zapdos, some even pulling cameras to photograph the spot against the Shalour skies, a spot that was growing even closer-

“Why is it getting bigger?” I mumbled, before my brain caught up with Dr du Bois and we were running back inside. We were only slightly too late; the legendary majestic bird crashed into the tent, driving Liz into a tizzy as she fled for my cap.

“What the-?” I yelled as the Zapdos thrashed and flipped in the medical tent.

Tentatively, Dr du Bois sidled up to the Legendary Pokémon. “Erm... please hold still.”

The Zapdos's thrashing lessened before Dr du Bois knelt down by its right wing, clicking her tongue in a repeating and soothing measure as she examined it by sight. “Erm... broken wing, possibly around the humerus bone. Torn secondary feathers. Dirt is the result of a Rock-type attack, since Flying-type Pokémon are immune to Ground-type moves. Judging from the damage, possibly... Stealth Rock. The main wound, though... from below. It struck from below... hypothetically, a Head Smash is possible, but unlikely. Probably Stone Edge, boosted by same-type attack bonus and absolutely no regard for safety, like in a Pokémon battle. So, I guess you fought with a Rock-type Pokémon and ran away?”

The Zapdos hissed.

_He said Stone Edge, Altair relayed. And that the surrounding city is not safe as long as the Pokémon was still here._

“How thank you, Altair,” Dr du Bois nodded, leaning back to consider. “Donar. Run to Shalour, get an emergency team for... twenty one, plus one Zapdos. I need to splint this wing, and if a Legendary Pokémon is going to be ferried into the Shalour City Pokémon Centre today, we're going to have to make sure this Zapdos can bloody well fly. Darkrai, prep for Hypnosis.”

The Hypnosis struck, the Zapdos falling asleep before I realised that she had bandages and splints ready, calm despite that she was facing a Legendary Pokémon and was about to perform medical treatment on it. That was all kinds of awesome.

“How hurry!” Dr du Bois rushed as, with the opening of the tent flaps, even more Pokémon and stretchers were trailing in. “Altair, the others need help. Durand... where is a Ground-type Pokémon when you need one? Fletchinder, stay there with the baby Pokémon. Donar... I need you to run to the Pokémon Centre, get Nurse Joy to arrange for an emergency convoy, stat.”

“How R- Right!” I ran out, trying not to trip and fall into the muddy puddles that dotted the path down to Shalour City. The landslide had largely been localised to the mountainous areas, so that was a bonus, but the single Wobbuffet body that was carried in, and Dr du Bois's sad but resolved expression gave me chills at the thought of the Zapdos, the remarkable, primordial force of the storm, brought low by mortality.

As I ran, I might have nearly twisted my ankle were it not for one fact – a flash of black and white prevented me from tripping. Next, I saw the black and white Pokémon, the blade arcing from one side of its head clear for identification even without the PokéDex.

_Absol, the Disaster Pokémon. It appears when it senses an impending natural disaster. As a result, it_
was mistaken as a doom bringer.

Yet, this spectre of disaster was coated in red, as if it had bathed in the blood of the victims themselves.

I blinked, and the red spectre disappeared, back into the weakening cascade. After a while, something told me to continue running, and I did, all the way back to the Shalour Pokémon Centre to demand a convoy.

...a monster that can deal with a Legendary Pokémon is few and far between, not without training. Still, Stealth Rock and Stone Edge do not comfort me, especially this close to the landslide and the mountain. I am more than aware, of exactly what nests in mountains. I am not sure, though.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois.
Chapter Summary

On the morning of that day, I received a call from Mme. Oak regarding her son...

“I'm Serena Calme, and he's Donar,” Serena offered, visibly excited. “If you're here... then this is the Tower of Mastery, the home of Mega Evolution!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Day 33: I have gone through medical school and continued to update my education, though I had entered the humanities instead. I may have neglected to update my license, although frankly my Trainer's license and eight badges of the Kalos League qualified me to perform emergency first aid from any Pokémon. Still, it was not every day that I had to administer such to an injured Zapdos. Thus, it was after the Electric Pokémon had been checked in and the worst of the landslide damage had been discovered, that the Ranger Union sent their warning letter. I had Crystal set it on fire.

On the morning of that day, I received a call from Mme. Oak regarding her son...

It was during a light breakfast of brioche tartines with hot chocolate, and a glass of orange juice to follow that I received Augustine's call. It came in the form of the concierge actually walking up to me with the announcement.

“I'll take it,” I sighed, smoothing my pleated skirt over to stand. “Altair, make sure Darkrai doesn't take too much of the fromage blanc. He'll ruin lunch.”

One of the first things I had learned after emancipation with the Plant Badge was to go for a hotel if I could afford to. I could usually afford to, even after I divorced my fortunes from my mother and enacted my disappearances. I could live off of the land, as I had proven time and again, yet Delphi had always been picky and more inclined for hotels, if for their excellent cuisine alone. After years in the life of academia, hotels were also a way to secure my work and ensure privacy. Despite that Pokémon Centres provided suitable accommodation free, they were also packed and served as public spaces. I used them so many times on more than one ethnographic field trip, that Augustine had learned to contact the hotels I was at before my Holo Caster.

“Allô?” I asked once I picked up the receiver at the screen phone. “C'est Marguerite.”

“Finally!” Augustine's voice came in, and the live video-call showed his smile on the screen. “Salut. I've been fielding called from the Ranger Union. They want to speak to you about the injured Zapdos. Did you really treat it?”

“Broken humerus,” I replied, now in Standard. “Tell them I don't want to speak to them.”

“I knew you'd say that,” Augustine sighed. “So, I referred them to the Champion's office at Île-de-l'arc. Since the League is keeping quiet for now, they're off your back.”

“If you already knew, then why did you call?” I asked.
“Mme Vendredi Oak is asking about her son,” Augustine broke the news, all business now. “She wants you to call her, and she's remarkably persistent about it.”

“I understand,” I replied, nodding. “Is there anything you need to say?”

“It might resolve your mother issues.”

“Goodbye, Augustine,” I hung up, before considering the dial-phone again. After a heartbeat, I dialled the number that I had memorised.

“This is the Oak household,” a soft-spoken woman replied, her picture showing where Donar had gotten his dark hair and eyes.

“Bonjour,” I began without preamble. “I am Marguerite Linden du Bois, the researcher currently attached to your son, Donar Oak. Augustine informed me that you wished to speak to me, Mrs Oak? I believe your son might have already updated you as to his situation regarding the Shalour landslide.”

“Ah, good morning, Dr du Bois,” she replied. “Please, call me Vendredi. It's just... a mother's curiosity, you understand. Donar mentioned you a lot, even before I asked him about any potential girlfriends.”

I carefully did not allow my expression to change. “Then, you must certainly call me Marguerite. It seems only polite. And as for Donar... he is an admirable boy, to get two badges in a month and five Pokémon.”

“I know what you mean,” Vendredi agreed. “His father was the same. Well... part of the reason I called was because of his father. Woten Oak, of the International Police. He's in Shalour for the moment, and... well, he wants to meet, but Donar doesn't want to meet him.”

“It's common for estranged family not to meet up,” I replied.

“Oh, no! Woten and I are still married,” Vendredi explained. “It's just that, Woten's not home often, and...”

“I see,” I replied in the face of awkward silence. “I suggest we respect Donar's wishes on the matter.”

“...oh,” Vendredi echoed in a small voice. “Well... au revoir.”

“Au revoir, madame,” I replied, hanging up as the screen went black. It occurred to me as I headed back that I may have offended the subject's parents. It was a minor occurrence.

Frogadier gave me a brief greeting as I sat back down to finish my chocolate and tartine, before starting on the orange juice. “Who was it?” Donar asked me halfway through his orange juice.

“Professor Sycamore, looking to put me in touch with your mother,” I replied. “Something about your father.”

“Oh.” Donar blinked, looking at the cylindrical glass in his hand.

“Irrelevant,” I declared. “What are your plans now?”

“Well, I need the Badge,” Donar shrugged. “And the Shalour Gym declared a fortnight moratorium on Gym battles in light of the landslide, so I don't have anything left to do. I thought I might go to the
Pokémon Centre, get a check-up on my Pokémon, and start intense training. Well...”

“Add to your team,” I clarified. “Think.”

“Well, I have Frogadier, Fletchinder, Ivysaur, and Bagon,” Donar recounted. “And... well, when Fletchinder takes on the Carbink, she does badly against them.”

“Not her fault,” I nodded in understanding. “Fletchinder is a duel-type Fire/Flying Pokémon with a double weakness to Rock-type moves. Technically, you have Frogadier and Ivysaur to help with those.”

“But they can't hit Ice-types very well,” I reflected. “Like Sapin. And Fletchinder has a weakness to Ice-types as well, so I need a Fighting-type... Then I also need a Ghost-type... right?”

“Depends,” I replied. “I know some people do without, though they keep Dark-type Pokémon at hand. Think about your team's weaknesses, and in the absence of Pokémon types, how to cover them.”

“Okay...” Donar squinted, as if trying to recall. “Erm... Ice-types.”

“What about them?”

“Three of my Pokémon are weak to them,” he shamefully admitted.

“And you would have two weak to Rock-types as well, since a Salamence is Dragon/Flying dual-type,” I noted. “There's no shame in admitting to it, the real shame is doing nothing about it. So, you need a Fighting-type Pokémon to give you decent coverage, and then consider how you would go about things. For example...”

“Example?” Donar blinked.

“Noël Duval,” I specified. “Do you remember his Snover and its ability?”

“Caused massive snowing,” Donar nodded. “What about it?”

“Snow Warning is only one of a few abilities that creates localised weather effects,” I answered. “The process was discovered in the Hoenn region years ago, and in doing so, the Pokémon Castform was created by humans. Anyway, there are four types of weather that humans can manipulate.”

“Uh huh...” Donar was nodding.

“The first, as Noël Duval illustrated, is through hail,” I specified. “The second, using either the Drizzle ability or Rain Dance, is by heavy rain. The third, intense sunlight brought on by Sunny Day or the Drought ability. The fourth is through sandstorms, transforming the field into a highly-specialised desert arena. These four forms dominated the Unova Leagues for a long time, ever since the strategies for manipulating weather were perfected for Pokémon battles. It's a rather inexact art, but worth the investment if one could pull it off. This is one aspect you need to consider, since the only way to disrupt a weather team is either use a weather-manipulating move, find a Rayquaza, or simply finish off all members before they can attack, which is nearly impossible. Let's not even go through entry hazards, since you already know their application.”

“Entry hazards can only be removed via Rapid Spin or Defog, and the only way to stop these moves is to prevent their successful landing via a Ghost-type Pokémon or to finish off the other guy first.” Donar recalled. “So I'll need a Ghost-type Pokémon.”
“Or you can consider a different option,” I agreed. “Either way, your team’s vulnerability to Rock-, Dark-, Psychic- and Fairy-type is stunning.”

“You don’t need to tell me,” he grumbled, pushing at Bagon’s head-butt on my knee. “There’s a temporary tournament being set up. I thought... I could go. You know... participate.”

“An excellent idea.”

At this, Donar actually looked at me. “Huh? You’re... it’s not going to ruin your research or something?”

“Note, subject is exposed to double hermeneutic,” I commented. “To all intents and purposes, you are the subject. There is only yourself stopping your choices... as well as your monetary issues, and Pokémon, etcetera. Why would I be mad that at least you’re preparing yourself for a tournament-style battle?”

“Oh...” Donar faintly answered. “But... Noël hates you.”

“So do Sina, Dexio, and sometimes Augustine,” I pointed out, before peering behind Donar. “And your friend Serena.”

He turned around. Serena Calme was there, Calem’s daughter, her blonde hair hanging matted on either side of her head, and her dark eyes glimmering with Calem’s own joie de vivre. She wore a high-waisted blue and white dress that spoke of Calem bringing his daughter to Snowbelle City – nowhere else does that cutting exist save in the Snowbelle Boutique – and her high-top shoes were black.

“Donar!” Serena greeted, giving his a hug and cheek-peck as expected of a Kalosian girl. “Bonjour!”

Donar blushed, but did not flinch. “Serena, hi! Erm, you remember Dr du Bois, right?”

“Bonjour, Mademoiselle Calme,” I greeted in the face of the sudden chill.

“Bonjour,” Serena replied, letting go of Donar with very bad grace as something sashayed behind her. Beside me, Altair’s bread dropped into the Baie Mepo blend that I had deemed safe for canine consumption. I didn’t blame him, though. Seeing a Delphox up close, one that kept sneering at gawkers in the small hotel restaurant, was a stark reminder of our past.


“Isn’t that right?” Serena smiled as behind her, the Delphox preened. “We got out of the Camphrier Pokémon Centre last week. Somehow, facing off with Altair really motivated Elmo to train and evolve, and he evolved yesterday! But the gym was closed, so we thought to visit the hotel for lunch before training. When did you come to Shalour City, Donar?”

“Two days ago,” Donar replied.

“Wasn’t that during the...” Serena paused, before she gasped. “Were you hurt, Donar?”

“No... we got out in time,” Donar shook his head.

Serena looked to me with an expression that more or less communicated her contempt. I returned it with equal fervour before she looked away first, back to Donar.

“Anyway, maybe we should train together!” Serena suggested, before turning to see the one that she
had yet to notice. Almost immediately after, she blanched. “Donar... who's your friend?”

“Erm... Serena, meet Darkrai,” Donar swallowed.

Hello.

“...hi,” Serena faintly replied. “So... train together for the tournament?”

“That'll be nice,” Donar agreed. “Erm... how's your dad?”

“He's in Kiloude City,” Serena tightly answered, before nodding to an approaching waiter. “May I join you?”

“S'il vous plaît,” I replied, taking the higher moral ground. Far be it for anyone to imply that a Linden du Bois was anything less than polite.

The waiter arrived as Serena took a seat. “Est-ce que Vous voulez quelque chose, madame?”

“Vous avez le gâteau Baie Grena?” Serena asked for the Pomeg Berry cake. “Je vais le prendre, avec un thé au lait.”

“Oui, madame.” The waiter left with the very order that had Altair and I flinching, plus one milk tea. A Pomeg Berry cake was simply too... tart, but adding milk tea was just horrendous.

“So, Donar, are you entering the coming tournament?” Serena asked, with a kind of false sweetness that was as grating as it might seem endearing. “I think quite a few of the Shalour Gym Trainers would be present, so it might be good practice.”

“Ah haha...” Donar nodded. “Yeah, I will.”

“And Dr du Bois?” Serena now turned that same poisoned honey on me.

“I am old now,” I answered. “Training Pokémon is something best left for the young.” Not to mention that any Shalour Gym Trainer would recognise their Gym Leader's former Lucario right off the bat.

“Maybe that's right,” Serena next implied with false sweetness. “After all, without the Champion's Pokémon, I suppose you'll just be another Pokémon researcher.”

“My ghosts shall protect me,” I reminded her. “And I have a Darkrai.”

Serena shot a disbelieving look towards the Pitch-Black Pokémon, but refrained from commenting as her order approached. Her Delphox snatched the cake, taking to it with great relish as his owner took the milky tea and added more sugar. “Your Ghosts. If you could be a Trainer, then why don't you go on your field-work yourself?”

“It would skew the research,” I answered with a vague sense of unease. “Instead of attacking the basis of my research, why don't you say what you really mean?”

“Ah,” Serena acknowledged, setting her half-full cup down. “Papa went to Kiloude to find Daisy Linden. He found no trace of her.”

… I had expected that, but knowing it hurt more than anyone would believe. “I see.”

“So, I think you lied to Papa,” Serena elaborated. “Does it make you happy, that Papa would tear Kiloude City apart to find her.”
“Not at all,” I answered. Quite the opposite; I wanted Calem to be happy, quite badly.

“You mean Daisy isn't in Kiloude?” Donar spoke in concern, looking from Serena to me.

“No,” Serena replied. “Papa said so. Dr du Bois, you are a liar. Where is Daisy Linden?”

I remained silent.

“Dr du Bois?” Donar spoke up.

“...her location is my secret,” I answered at last.

Silence, before Serena finished her tea with milk. “I understand. Dr du Bois... I challenge you to a Pokémon battle.”

What? What?

Durand was currently still on employ, so it was with a squat follower and a Darkrai and Lucario as twin shadows that Dr du Bois slowly walked towards the practice field set outside of the Pokémon Centre. Across from her, Serena smirked.

“Each challenger can use three Pokémon,” Serena dictated the rules. “The first with Pokémon left ready for battle wins. No switch is allowed between battles. If I win, then you must reveal the location of Daisy Linden.”

“And if I win?” Dr du Bois coolly asked.

“If you win, I won't pester you about Daisy Linden ever again,” Serena offered.

“... I understand,” Dr du Bois answered. “Your Pokémon?”

“Elmo, you're up first!” Serena called out her Delphox, causing Altair to flinch again. The Delphox bristled, brandishing a branched wand from its fur-sleeve that caught on fire.

“Jelly,” Dr du Bois summoned her Jellicent, which bobbed around the field.

Serena made a face. “Going for the high road, then?”

“Scald,” Dr du Bois murmured as the pink menace spat a jet of steaming water towards Elmo. The Delphox dodged, but ended up drenched and defeated.

“Return, Elmo,” Serena tersely commanded, holding her Pokéball up as the red beam of light enveloped the Delphox. “Take a good rest. Go, Pika!”

The Pikachu took to the field in a blur, almost racing to tackle immediately.

“Toxic,” Dr du Bois called with her usual sang-froid. Poison dribbled over the Jellicent, a mist of violet descending over the field that the Pikachu was caught within.

“Pika, Thunderbolt!” Serena called quickly as the Pikachu stumbled.

“Pika-pi!” Electricity charged, shrouding the Pikachu.

“Recover,” Dr du Bois ordered once more, as white light shrouded the creature of the deep that stood against the Thunderbolt.
“Hah!” Serena called as the thunder struck, punching the air. Her face fell as the dust cleared, the Jellicent still standing.

“Jelly...” Dr du Bois’s voice took on an undertone of faint glee. “Hex.”

The Pikachu screamed, really screamed, as ghostly energy of blue-violet shrouded it once more, before it finally toppled.

“Return, Pika!” Serena called, before plucking a third Pokéball from her belt. “Take a rest too. This time... this time, I won't fall! Go, Obscura!”

The ball bounced and opened, unleashing a Pokémon I had never seen before.

It was a dark purple Pokémon, almost similar to Jelly but more streamlined. It has a pair of tentacles on the bottom of its body that looked like stubby legs. Six light-yellow spots on the front and back, and a light-yellow stripe nearly wrapping around its body above the spots branded its body. Arm-like tendrils, scythe-like in appearance dangled from over the spots like fundamental arms, centred with a red beak, black eyes with yellow irises, and wavy ‘hair’ made of eight tentacles that waved about as it cackled and flitted.

Malamar, the Overturning Pokémon, my PokéDex read. *It lures prey close with hypnotic motions, then wraps its tentacles around it before finishing it off with digestive fluids.*

“Well,” Dr du Bois spoke suddenly. It echoed with the kind of language that someone might say when confronted with a new type of problem.

“Obscura, Swagger!” Serena suddenly ordered as the Malamar swaggered about. The pink menace of a Jellicent followed its path with beady eyes beginning to glaze over.

“Oh,” Dr du Bois spoke, with great interest as Jelly wobbled. “Jelly...”

“Now, Obscura!” Serena called. “Foul Play!”

Obscura grabbed onto Jelly with its tentacles, before flinging the Jellicent around and down to the ground with a bark of laughter.

“Jelly?” Dr du Bois whispered, almost in a dream.

Obscura giggled, a sound like a metronome or a low-pitched siren that seemed quite sinister, like a click of its beak.

“J- Jelly is unable to battle!” I called, although neither of them seemed to have listened.

“Well?” Serena asked. “I trained her when she was an Inkay into a beautiful Malamar!”

“In terms of defensive typing alone, Malamar would rank as number twenty-seven out of all known type combinations,” Dr du Bois murmured. “And that creature... have you woken up, Jelly?”

“What?” Serena blinked as the pink menace arose from the ground like some horrible spectre of the deep.

“Return, the battle is over,” Dr du Bois told the Jellicent, who floated sullenly back to Altair while the doctor plucked another Pokéball from her belt and released it. “Good work, Jelly, but it is time. *C'est ton début, Liz!*”

The Floette appeared, carrying her flower-umbrella as she spun in the air. Obscura scowled at the
Single Bloom Pokémon.

“A Floette?” Serena stared at Liz in disbelief, her golden hair a cascade as she shook her head. “You're sending that tiny Pokémon against my Obscura?”

Obscura cackled, and Liz glared back, but Serena's point was true. Compared to Obscura, Liz might well be a dwarf against a giant.

“Size has no relative to power,” Dr du Bois murmured.


A tentacle was raised, but then her eyes spasmed in alarm and the squid flinched.

“Obscura?” Serena pleaded, suddenly afraid. “Obscura!”

“Liz, Dazzling Gleam!” Dr du Bois called, darkly commanding.

Light flooded my eyeballs, so much that I had to look away.

Serena screeched, and when I looked up again, there it was; Obscura toppled, tentacles sprawled on the earth, and Liz floating overhead with a sad expression before returning to Dr du Bois.

“C'est fini,” Dr du Bois signalled. “I win.”

“Obscura...” Serena echoed, defeated.

“Mademoiselle, your combo was good, worthy of a veteran Trainer,” Dr du Bois began. “Even, but your Malamar remains untrained. As do you.”

“What happened...?” Serena whispered. “That last Foul Play...”

“There are three abilities common to the Frillish line,” Dr du Bois outlined. “One, Water Absorb. Two, Cursed Body. Three, the rarest ability, Damp. Jelly possesses the second ability, which means that any physical moves that strike at her, including Foul Play, has a thirty-percent chance of being temporarily disabled.”

“So it was luck...” Serena grumbled.

“But even if not, Dark-type moves are resisted by the Fairy-type,” Dr du Bois added. “The Flabébé line also is not inclined towards physical strength to begin with, so damage from Foul Play would not do much. It's not too bad, though, that you could control a Malamar.”

“That I could control a Malamar?” Serena echoed, offended as Obscura growled.

“Malamar are on par with Liepard as the most sadistic of Pokémon,” Dr du Bois answered. “They are also powerful, and the Contrary ability they have enables them to take full advantage of Super Power, one of the strongest Fighting-type moves known. Xerosic, second-in-command of Team Flare and Lysandre Fleur-de-Lis himself, used a Malamar. Inkay and Malamar has also been proven to use their strong hypnotic powers on unsuspecting Trainers such as yourself in their cliff habitats to make people walk off cliffs of their own volition. When I say that you could control a Malamar, it was a compliment.”

I looked at Obscura, who was staring towards Serena with a strange expression, reminding me excessively of Dr du Bois and the Clauncher Incident. I shuddered. “Serena... we should go to the Pokémon Centre.”
“Good work,” Dr du Bois murmured, reaching for the Jellicent. For a long moment, Trainer and Pokémon embraced, the beady eyes actually relaxed and warm, Dr du Bois’s hug firm and unrelenting even as the Cursed Body activated. “Merci, Jelly.”

It occurred to me, then, seeing Durand and Altair and Darkrai trail behind her, that the Pokémon team behind Marguerite Linden du Bois was way scarier than anything I could think of.


*Humans looking for you, Marguerite.*

I broke my train of thought to see two Pokémon Rangers, a male-female duo, each wearing the orange uniform most commonly seen in the Coumarine Gym. Both of them were approaching me with ill-disguised intent the moment I stepped into the Pokémon Centre.

“Dr du Bois?” one of them spoke. “I’m Pokémon Ranger Chaise from the Coumarine City branch of the Ranger Union.”

“I’m Ranger Brooke, of the same,” the woman shortly introduced herself. “We understand that you found and treated the Zapdos that crashed into the emergency tent during the landslide aftermath?”

I turned to Donar and Serena. “You two can go ahead.”

“O- Okay,” Donar nodded, following Serena towards the reception counter. Only when they were out of earshot did I deign to answer the Rangers.

“Yes,” I answered. “I submitted my report to Nurse Joy over there. You can ask her.”

“You detailed that the Zapdos was attacked prior to crashing into the tent?” Brooke asked.

“Attacked... hardly,” I demurred. “I deduced, from its injuries, that the Zapdos fell victim to a Stealth Rock and Stone Edge, caused a storm via Rain Dance in an effort to fight its... predator... off, and then managed to flee from over the ridge. Whether Zapdos was attacked or not remains uncertain.”

“Pokémon do not usually attack one another,” Chaise contributed.

“Not without reason,” I disagreed. “Pokémon can hurt and kill one another. Willingness is a different story.”

“Would you say that this was a human effort?” Brooke finally asked, inviting a stare from Chaise.

“I do not know,” I replied. “I only know that there were two moves involved in Zapdos's injury; Stone Edge and Stealth Rock. I did not do more than a cursory examination. Furthermore, even if we can prove that Zapdos was struck by two different Pokémon, that in no way denotes that Zapdos went up against a Trainer's or poacher's team.”

Chaise nodded with a glazed look that indicated that he was memorising my entire testimony. “I notice that you don't have a medical license.”

“I have eight Gym badges, which under the Kalos League entitles me to a licence pour les produits pharmaceutiques solides,” I answered. “First aid is not exactly hard to engineer.”

“Still, to treat an injured Legendary Pokémon while under stress and in the field like that should be much more than any academic could manage,” Chaise commented. Brooke – not very discreetly –
elbowed him.

“Would you like to repeat that?” I demanded. “Goodbye, Rangers.”

I walked away, attempting to reach the counter before their local Wigglytuff nurse reached me. Vacuous eyes stared from Altair to me, before the Pokémon nurse nodded to me and started indicating towards the hallway.

_Zapdos summons you_, Darkrai relayed.

I eyed the fluorescent lights overhead. “Now?”

The nurse nodded, rather sadly.

I followed the Wigglytuff in a businesslike manner. For the doctors who wanted to interfere, a sneer and a Lucario’s snarl put them to rights. However, Darkrai still hid in my shadow before I entered the ward.

Perhaps because of its power, or merely a concession to its status as a Legendary Pokémon, the entire ward had been cleared. No machine was left within the room; merely a nest of blankets and carpets on a white tiled floor. The smell of ammonia and cleaner was tamped down with lemon and static; a sort of roasted smell or ozone in the air that mixed oddly with the general acoustics of the isolated ward. In the middle, the spiky-feathered form of Zapdos nested, one wing bound in a sling.

“Bonjour,” I answered in the face of the Legendary, privately thinking that at least, citizens Shalour City had had the experience of a lifetime to face a Legendary Pokémon. The grumpy chicken gave a snarl and a chirrup that plainly communicated ill-will.

_They thank you for treating him_, Darkrai interpreted.

“I see,” I replied, noting the plural pronoun used by Darkrai before I regarded Zapdos. “You’d have lost the wing if you continued, you know.”

Now the Legendary looked awkwardly contrite.

“You could do me a favour,” I told it. “Please, identify who attacked you.”

A crackle of overt electricity followed that pronouncement.

_They wants revenge_, Darkrai translated.

I considered the Zapdos. I was not a fan of any Legendary Pokémon, including Kanto’s legends. Zapdos was clearly used to enacting its own justice, and it created an implicit disrespect of the human justice system. While the justice system and I might disagree on some instances, it was still a system of civilisation that was actively subverted by so many individualistic personalities as created by Trainers and such powerful Pokémon.

“Very well,” I acknowledged. “Your wing should heal within the week. Nurse Joy and the staff at the Pokémon Centre will release you back into general public space when you are deemed well enough. Taking, of course, that no Trainer tracks you down from here to catch you once you step out of the Centre, or that you might attract your attacker here.”

At my pronouncement, the Zapdos bristled its wings in something approaching alarm.

“It has been known to happen,” I continued. “Of course, you don’t have to care about them, do you?
Not for the people who tended to your injured self. Not for the multiples of injured Pokémon injured in the landslide that you caused. *Adieu, Zapdos."

I spun on one foot, about to walk out and leave Zapdos to its stewing before a burst of sparks and a shimmering veil of light over the door greeted my eyes. It squawked some more.

*I believe them to be surprised,* Darkrai relayed. *They expected rather more deference.*

Any other person could have taken it as a warning, but I rolled my eyes and pushed my way through the Light Screen. Zapdos squawked in surprise; why, though, I had no idea. Light Screen was clearly only for special attacks.

*Wait, he said,* Darkrai spoke telepathically.

I turned to Zapdos. “Thank you for your time. I hope I never see you again.”

The indignant squawk of the Legendary as I walked out was quite charming.

*Marguerite,* Darkrai spoke telepathically. On my other side, Altair lingered as a solid presence, fending off passing nurses.

I was about to retort when I was confronted by Calem's daughter once again, her blue eyes brimming with tears as she stared from Darkrai to me, and then to Darkrai and back again. “You weren't serious about battling me, were you?” her voice was small.

I decided not to correct her assumption. “Was that so?”

“You didn't use Darkrai,” Serena bristled, offended. Her face was a round cherub like so many fair Kalosian girls, so different from my own lean features, only made gaunter by age and nightmares. A child confronting an adult. Nabokov would have classed her permanently as a child. “Papa told me.”

I leaned close to her, ensuring that our eyes met. She had none of Calem in her face; blue eyes not covered with contacts, long blonde hair, youth clear in every part of her face, almost like Daisy Linden. Up close, I could smell charred twigs, a touch of ozone and perhaps the Malamar, on top with all of the other scents that she had not managed to erase in her clothes. In many ways, Calem's daughter had taken on the form of Daisy Linden.

“W- What?” Serena blinked, trying not to meet my eyes.

“That dress is very fashionable,” I told her.

“Y- Yes?” Serena hazarded. “It's available only from the Boutique Couture in Snowbelle City. P-Papa bought it for me.”

*Oui,* I replied, still unmoving.

Serena stared at my own skirt and blouse. “Erm... why?”

“It was in this design that the Kalos League crowned Daisy Linden ten years ago,” I answered, half in reflection. “Did he also suggest that you go on this journey?”

Serena's eyes slid to the side. “Well...”

She caught herself. “What's does that mean, anyway? We're talking about you!”

I straightened my back. “Go home, Serena Calme,” I told her, as blunt as you please. “Escape this
attempt to turn you into Daisy Linden. You are not her, no matter what your father wishes. Even though your attempts to become her has driven you to such depths of malice, you are not Daisy Linden—"

The slap was not wholly unforeseen; I had recognised that Serena hated me, after all. For not conforming as she had done, perhaps, ever since Santalune City and her face-off; perhaps even earlier, since our meeting in Aquacorde Town, she had hated me. Either way, the slap came, and I was caught off-guard.

She attempted to follow up on the other arm, were it not for Donar.

“Serena, Dr du Bois!” Donar's shout attracted much attention from the counter, from nearly everyone in the Shalour Pokémon Centre. “What's going on?!”

“I gave my frank opinion of her skills and aptitude as a Trainer,” I answered, dazed with a realisation that had kept nagging since I saw a stack of Carbink. “Mademoiselle Calme apparently disagreed with me, and it escalated into violence.”

“Doctor...” Donar warned, still holding Serena back. “Come on, Serena. Let's go away. You're attracting attention!”

“She insulted my papa!” Serena snapped back. “I- I-! Donar, let go of me!”

“Officer Jenny might come!” Donar snapped, pulling Serena by the hand out of the Pokémon Centre's sliding doors.

I went to the counter immediately. “Nurse Joy. The Carbink that just came in.”

“Ah?” Nurse Joy looked up, harried. “Yes, they're down with suffocation, the poor dears—”

“Mark them down for ferrous compound analysis,” I insisted. “Please.”

“Iron poisoning?” Nurse Joy realised.

“A possibility,” I nodded, turning away from the counter to march through the crowd, staring at all of the witnesses' expressions before I found Brooke and Chaise amongst the crowd.

“There is a potential mass poisoning going on. What are you waiting for?” I snapped. “Back to work!”

Altair and Darkrai followed my march out of the Pokémon Centre, where I found Durand standing guard outside of the Pokémon Centre with some of the recovering Pokémon patients. I chatted with the Golett a bit more about future employment, gave him an identity and a memento in the form of a referral mail to Augustine, and then I found a basket which I filled with Berries. We then escorted the Golett only as far as the city limits facing the Reflection Cave, before I knelt to face the Golett.

“With this, our contract is over,” I told the rotund little golem Pokémon before I kissed its approximate forehead. “You’ve been a very good escort, Durand. Au revoir.”

One clay arm rose, and the Golett attempted some form of a salute that nearly had me giggling at its antics.

As Durand disappeared in a burst of Phantom Force, a brunet man in a trench coat approached me. “Ceci est territoire limité,” he spoke in badly stilted Kalosian. “Qui êtes-vous?”
“I haven’t known,” I answered him in Standard. “If this is restricted territory, then who are you?”

He produced a pass, upon which his face was on, along with the emblem of the world’s most inefficient agency. “International Police. The name’s Oak, Woten Oak.”

“What was that for?” Serena rounded on me the moment we were out of earshot.

“You can’t attack a professor, Serena,” I explained, feeling rather out of touch. “Look, we can probably bring this up to Professor Sycamore-”

“Sycamore’s as terrified of her as you are,” Serena snapped back. “He won’t try anything. We’ve got to fight against her tyranny.”

I privately considered that Dr du Bois was not so much a tyrant as a free spirit. “Yes, well, hitting her in public isn’t going to do you favours. The Gym Leader is going to know, Serena. What’s this going to reflect on you as a Trainer?”

At this, Serena blushed, looking at the asphalt floor as we walked in the streets. Shalour City was a coastal city, and it showed as a passing breeze brought the calming scent of brine and petrichor to tickle my nose. It was not the most appropriate mindset.

We ended up meandering down to Shalour’s harbour, where, aside from a wide spread of sand forming a path that led towards a small island, where a tower squatted, surrounded by ochre walls. By its very presence, the tower seemed to intimidate. Serena and I stood there, unsure of whether to walk forth or turn back.

“Maybe we should go there,” Serena suggested.

Since it was likely that Dr du Bois was still at the Pokémon Centre, or had seen off Durand, I followed her across the beach onto the island. It rose like some tiered wedding cake decorated with colourful houses and tents, separated by a set of stone steps along which their street-lamp sentinels were covered in paper.

I looked at one of the posters. “Oh, the Shalour tournament's going to be here. Serena- Serena?!”

My friend had already left me behind, climbing the steps with a sudden, decisive spring. I sighed, climbing after her past a set of gilded pillars decorated in spirals, into the main tower.

The inside of the tower was like a lighthouse, a spiralling staircase leading up above, but most staircases did not have large stone statues of Lucario as their guard dogs. Nor did those statue-guardians stand on plagues as tall as two men, with a... door? It was a free-standing room that thing was on? What?

I stopped, craning my head up to look at the giant statue in dim light. That Lucario was different; it looked more like K9, or how Altair had been dressed during the movie shoot. But... the manga, was new, right?

There was a plaque by the door, brass tarnished with age and the carvings uncertain:

Nous, ses descendants, avons formé la Maison de Lierre et donc déclarons l’ouverture de la Tour Maîtrise au quatorze juillet de la douzième année du règne du roi Dagobert de la Maison Cent-Feuilles.

“It’s Kalosian!” Serena realised, reading the text. “Long, long ago, a man and his Lucario came here. They found two strange stones. That was the first Mega Evolution of the world” – Donar, Mega Evolution!”

I nodded in trepidation, staring up from the masked Altair -lookalike to the plaque. “Yeah... keep reading, please.”

“Oh, sorry!” Serena huffed. “We, his descendants, formed the House of Lierre, and thus declare the opening of the Tower of Mastery on the fourteenth of July of the twelfth year of the reign of the king Dagobert of the House of Cent-Feuilles.’ That means this fort must be over two thousand years old!”

“It's not,” a voice echoed behind us.

Slowly, the two of us turned behind to stare at the very angry blonde woman standing in the doorway.

“Care to explain why you're here?” the woman drawled, blue eyes shimmering dangerously. She was covered in mud and sweat – probably from helping out at the landslide.

“You're Leader Korrina!” I blurted, suddenly remembering. “Shalour's Gym Leader!”

“Oh...” she blinked. “Yes?”

“I'm Serena Calme, and he's Donar,” Serena offered, visibly excited. “If you're here... then this is the Tower of Mastery, the home of Mega Evolution!”

On that very same day, I met Monsieur Oak Sr.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois.

Chapter End Notes

Lierre = ivy. The meaning is approximately 'friendship'.
XX: Consulter - To Consult

Chapter Summary

The question is resolved. I have disabused Donar of the notion forcefully.

“Altair did not mention much about his life in Shalour before Daisy,” Dr du Bois explained. “I met Monsieur Oak the senior on my way from discharging a Golett towards the Sycamore Laboratory, quelle surprise.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 33 (cont.): M. Oak Sr and I found ourselves visiting Korrina at the same time, and we found Donar and Mlle. Calme speaking with the Gym Leader...

As a researcher connected to a laboratory as large as the Sycamore Research Laboratory, on top of the École de Illumis, I am bound by contract to inform Monsieur Woten Oak about his son, despite my suspicions piling like coins at the baccarat tables in Coumarine City's casinos.

“Four Pokémon already, was it?” Woten Oak smiled thinly. The agent had invited me for coffee, would not take a refusal, and thus I ended up following him for a no-doubt tense conversation.

At least he chose the patio tables. Despite the lack of many hotels in Yantreizh – there were many inns that could only claim the title nominally, and we stayed at one – there were excellent cafés with patios facing the coast and the Île de Grand-Maître.

“You don't need to hesitate on my account, Madame Linden,” M. Oak offered. “My son can be rather difficult.”

“I have not found the boy a difficulty,” I demurred. “Dr du Bois, s'il vous plaît.”

“Oh?” M. Oak nodded. “It is... rather difficult, I understand. I told Vendredi that, but she wouldn’t listen, that Kalos was the best place for him to settle.”

“Madame Oak, I comprehend, worked as a Gym Trainer,” I replied as a waiter approached us.

“Vous avez choisi, madame et monsieur?” the server offered.

“Nous voudrions la carte, s'il vous plaît,” I replied before Woten Oak could speak.

“Language barrier,” M. Oak spoke as the server left. “It was one of the things Vendredi never could teach me... he never learned it, I expect. It’s very hard to live in Kalos and not speak a word in Standard.”

“You did not ask, Monsieur,” I replied. “You will always find a Standard speaker.”

For the sake of his ego, I did not add that the average Kalosian would probably find his features far too arrogant and cruel to even consider politeness towards. If he had not said so, I would have
wondered how soft-faced Donar and this specimen of rugged cruelty could share the same name, let alone the same blood.

The server returned with two cards, handed to the two of us.

“Excusez-moi, est-ce que vous parlez anglais?” I asked the besuited man with the apron, a tad sharper than I intended.

“Yes, madame,” the server nodded to M. Oak. “And mister would like?”

“Coffee,” M. Oak tersely stated. “Black, please.”

“The Baie Grena tisane, please,” I ordered.

“Very good, madame. Will mister and madame want a snack?”

“No,” we answered together.

“Je vais apporter ça tout de suite,” the server left, passing a man reading « Le Monde » and reporting on the rise of wool-weavers’ strikes in the Sinnoh region. We waited until two separate orders had been delivered before the conversation meandered along.

“I believe you’ve formed some impression of me,” M. Oak stated. So at least, Donar had inherited that sharpness of mind somewhere.

“Not at all,” I answered. “You seem a busy man, and the Oak dynasty is a long one.”

“Not from Samuel Oak’s side, no,” Woten Oak answered. “I was born in Mistralton City, actually. Vendredi and I met when she was on a trip through Unova, she was still Vendredi Coriandre then. One thing led to another, and we got married. Donar was honestly a surprise that led to it. Neither of us wanted to give up our careers, and my work in Unova leaves me with little time. Vendredi toted him around Johto, Hoenn and Sinnoh with a spell in Kanto, Donar’s birthplace, before they moved here. It must have been five years since I last saw him.”

There was something left out of the picture, but I left it alone with a certain revelation of Donar’s background. “The Team Plasma investigation.”

His face twitched. “Ghetsis was a completely new type of threat. It wasn’t safe for Vendredi or Donar, especially since Detective Lack and Looker got into the business.”

“Children grow independent from their parents,” I demurred. “Much like Norman and Ruby did.”

“They grow up so fast,” M. Oak agreed.

“You are fine with Donar’s choices, then?” I asked.

“Why would I not be?” M. Oak considered. “A journey is a beginning. Plus, if he’s already started, he might as well go for broke. You are travelling with him, Dr du Bois?”

“It’s my work,” I answered. “Part of my work concerns theories of human deviance. After all, with Pokémon, the monopoly of violence controlled by any single regional police is lost, and the effectiveness of the International Police doesn’t work. Part of my work involves theorising about why people deviate from social norms to hurt and kill.”

“That sounds interesting,” M. Oak leaned forward. “I did not think academics were interested in anything other than Pokémon.”
I took a sip of tea. “Even silly academics need a focus. Mine just happens to coincide with a milieux of research opportunities.”

“Your theories...?”

“Are irrelevant to the subject of our discussion, M. Oak,” I considered the dark hue of my tea, finding the tartness of the Pomeg just right. Someone must have boiled the seeds and the leaves together for nearly three hours.

“Woten, please,” M. Oak answered. “Donar, was it? When is he getting to Coumarine?”

“It depends if he can get through the Shalour Gym,” I demurred, electing not to mention the man’s name. “Sociologists refer to this phenomenon as the ‘independence run.’”

“The run before reality sets in,” he reflected, almost idly. Some transformation flitted across as he spoke, any warmth from the Oak mother and son swept to become an iron mask that was gone in an instant.

Just an International Police investigator? Not likely.

Setting my teacup back down upon its saucer with a surgeon’s hands, I did not stare at the calluses that were obvious in hindsight, nor the sociopathic mask that took one to know one, nor of the sudden danger of our position in the open air of Shalour City. Neither did I look towards Altair, whose posture was almost unnaturally straight for a Lucario on standby, and who might possibly be scanning the surroundings with aura. Nor did I draw attention towards the extra shadow of my shadow.

“Most parents would prefer that their children do not leave the nest so soon,” I commented.

“Vendredi and I are not most parents,” M. Oak chuckled levelly. “My wife and I will have to drop by Castelia City soon to eradicate the remains of Team Plasma. It's really not much of an option. The sooner Donar can take care of himself, the more we'll be able to leave him to his own devices. The Rhyhorn racer, Grace, she did that, and her daughter's head of the Kalos League. That should mean something, right?”

“Madame Linden left with her daughter's knowledge and blessing,” I replied. “I suppose we must give credence to your travails, Monsieur. However, Donar...”

The iron mask sank back, a mask of quiet tragedy. “You understand my work, then. And its consequences.”

I could hardly imagine. My mother had divorced Dr Hugo du Bois when he got too busy to return home. Vendredi Oak must either be very hard-up on her financial affairs or truly devoted to continue this farce of a family, with an absentee father and a distant son. It explained some things; like how Donar wore no cap on his first day. Like how he only seemed to own multiple sets of one track-suit and sneakers. Like how he absorbed Pokémon knowledge like a sponge, but had nearly no idea of how to take care of himself.

“I believe this has been a rather productive meeting, Monsieur,” I commented. “You are here to investigate the landslide?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Right now we've no idea if the attack on Zapdos and the landslide are related, but I found evidence that showed presence of a Tyranitar on the mountain. I'm going to find the local Gym Leader, see if she can spare a Fighting-type Pokémon. We've got to either capture or chase it away before the entire mountain range of Kalos is destroyed.”
“Is that so? Then I should not have interrupted your investigation. I apologise.”

Woten Oak laced his fingers together beside the empty coffee cup on the table. He opened his mouth, abruptly closing it when my Holo Caster vibrated, jarring enough to feel under the table.

I glared at the device, the moment of irritation softening when I saw Augustine's name flash across the screen. “S'il vous plaît,” I told M. Oak as I stood up to walk into the coffee-shop. “Altair, please stay.”

I was installed within a washroom cubicle before I answered the call. “Allô?”

“Daisy?” the voice that answered abruptly roused my anger. “Mes excuses. Augustine was rather insistent that the Kalos League stay away from you.”

“C'est Marguerite Linden du Bois. Qui est à l'appareil?” I replied frostily. “This is Marguerite. Who is speaking?

On the screen, she rolled her eyes. “C'est Diantha. J'utilise l'holokit d'Augustine.” This is Diantha. I am using Augustine's Holo Caster.

“Pourquoi le champion de Kalos m'appelle?” Why is the Champion of Kalos calling me?

“Oh, pour l'amour de-” Diantha stared at me. “You might as well use Standard. Marguerite.”

“You were doing so well,” I mocked, but switched languages as requested. “Why did you borrow his Holo Caster?”

“The Zapdos that crashed down at Shalour City made inter-regional news,” Diantha informed me. “Your notification to Augustine was processed while he and I were discussing measures to take. The League would prefer not to fall to the same trappings that befell our fellows in the Indigo continent and Sinnoh.”

The League did not want to stand aside on this matter? Pokémon Leagues usually cited policy neutrality in such matters, making the maintenance of social order in the training world harder to police.

“What changed?” I asked suspiciously. “More importantly, what are you not telling me? A Zapdos crashing down on Shalour City should not make much of an impact.”

That Absol sightings reported in Geosenge... it could not be so.

Her brow furrowed on the wobbly screen. “I cannot imagine that you do not already know, or have not deducted so.”

“The Tyranitar?”

“Oui. Wikstrom had tracked it to Geosenge, where it promptly eluded him. It belonged to a Trainer that was part of île duMuguet.”

“They brought a Tyranitar from Sinnoh over,” I echoed in disbelief. “A League Tyranitar, at that.”

Diantha's lips deepened in a moue of distaste. “Madame Shirona and I have been actively searching le chemin Fourrage ever since the rampage started. We believed it might head towards la Steppe d'Illumis. It did not, contrary to our expectations.”

I pursed my lips. It was not a bad plan, seeing as most Pokémon would indeed converge towards
their home habitat, and there was only two locations in Kalos that had the conditions required, one of which was too far away. Yet, somehow it changed paths, went the opposite direction and towards the one location in Kalos swamped with its double weakness. Beyond here was the River Tisane, and the mouth of the Rivière Champagne that Coumarine City had stood sentinel over should have noticed the Tyranitar. No self-respecting Tyranitar would subject itself to water without cause. “The Trainer?”

Diantha pursed her lips. “We received word of its rampage by the fact of its Trainer's absence. Julia of Hearthome City. The worst has come into being.”

“This is going to be bad for Île-de-l’arc,” I automatically calculated the odds of the unlucky Julia's survival and found them wanting. “And how do I fall into this, that you had to call me?”

“We did not find the body. We assume that the Tyranitar has it. You saw what happened; this threat to Kalos needs to be resolved.”

“So the League shall resolve it,” I answered before hanging up. “Good day, Madame Carnet.”

The heart of the mystery was promoted by Professor Sycamore, a promise of power.

“Professor Sycamore sent you two?” Korrina demanded.

“Yes, Leader Korrina!” Serena brightly replied. “Professor Sycamore sent us to learn the secrets of Mega Evolution.”

“Ah,” Korrina echoed a sentiment. “My late grandfather mentioned him. Professor Sycamore once apprenticed here to learn Mega Evolution, but he couldn't master it. Welcome. I am also the Mega Evolution Guru.”

“Leader Korrina is the teacher...?” Serena's eyes could have ballooned. “Please teach us the secret of Mega Evolution!”

“Well...” Korrina gave a wan smile. “How much do you know about Mega Evolution already?”

Clearly, Serena had not been expecting such a response, but she gave her best answer. “Erm... it requires two stones. One held by the Trainer, the other held by the Pokémon, and a bond between Pokémon and Trainer is needed to unlock the transformation in certain fully evolved Pokémon.”

“True...” Korrina reached into her pocket, pulling out a large orange orb with swirled like of red and blue imprisoned within, that fit in the palm of her hand. “For example, this is a type of Mega Stone, called a Lucarionite. A Lucario holds it. Then, when Lucario and Trainer agrees, this clé de voûte, or Key Stone, activates the Lucarionite, triggering a physical transformation in the Lucario until the end of the battle.”

I saw it; the stone embedded in the ring of her left ring finger sparkled, catching a veritable rainbow of colours. It reminded me of something I had seen... with Dr du Bois...

“Professor Sycamore mentioned that all of the Kalos Champions know Mega Evolution,” Serena said.

“All of the Champions?” Korrina smiled. “Well... most Champions to date have learned some part of it. Not all of it can be taught, though. A great deal of the secret lies in faith.”

Shauna I barely knew, the less said about Serena the better. Of course, Dr du Bois would stand out, a
pedestal of its own merits, of course. Yet, even stained in mud and sweat and imperfect, Korrina would be one of the vivid sights of my mind, especially her smile.

As we walked out, Korrina promised that she would accept students the moment a new supply of Key Stones were found – “Otherwise we can't even use the Mega Stone!” she joked – as two people approached. Behind them, two shadows hung back; one a veritable phantom, the other a stocky Lucario.

_Greetings, Leader Korrina,_ the Lucario greeted. He more or less ignored my nascent surprise at seeing that man here.

Korrina paused. “Altair?”

“Altair, I thought you were with Daisy,” Korrina.

_She was... busy,_ the Aura Pokémon elected to answer. _She sends her regards. This is my temporary Trainer, Marguerite Linden du Bois._

“Marguerite, _s'il vous plaît,_” Dr du Bois greeted Korrina, taking a step forward. My jaw about dropped when the two women exchanged cheek-kisses. Korrina stepped back, smiling until her blue eyes dropped towards Dr du Bois’s hands and frowned lightly.

“Altair did not mention much about his life in Shalour before Daisy,” Dr du Bois explained. “I met Monsieur Oak the senior on my way from discharging a Golett towards the Sycamore Laboratory, _quelle surprise._ Donar is my subject of study in accord with the Sycamore Research Laboratory.”

“Subject of study?” Korrina echoed.

“I am a sociologist specialising in anthro-Pokémon relations,” Dr du Bois explained. “Though I earned my doctorate at the _École Normale Supérieure de Kalos à Illumis._ To do my research on the sociological forces behind the world of Pokémon Training, I have been following Donar around.”

“... oh,” Korrina commented with the air of vague confusion and half-clarification before she turned to him.

“Leader Korrina,” the man greeted. “I see you've met my son, Donar.”

“Oh... _bonjour,_ Monsieur Oak!” Serena greeted, before her smile faded slightly, turning her head quizzically towards me and then to him.

“Donar,” he greeted.

“Hi, dad,” I blandly answered.

He frowned, but said nothing, his eyes dead as always. “Is this your friend?”

“Dad, this is Serena,” I spoke mechanically. “Serena, this is my dad. So where are we going this time?”

“Going?” he repeated.

“Well,” I shrugged. “You only come back when we're about to move, right?”

He blinked. “Erm... no. We're not moving. Your mother is very happy here, and I think... well, it's time to look at a permanent settlement in Kalos, perhaps.”
“Oh.” I echoed. It was almost like all of my anger had been banked.

“This is your third Gym battle, right?” he continued, plain and uncaring and monotonous.

“Yes,” my hands tightened. “Not that you'd care.”

He ignored me. “I am investigating the landslide.”

“I see.”

He gave me a flat look, but nodded. “I will be in the Reflection Cave. Would you like to come along? Miss Calme?”


“I don't want to. Serena, I'll see you soon for our match,” I turned to Dr du Bois. “Doctor, do you have research to do?”

“Of course,” Dr du Bois thankfully answered. “Apologies, Monsieur Oak, but Donar is my temporary research assistant. He is required.”

“Ah, I see,” he was laughing as we gave our regards and walked away. “Erm... what did you do again? Why use my son?”

Days later, I was frowning when Donar asked his question.

“Pardonnez-moi, what?” I automatically asked.

Donar's cheeks pinked, not very hard in the approaching dawn over Shalour City. It had been a day since I met M. Oak the senior, and, from Donar's eye-bags, clearly he could not sleep. “I said, why did you pick me?”

Beside me, Altair and Darkrai paused their argument of a croque-monsieur versus a croque-madame. Almost immediately, Donar's team looked up, Bagon stopped head-butting his leg, and nearly all Pokémon present started discreetly moving away. Traitors, the lot of them.

“Clarify.”

“Well... I was the new kid on the block,” Donar slowly stated. “You had no reason to stick to me.”

“Four other Trainers set out with you,” I answered. “Of those, three could not have coped with my Ghosts. Serena clearly did not like me. While likeability is not compulsory, it does help, and there is an element of choice in such matters where the subject of study is concerned. You were my only option then.”

I paused. “I was not born on the Kalos region.”

“You weren't?” Donar automatically said, before his teeth clicked shut. “I mean... oh.”

“I know what you mean,” I answered. “I was a... new kid on the block, myself, when I started out on the journey. Every bit of advice I gave you were derived from the mistakes of my own journey.”

“So... Altair was your starter Pokémon?” Donar asked, changing the subject rather than ponder on what, exactly, that I had so much advice mean.
“No. I started much like you,” I reflected. “He was killed in battle.”

“I’m... sorry.”

“Thank you,” I answered rather than place him in a spot. “I had not known my own father much, and my mother was often too busy. Your father seems to be adequate.”

“Fat lot of good,” Donar grumbled back, but the tension had ceased. “The only times he ever comes home, we’re moving, and then he disappears all over again.”

“To be expected,” I answered. “If he did not, your entire family would have been dead.”

Donar paused. “Dead?”

“Did he never tell you of his travail?” I asked. “Monsieur Oak is an agent of the International Police.”

“The... International Police?” Donar echoed. “Erm... like Officer Jenny?”

“The International Police are the ones who dismantle organisations like Team Rocket, and maintain order across regions,” I explained. “Officer Jenny is part of the local police; the International Police stretch across the regions. As an agent, everything about Monsieur Oak could be targeted by the remains of organisations like Team Flare or the Rockets.”

Donar flinched. “O- Oh... but you’d say that, wouldn't you?”

“Is this something about your father?”

“Well...” Donar flinched, but plodded on, “he's... women like him. A lot. Mom said that he had to stay away because...”

Much like the Pokémon Inspection Agency, Rangers and the Pokémon Leagues, I reflected, the International Police form an important aspect of global governance. Their effectiveness, however, had left much to be desired due to lacking the monopoly over state-sanctioned violence. This left them with many unsavoury options, especially lying to children.

“I have no reason to support your father,” I replied, and Donar flinched for some reason. “In fact, I would advise you disabuse yourself of the notion immediately.”

“Y- Yes, madame!”

I finished my black tea in a foul mood. The sheer thought... Woten Oak might be ruggedly attractive, but that was simply a turn-off. The man was older than I was!

So was Wikstrom, I reasoned, and deposited the thought into the depths of the mind palace I called my own.

Mid-morning found us in Kalos Route 12, Fourrage Road. Across the mouth of the Rivière Tisane stood the Baa de Mer Ranch, where hordes of Skiddo meandered beside Mareep. The wide field was optimal for Pokémon training.

I called out Aegis, who sleepily blinked at me as I faced Donar. “If you need help, I shall be training Aegis.”

Donar blinked, but nodded as I turned away to unleash Crystal out and set up several Will-O-Wisp flames. “Aegis. Stance Change Claw.”
“Whoa!” Donar gaped the moment Aegis unfolded himself to unleash an arc of ghostly energy to disrupt the flames. “What's that?”

“Shadow Claw,” I answered. “A move that can be learnt via TM.”

“No, not that... the Stance Change,” Donar clarified.

“Stance Change is the unique ability of all Aegislash,” I answered. “Unlike its evolutions of Honedge and Doublade, Stance Change allows an Aegislash to switch between a bulky, defensive Pokémon to an offensively oriented Pokémon. With Reflect and Light Screen, an Aegislash can and did kill entire battlefields of Pokémon. Crystal, retaliate with Incinerate.”

Aegis snapped back as the attack came, weathered with the honeycomb light that protected it from the searing heat.

“King’s Shield will not protect you for long,” I severely replied. “Crystal. Will-O-Wisp.”

The Chandelure spun, unleashing the demonic fires that had Aegis cringing back before it lashed out with a Shadow Claw, catching Crystal to send the Luring Pokémon spinning to the ground. A spitting sound ensued as parts of the grass caught on fire.

I put it out with my foot as Donar clapped, along with a long, low whistle.

“I challenge you to a Pokémon battle!” a Trainer popped out of the surrounding bush.

“Erm, you don't want to-”

“Go, Binacle!” the Trainer flung out a Pokémon that resembled two rocky hand sticking out of a white chalky rock, one of the Kalos region's natives. Coincidentally also used in cooking. Ah...

“Water Gun!” the Trainer smirked, pointing towards Crystal. Ah...

“Energy Ball.”

Bless her heart, Crystal cackled as the attack hit, sending an uppity Binacle back to hit, knocked out.

“I win,” I offered to the gob-smacked Trainer.

“I tried to warn you...” Donar muttered as the Trainer handed over some money and made a run for it.

My mood very much improved, I even matched Aegis against Altair against Darkrai. While Aegis was the bulkier, Altair had willpower and Bone Rush – for now – and we were relearning Crunch. While Darkrai had speed and Dark Void, his defences were not good, and we were resolving that as part of the payment process.

That apprenticeship under a Move Tutor was a great help, I reflected.

A purple ribbon snaked about, Aegis retaliating with a snick to defend against Altair. My Lucario shifted his weight to lower his centre of gravity, choosing to skid and turn on one foot, but then he flinched and pointed down.

“What happened?” I asked as Aegis stood down.

Altair pointed towards the matted earth on the grass, and nestled within the heart of a giant footprint. I knelt down, my Holo Caster fumbling to find the camera application, though a practised eye
already told me that which I wanted to know-

Blood.

“What?!”

Donar just poked a bush nearby. Amongst the silence of the Mareep lambs bleating, there existed the heart of a palm... a human palm, that was.

Day 40: The question is resolved. I have disabused Donar of the notion forcefully.

Chapter End Notes

In the Pokémon games or the animé to date, Coumarine City does not have a casino. In fact, Bulbapedia lists only Celadon, Goldenrod, Mauville and Veilstone as holding Game Corners, or casinos. However, I make note of Coumarine City and its hypothetical gambling industry because there was a reference to baccarat, and the most popular version of the game played in real-life France is Chemin de Fer (Iron Road). That is, railways. Coumarine City is the only known city in Kalos with a rail-road or monorail.

Fun fact: Chemin de Fer was the original game played by James Bond in the novel version of Casino Royale. I have no clue why would anyone switch to Texas Hold 'Em Poker, but I assume it was for popularity.

The Île de Grand-Maître is basically that island where the Tower of Mastery was.
XXI: Compter – To Count

Chapter Summary

I am sorry to report that Julia of Hearthome will neither see her home again. Nor will her left palm ever fix itself to the rotted stump that remained of what we retrieved. It happens when her former partner dragged her rotting corpse across Fourrage Road and through the Tisane.

_____________

Holding onto a smoking, squat-barrelled orange gun, Dr du Bois heaved a breath slowly as the Tyranitar fell to its knees and nearly began rolling, its moans of pain frightening and heaving up to crush my legs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 47: This is a continuation, penned seven days after the fact that we fought off the rogue Tyranitar.

Yes, the attacker of the Zapdos was a Tyranitar, as our electro-avian friend had established beforehand. However, Zapdos had neglected to mention the fate of Julia of Hearthome City.

I am sorry to report that Julia of Hearthome will neither see her home again. Nor will her left palm ever fix itself to the rotted stump that remained of what we retrieved. It happens when her former partner dragged her rotting corpse across Fourrage Road and through the Tisane.

I know you will read this, Professor Oak. We found clear signs of sexual abuse. The semen we swabbed did not belong to a human being. The vaginal tearing was too large for any human being. Her hips had been crushed by sheer weight.

(Edit. The professorship would be gone before I let Samuel Oak draw his own conclusions from this.)

A palm.

Dr du Bois was pale, even paler than usual as she produced a handkerchief to poke at the... meat... and check it. As her head bowed, a breeze passed my face and with it what felt like a load of sand.

“Wind...?” Dr du Bois turned her head up to face me and then the river that flowed between Shalour and Route 12. One of her hands trailed towards her pockets. “Donar, get back to town.”


“Altair, I need you,” Dr du Bois flung out the Pokéball, calling out the Lucario. “Crystal, return-”

A truly terrible roar echoed, and a veritable whirlwind laced with sand erupted. Altair was batted aside as if he truly weighed nothing more, and Dr du Bois ducked before a green paw swiped at her
head, or where it had been.

The Tyranitar bellowed, an earthquake with every step rendering me from being able to move further. Pointed rocks loomed over the field.

I skidded, staring at them in despair. Stealth Rock-

The Tyranitar let off another ear-splitting roar, its tiny triangular head oriented before it stepped, and with it an awful crack much like that time she prepared marrow on toast. Bones cracking.

“Frogadier!” I called my own Pokémon, who unleashed a Water Pulse immediately.

The Armour Pokémon bellowed before it charged towards me. One arm slapped away my Frogadier, before its mouth glowed, an orb of energy about to be unleashed and eradicate Donar Oak.

I reached for Frogadier, rolling, trying to run-

A fizz echoed, and the Tyranitar screamed, an unholy mix of pain and fear and hate of the behemoth monster. It stormed front and back, clutching with stubby red-brown-green paws as it stumbled at its face, at its smoking head. On its head, I saw, red-white flames flickered, eating through.

Holding onto a smoking, squat-barrelled orange gun, Dr du Bois heaved a breath slowly as the Tyranitar fell to its knees and nearly began rolling, its moans of pain frightening and heaving up to crush my legs.

Frogadier made a note of distress, about to form a Water Pulse.

“No,” Dr du Bois cautioned, shaking as she got back to her feet in the midst of the dying sandstorm. Her hands shook before she put the still-smoking gun away somewhere on her person. “Magnesium burns in water. Altair.”

Understood. The Lucario squatted, using his Bone Rush to knock out the Armour Pokémon. He then started scraping up some of the sand on the ground to pile on the groaning creature's hind-brain.

Dr du Bois limped over, and after a moment of seeing them shovel sand to pile on the monster's head, I joined them. The flames hissed and sputtered, more white than red, and I had to stop several times from the heat, Frogadier always hissing between the flames and I. Somehow, though, shovelling sand onto a Tyranitar's head was rather calming.

“You shot it?”

“I was about to call for help before it advanced, clearly with horrible intentions,” Dr du Bois elaborated. “A Tyranitar with Sand Stream walking into Shalour could cause a repeat of the landslide. Flare guns were meant to call for help. However, it did not act as expected, and clearly it meant us harm.”

“You shot it,” I echoed in disbelief as the head was completely buried and Altair sighed.

Dr du Bois hauled herself to her feet, legs shaking as she meandered some ways away to peer towards the surrounding fields, empty as the Mareep had long since fled. In the distance, a puff of white floated on the Tisane.

Dr du Bois sighed as she paused, taking in whatever sight there was. “Donar... go get... Officer Jenny. Leader Korrina, too. We need... evidence...”
She collapsed onto her knees, and it was only Darkrai who prevented her from falling onto her face. Darkrai made a noise of distress. *Marguerite...?*

“Dr du Bois...?” I shook her arm, shrouded in her coat and cold from wind. “Doctor? Dr du Bois!”

Sometime during my six years of studying, when I found myself in Unova for an academic conference, I was in Undella Town. I remember bringing Crystal, who was still a Lampent, to the local casino. Undella Town was a resort town, and it showed in the multitude of humanity that littered its beaches and buildings. Compared to the innocence from Nimbasa City, Undella Town drew a far more mature, far more hungry crowd to fritter away fortunes in Poké. I enjoyed the baccarat tables, especially *chemin de fer*.

I had *banque* when the Pumpkaboo Pie cocktail was served to me.

“From the gentleman across,” the server helpfully pointed out that untrustworthy man, his thin face and the smirk permanently etched onto it marking him as the Dark Master of the Unova Elite Four.

I held up my unlit drink, and my new Lampent. “Flame it.”

Grimsley started as the drink caught in brilliant blue flames, and I let it continue burning while I took the straw to down the whole thing, his dark eyes in mine the whole time.

Why, of all things, did I begin to remember this...?

The flames, instead of the warm coffee liqueur and the suffusing cinnamon, tasted like wood-smoke. Heat blistered at my arms and hands, and my skin peeled and blackened from fire. What was going on, I knew not; neither the mystery of my feelings nor of my comprehension was understood by myself. A lone soul, scattered to pain and loneliness for reasons I knew not. Why did he attack us...?

“If you wish for something, you must be prepared to pay a price for it.”

Will this... save my home...?

“I swear upon my name, that this land will be saved from this catastrophe. However...”

You're so unfair... Tricking a dying girl into such an act, truly one of the fée... I shall place my faith into the future. If I must die over and over... do it, Xerneas!

Black flashed to white, and I fell awake.

The Verey flare gun was a weight near my leg, solid and reassuring. My limbs could move, extremities and all, and I was prepared to fight.

*Marguerite?*

My guard fell by increments as I reassured myself that this was the Darkrai I knew.

You are awake, Altair commented.

“What happened?” I asked.

*You discovered her body.* Darkrai explained, seemingly unperturbed. *Then you blacked out. The fighter and I had to carry you back. The Tyranitar was also discovered. The officers outside... they mentioned something about charges?*
“Legal charges. I might get into a spot of trouble over the law. It's not a problem, because of self-defence, Darkrai.” I widened my eyes, the contours of my face stretching to mimic tearful innocence and desperation, like the first time I had killed. “I will get us out of this.”

*What are you doing?* Darkrai now questioned.

“Trying to look innocent,” I answered. “Human cultural assumptions places me at an advantage, mainly because I'm a woman and an academic, and no one thinks academics have the stomach to shoot people. If I convince people to draw their own conclusions, the fact of the matter is that many would see only the cover and thus the deception succeeds. How do I look?”

...*passable*, Altair answered me, since Darkrai seemed at a loss for words.

The door of the single room – I'd only noticed it now – opened, and with it a doctor accompanied by Officer Jenny.

“You're awake!” the doctor sounded surprised. “Well, aside from shock... Officer Jenny. Would you mind...?”

“It's fine, docteur,” I replied.

The doctor checked my pupil response and breathing as well as the miscellany of medicine, before he declared the result I already knew. “Mademoiselle Linden-”

“Dr du Bois,” I interrupted. “I'm an anthro-Pokémon sociologist attached to the Sycamore Laboratory. Although, I think it's time to switch to political science.”

“Oh?” Officer Jenny nodded, before producing a notebook. “Well, we need your statement.”

“I'll be pleased to cooperate,” I answered. “It's so sad, that girl...”

Officer Jenny nodded grimly. Perhaps it was due to my involvement as the one who discovered the rotting corpse, but I was let off with only a few questions.

*How may I achieve that?* Darkrai nearly sparkled.

“Darkrai... it'll take a bit of deception to pull off,” I answered. I would have loved to continue disabusing him of the notion of making himself seem innocent – lost cause though it seemed – before a knock echoed.

*Shall I...?*

“Should you wish,” I answered. I gave fifteen seconds before I called: “*Entrez!*”

“If I may, Mademoiselle,” the flash bastard in a yellow scarf and black suit made a bow, right hand crossed to above his left pectoral.

If I had the energy to waste on full-body shudders, I would. Daisy Linden and Grimsley had never met face-to-face; Marguerite Linden du Bois might not be remembered, especially from the gambling maniac of the Unovan Elite Four. Though it begged the question of what was Grimsley doing here to begin with...

“Mademoiselle du Bois,” Grimsley Pieris prompted, and I realised that to him, I must be a young girl with the bad luck to be involved in all this.

“Doctor,” I automatically corrected, watching his opinion change. Worst-kept secret of a gambling
addiction or not, Grimsley did not seem to possess a superior poker face. Or he could be prepared to throw me off. Was he the good or bad cop?

“Dr du Bois,” he corrected. Oddly, he ignored or overlooked Darkrai. “You were the one who discovered Julia's body?”

“That... I am,” I paused. Dead bodies were all well and fine, but advanced decomposition of animal protein-based flesh did not always sit well.

“Could you please tell me of the circumstances?”

“I was training with Donar,” I replied. “Donar Oak, I mean, a young Trainer. I am currently following him around as part of my dissertation of the social forces surrounding a Pokémon Trainer.”

A humanities scholar, I watched his estimation of me fall. “He must not be a very good Trainer.”

“He's talented enough,” I answered, reviewing my words. True, Donar Oak did have the potential to go into the Leagues, though there was a reason why two out of three professional Trainers failed. Resources were one flaw of his quest, but I digress. “My partner Lucario, Altair, he assisted me when I felt the sandstorm coming by the banks of the Tisane.”

“You have a Darkrai and a Lucario travelling together?” Grimsley questioned.

“Darkrai is my research assistant,” I promptly replied. “Altair is my partner. The difference is that I have Altair's Pokéball and Darkrai has no Pokéball.”

“How very unusual,” Grimsley bowed to Darkrai. “A pleasure to meet you, lord of nightmares.”

Darkrai's cyan eye glittered like a steel blade, before he settled back.

“Darkrai was facing against my Chandelure when the Tyranitar attacked,” I continued, my eyes widening. “When it did, I presupposed that it was a Pokémon with Sand Stream. I withdrew my Pokémon and I was about to use my emergency flares to call for help, but it appeared, and I... I killed it, didn't I?”

“No, no,” Grimsley assured, palms up to face me. “Please, elaborate on the circumstances.”

This was going to take a while.

I don't know if we were extra-lucky, or if Dr du Bois was just that well-connected. Barely three days after the Tyranitar attack she had gotten a call from Professor Sycamore and the Professor Oak, as well as a gift basket from Professor Juniper in Unova. Rangers and Officer Jenny dropped in on her.

Wikstrom himself, with a member of the Unova Elite Four that gave me a rather warped feeling wavered between trust and mistrust, came over with a giant bouquet of wild daisies.

“For the daisy,” Wikstrom had offered to Dr du Bois, pale and still stuck in bed. During that time, I had alternated my full training regime, and Bagon had started eating more, a process that the PokéDex detailed as a natural segment of preparing for evolution. Fletchinder had mastered Aerial Ace and Flame Charge, and we had decent coverage to be gotten.

“I think we need a Fighting-type,” I detailed. “After that... Steel-type? Fairy-type?”

“Something that can handle Ghost-types,” Serena added, a touch darkly.
“Well...” I pondered, walking towards the extremely stylised building that housed the Shalour Gym. The moratorium on Gym Leader battles was going to be lifted ahead of schedule, so we thought we might as well research on Korrina's battles before participation.

“What kind of building comes decorated in gilt?” Serena huffed as we ascended a set of stairs, either side with railings and a flat incline present.

I pointed to a sign by the door. “The kind with royal acclaim.”

“How d'you know?” Serena glanced.

“There's a really fancy crown on the sign,” I indicated where the fleur-de-lis was. “Dr du Bois mentioned it somewhere in Parfum Palace.”

“Oh, someone's an aficionado of Kalosian heraldry,” a man dressed as a referee rubbed his hands together, his pleasant face smiling. “This building used to be the great manor house of the Lierre lords, you know. The Lierre family still keeps it, though of course, Leader Korrina has had it modernised. Very stable architecture, the building, and the exterior protected by cultural mandate.”

“Really?” I sounded impressed, for the referee puffed up his chest.

“Yes,” the referee nodded. “Do you see the open-top crown, the one with the Lanturn as its curve? That is the mark of the Dauphin, in pre-Revolution times, establishing the duchy of Shalour with the charge of fostering the Kalos army, along with several other cities. Some of the oldest man-built buildings in Kalos Gyms in the Kalos region are the Laverre City Gym, the Santalune Gym, the Anistar Gym and our Gym.”

Serena and I followed the referee in, through a modern roller coaster rink and towards the central battlefield. Korrina was already facing off against a Trainer, her Hawlucha versus what looked like a giant chestnut on legs.

“What's that?” I muttered to myself, pulling my PokéDex.

*Chesnaught, the Spiny Armour Pokémon. When it takes a defensive posture with its fists guarding its face, it could withstand a bomb blast.*


I turned my head, peering. True to words, Shauna was facing the Gym Leader, and judging from her expression, she found it tough.

“The challenger is down to her last Pokémon!” the referee – a different guy from the one directing us to the crowded stands – called.

“We won't lose!” Shauna retorted, with Chesnaught bellowing in answer.

“My Hawlucha has the Flying-type,” Korrina pointed out. “Hawlucha, Flying Press!”

The Hawlucha leapt, falling down from above to stomp on Chesnaught.

“Chesnaught, Spiky Shield!” Shauna called.

I watched as a shield of green formed around Chesnaught, before the green flared in spikes that scratched at Hawlucha.

“Spiky Shield not only protects absolutely, but it also injures the opponent!” Shauna boasted.
“Chesnaught, follow with Seed Bomb!”

“The Pokémon nodded, about to slam an explosive seed.

“Hawlucha, Power-Up Punch!”

The Hawlucha punched, sending Chesnaught skidding back.

“Now, Aerial Ace!” Korrina called, as the Hawlucha took a running jump that led to it soaring through the air, cutting at a rush on Chesnaught, who groaned and fainted.

“Chesnaught is unable to battle. Leader Korrina wins!”

“Chesnaught...” Shauna smiled, recalling Chesnaught into his Pokéball. “Take a good rest.”


“Shauna!” the two of us approached Shauna, who turned and smiled upon our appearance.

“We were in the area!” Serena hugged Shauna. “When did you get here?”

“I only just walked through,” Shauna answered. “Hi, Serena, Donar. Have you challenged the Gym yet?”

“No, not yet,” Serena shook her head. “Come on, we should take your Pokémon to the Pokémon Centre.”

“I just don't get it... why did that Flying Press affect Chesnaught so much?” Shauna grumbled.

“Flying Press is a Fighting-type move with Flying-type attributes,” a voice mentioned behind us. “It's Hawlucha's signature move. Your Chesnaught is doubly weak to the Flying-type.”

“Noël!” I exclaimed, looking to the older Trainer.

“Bonjour,” Noël nodded to me. “Your friends?”

“Serena, Shauna, this is Noël Duval,” I introduced. “I met him at the Ambrette Lab. Noël, Shauna and Serena, my friends. The three of us, plus Tierno and Trevor, started out at the same time.”

“Bonjour, mesdemoiselles,” Noël winked as he spoke. “So you finally shook off that professor?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Dr du Bois is in hospital.”

“What? Why?”

I filled them in on the Tyranitar attack, and even mentioned Julia's body being found. Serena and Shauna were equally shocked, and Noël frowned.

“How... unfortunate,” Noël mumbled as the four of us walked in the streets of Shalour City. “A Zapdos was injured, and is at the Shalour Pokémon Centre? That's a bit... unsafe, right?”

“Unsafe?” I asked.

“Most people never see a legendary Pokémon in their lives, and for a Zapdos to appear so suddenly, not to mention stay... must have been some injury,” Noël commented to us. “There are villains who might try to catch him.”
“It's... probably safe,” I hesitated. It might not be safe, and I should have known that, but... but it was Zapdos. Surely-

The crowd waiting outside of the Pokémon Centre suddenly seemed, to me, a hunter's trap lying in wait, patient in the wait for Zapdos to leave the Shalour Pokémon Centre.

I dropped by Dr du Bois while Shauna went to get treatment for her Pokémon. The professor was not working in bed, but she was reading out loud to her Pokémon: Crystal suspended overhead, Jelly floated by the vase of daisies with Liz on top, Aegis and Altair back to back, and Darkrai waiting. She was reading:

“Il me fallut longtemps pour comprendre d'où il venait. Le petit prince, qui me posait beaucoup de questions, ne semblait jamais entendre les miennes. Ce sont des mots prononcés par hasard qui, peu à peu, m’ont tout révélé. Ainsi, quand il aperçut pour la première fois mon avion (je ne dessinerai pas mon avion, c’est un dessin beaucoup trop compliqué pour moi) il me demanda...”

“*Qu’est-ce que c’est que cette chose-là?*” Serena spoke up.

“« Ce n’est pas une chose. Ça vole. C’est un avion. C’est mon avion. »” Dr du Bois just continued reading. “Et j’étais fier de lui apprendre que je volais. Alors il s’écria: « Comment ! Tu es tombé du ciel? » « Oui, » fis-je modestement. « Ah ! ça c’est drôle... »”

“*Bonjour, Dr du Bois,∗” I said. “When are you leaving?”

“Hopefully by today,” Dr du Bois replied, a touch of asperity present as the book was set down. “*Bonjour, Donar. How was the Gym battle?∗”

“I haven't participated yet,” I answered. “I'm going to work out a plan of attack before I start on the Gym. I remember your words, Doctor.”

“What words?” Dr du Bois glared to me. “To fix relations with your father?”

“To not hold the idiot ball,” I ignored the jibe about my father. “*Noël's here too. I think he's headed to Coumarine next. Could we...?∗”

There was a long silence I was very acquainted with, before Dr du Bois inclined her head. “...Make sure you win. We need to stock up on food supplies.”

Yes!

Day 51: Donar and Serena won against the Shalour Gym, and Shauna managed to catch up as well. Donar gained the Surf HM; useful when crossing the Tisane. I am torn between splurging and with-holding. Surely, I could splurge on something for his sake...

(Edit. *Donar Oak is not my son; I am not his mother.*)
The Pumpkaboo Pie is based on the Pumpkin Pie cocktail:

1/3 shot Kahlua
1/3 shot Bailey’s Irish Cream
1/3 shot Tequila (white)
1 dash cinnamon

Carefully layer this shot with Kahlua on the bottom, Bailey’s in the middle, and tequila on top. Light the tequila on fire and sprinkle with cinnamon.

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
For a long time, I have not went to bed early. I could wax poetic about the process, but the long and the short of it began and ended with this woman, called my Trainer and mistress and non-romantic life partner, because the human lexicon is not so obvious as to refer to someone one would devote their life to without romantic connotations being involved.

"Because I shot a Tyranitar in the face, we are going to be staying for longer than expected," she broke the news to us, matter-of-fact. On her lap lay a copy of « La Voix de Kalos ». "Most of that time will be spent with me in hospital. If needed, Donar will be taking all of you out for training."

Jelly grumbled; Crystal disagreed vociferously. Aegis remained silent while Liz began an argument with the Chandelure and the Jellicent. The fact that no one else acknowledged them spoke of a comfort, a ripple in the collective aura of our new team.

Our mistress closed her eyes, opened them, and then motioned towards the leashes I held. "Oh, come on. I can't just throw you guys out to Shalour City. Wikstrom and that Grimsley are here, and the Kalos league can't afford a screw-up this fast after Julia of Hearthome was discovered.« Le Monde »would be all over it comme « Les Oreilles ».”

I wish you could, Crystal hissed.

Come now, Liz persuaded, that's no way to treat our trainer.

You only say that 'cause you can't chase me away, Liz!

Mistress clicked her tongue, drawing attention to her once again. "Altair, did the hospital say anything?"

You will be discharged in three days, and no later, I answered. Doctors made their worst patients, and my Mistress was no exception to the rule. Neither was I, come to think of it, though I had not visited the hospital for work or otherwise for some time already.

I felt Crystal got bored and start to prey on Darkrai. A heartbeat after I sensed the irregular tachycardia, Mistress smiled and grabbed Crystal with her bare hands. Aegis clattered.

"Écoutez-moi, Crystal," Mistress started, smiling at Crystal in a manner seen only when my unhinged mistress had melted the traitor's face with her own Chandelure.
The Chandelure trembled, and even Jelly had the sense to stop.

Satisfied that she was the centre of our attention, Mistress gave us a benevolent smile, a shadow of her former self. “Altair will be in charge of all of you. During this time, you have free run of Shalour. You are not to haunt anywhere else except my room after dark. You will not stalk Trainers, Donar included. If there are injuries that are not a result of self-defence as defined by Altair, I will be disappointed, and that disappointment shall manifest itself in unpleasant ways.”

She then let go of Crystal, uncaring of the burn on her hand. “With that said, I leave you to enjoy Yantreizh.”

What does she want us to do? Burbled Jelly as we five left the Pokémon Centre.

Entertain ourselves, likely, Crystal hissed.

Both of you irritate me, Liz grumbled, floating somewhere about my head. Altair, where are we headed?

Aegis remained silent. I am aware of a certain comradeship with the Royal Sword at the moment. Another presence intruding was fast approaching.

Fighter.

The nightmare-bringer cannot help himself, I know. What I could not help was the feeling of wariness when I faced him. What's wrong, Darkrai?

He shifted. Marguerite told me to go out for some air.

It's about your Ability? I guessed. Years as a paramedic and in Lumiose A&E had given me experience in such matters, particularly when it came time to treat a Ninetales with Drought or a Politoed with Drizzle. Few, if any, Trainers ever pondered about the real-life implications of such a team, especially new Trainers.

It looks fun, Darkrai commented. Marguerite... she told me to find you and then an Audino nurse. I don't know why, I'm quite healthy, but she said that you would know the answer.

I nodded. It might not be a familiar technique in Sinnoh, but an alternative method for the suppression of Abilities was found in Unova and is being refined here. There are moves that would allow for the temporary suppression of... troublesome Abilities. An Audino can perform either Entrainment or Simple Beam, which replaces Bad Dreams with... another Ability. Temporarily.

Darkrai gasped. Oh. Why did Marguerite not tell me herself?

Bad Dreams is an Ability evolved from a self-defence mechanism, I replied. It would be like her asking me to give up any ability to sense Aura, or for her to impose upon me to become human. I presume that she did not know how to broach the subject. It has been... rather sensitive.

I refrained from touching the spot where a Vulpix with Drought had once attacked with Fire Blast.

Darkrai did not even hesitate. I do not mind.

...I understand. I turned back to the Pokémon Centre. Follow me.

I am aware, most believe a walk to be restricted to the street level. They would also be wimps, in common parlance. Fighting-types might prefer flat ground, but any fighter who could not adapt to the
terrain was pointless as anything other than infantry. The Pokémon of Shalour Gym learnt this earlier than most; barely before we had begun rounds of shadow-tag that I sensed him.

I dodged the Force Palm, skidding back as the tiny pup growled, placing one palm over its chest in acknowledgement. He had manners; a Gym Riolu, then. Not that the Riolu of Dernière Way were any less mannered, simply as a matter of semantics.

This place is ours, the Riolu stated. Who are you?

There is no harm to be gained by sharing for a brief moment, I answered. Where is your sire?

Madame Korrina needed him. He tilted his head to look at the rest of us, instinctively shying from the three Ghosts. Who is that?

He is Darkrai, I answered him. You have excellent control over the Aura, young one.

Thank you. I cannot wait for evolution.

Neither could I, I recalled. Evolution as a result of bonds required a bond to begin with, and the only one I could relate to, out of necessity, had been Madame Korrina. It was only when I had discovered exactly how unpalatable I found the prospect of staying as a Gym fighter for the rest of life that I sought to escape.

I communicated that to him, still keeping an eye over a team involved in shadow tag.

That sounds exciting, he barked. Physical communication came to him in a way more natural than one versed in the arts of aura or telepathy. Elder, you must be very different from all of us with Madame Korrina.

No, I gave him my answer. I was part of the Gym, as you are. With Madame Korrina.

But you're so cool! All the other Lucario are boring. It's training, fun, the same old routine!

Yes, I thought. The oddball of the Shalour Gym, cool. While I exerted my fair share of work, befriending Madame Korrina, training and evolving, my tendency to reach for an Aura Sphere before a punch had been a large handicap, and so had been a tendency to over-analyse situations. While she had taught me that it was not bad – as well as how to process information quickly in high-stress situations – I had been an effective fighter, but not then. I evolved at the same time as a pack-brother; Madame Korrina preferred him to me. It had been fine, and I had determined to leave Shalour the moment I came across a kind or foolish Trainer.

As it happened, I found a kind and smart Trainer.

Matters came to a head when Jelly set off a Water Spout to Crystal, who retaliated with Dark Pulse.

Excuse me, I told the Riolu, rueful that I missed this chance as I leapt for the roofs of Shalour City, engaging both of them in combat at once. What are you doing?

She started it! Crystal screeched.

Jelly burbled.

This is everyone's time. Darkrai glared. The force of the glare was such that both recalcitrant Ghost-types retreated, grumbling. Liz fluttered, pecking Darkrai on the cheek before the tag game resumed, albeit when Aegis picked up a fallen satellite dish to use as a discus.
Darkrai was a good influence.

It hit me, a vague guilt that I thought was long banished. The prankster Banette would have loved his tag games. He would have used Shadow Sneak several times over to retreat from Delphi, my oracle, and then Sealeo would have had to tag in, before Delphi set everything on fire in a fit of pique and Deneb would have loved to paint this. Non-coded iconography, she would have called it...

Sometime during the quarrel, the Riolu had left. I found him with little trouble, only that the Riolu was no longer alone. An older Lucario, one I still recognised, was gearing up to fight.

We will leave peacefully, I offered to them.

Strange one, my former pack-brother was shielding him from me, not even caring to hide his distaste via Aura. Why are you here?

Obligations, I replied, a touch insulted. My mistress has returned to Shalour. We will leave when she has left the hospital.

You will not corrupt my son, he answered, before taking the Riolu to leap away from me amidst the tiled roofs of Shalour.

I don't have to, I forbore to mention, watching the Riolu watch me as they left. If this is a corruption, then it has always been here.

Are you alright? Darkrai lingered beside me. You are rather stressed. Would you like a croque-madame?

Why a croque-madame? I could not help but ask despite myself.

It is crunchy and warm, Darkrai replied. And the yellow looks rather like Marguerite's hat.

...she doesn't wear yellow, I replied, but I got the rough idea of Darkrai's sudden attachment to sandwiches wearing my Trainer's headgear. I had been fortunate, finding a mistress who was kind and yet studious, who could appreciate the idea of a sentient Pokémon.

On the third day, I was present as a witness when the boy won against Madame Korrina.

It had been a simple move, even against Machoke and its Rock Tomb. Ivysaur was well enough to place a decent fight, Bagon set more things on fire with its enhanced Ember, and Fletchinder dominated the rest, even Hawlucha.

The girl placed a decent showing as well, with her Delphox; I felt a pang at the sight of the beautiful Fox in motion. Delphi's fur had always sparked with power, the tricky one impressive with his mastery of magic and fire-

“Altair?” Madame Korrina smiled as I entered. “So you're the Lucario attached to Dr du Bois.”

Bonjour, Madame Korrina.

“No need for the formalities. How is she?” Madame Korrina gushed. “Donar just told me that she's rather terrifying!”

She is cautious. I have become a doctor. I work at the surgery department of the Hôpital Quatre Points in Lumiose.
“You're a medic?” Madame Korrina smiled at me. “I'm so proud of you.”

*I am a surgeon. Mademoiselle Daisy was kind enough to act as guarantor.*

“That's even better!” Madame Korrina exclaimed. “One of our Lucario is a surgeon! What do you do?”

As I explained, I felt that I am very fortunate. I have no reason to cry, being here and actually thinking of it. Vega and I are alive.

Yet, I am alone and alive.

My friends, it is so hard sometimes.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay, here you might have had difficulties understanding speech breaks. That is not a formatting error; here Altair is making a distinction between human speech (quotation marks), telepathy (italics) and Pokémon communication (no marks). Here Pokémon communication take more than just repeating a name or a sound; it also involves a complex series of gestures. Since all languages communicate ideas at its very basic, Altair's interpretation of all three means of communication becomes one that blends Pokémon speech as a continuous action rather than a distinct ideal.

There's a fic on AO3: Chance Encounters by Woofemus, that discusses the attitude of the Lucario that joins the character in X and Y. The Pokémon animé and manga do also discuss the spirit of Pokémon, that they are sentient beings to some extent like us.

Here I took it further with Altair: Considering that the Shalour Gym is a rather physically-oriented Gym, I think anyone who used special moves would have been treated like how Thor treated Loki in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I made Altair a rather special-oriented Pokémon, although it's clear that Altair isn't afraid to get his paws dirty – see what happened to an unfortunate Braixen. Lucario are actually very nice mixed attackers, but here I illustrate my point as a social one. Homosexuality also might not be as stigmatised as I discussed, but Altair might have been termed as 'odd', being a loner Lucario with a very family-oriented person as Korrina. That, plus his tendency to think before moving, might be a detriment in a physical-oriented Fighting-type Gym. I'm sure that Korrina must have understood Altair on some level – Lucario do evolve only with friendship – but that doesn't mean that friends don't drift apart, or Korrina might have understood Altair's need for a different Trainer, one who thinks before leaping. Even a Gym Leader needs help, and here Korrina might have recognised something in her Lucario that she could not help him, but Marguerite could.

There may have been a few references to the French novelist Marcel Proust here, too. Here, I mentioned a few journals: « La Voix de Kalos », « Le Monde » and « Les Oreilles ». They are all Kalosian newspapers. « Le Monde » deals more with international affairs, « Les Oreilles » would be more centre-right, and « La Voix de Kalos » would be the leftist view.
On hindsight, it might be unsurprising that Marguerite reads leftist radical newspapers.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!


**β; Forme fruste**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Ah,” she said. It was said with a tone that lent shivers down my spine. Like the last time she had walked into the Lost Hotel without protection and alone. Like the time she won in Hold 'Em Poker against the Five Families of Nimbasa, which started her bid towards investment later.

Either way, it meant danger or adventure. Usually both.

*And how goes it today?* I asked her.

Daisy Linden, now Marguerite Linden du Bois, Ph. D., smiled wanly from pillows. “I suppose, really, that I'm better,” she admitted, “but I feel so terribly depressed. I can't help feeling how much better it would have been if I had died.”

I eyed the morphine drip, estimating that someone had been giving her too much opiates. *I recommend a mental tonic.*

“I have just the thing,” she waved one of the newspapers at me, a Standard edition of « *Le Monde* ». “Apparently, the Shalour forensic department were remiss in their announcements. There's been a retraction that the girl was carrying on with her Tyranitar.”

*Is that safe?* The question came before I could stop myself.

“A beast that weighs over two hundred kilograms, is known for tyranny and violence?” She wrinkled her nose. “Probably... with precautions... and if she wasn't squashed. *Thémise en scène:* Julia of Hearthome, part of the Sinnoh delegation, was not with the delegation. Instead, she was out training her Tyranitar in the Lumiose Badlands. Renaud Sauveterre, correspondent of « *Le Monde* », also reports that Julia had been confirmed dead for around two or three weeks, based in estimates that were found from that corpse the Tyranitar dragged with him. *Scène:* Julia dies, presumably in the Badlands, and the Tyranitar apparently took over two weeks to storm from Route 13 to here, where we shot him in the head and where the Tyranitar is under custody with Wikstrom and Grimsley to lend a hand. The Tyranitar's fate is unknown at present, though Champion Cynthia Shirona is in negotiation to have the Tyranitar charged under Sinnoan law. Cynthia is firmly backing the Tyranitar, with the claim that yes, trainer and Pokémon were *together.*”

*Is that allowed?*

“Sinnoh has never followed anything like the hotly debated Sexual Offences Act in Kanto,” she reasoned. “Culturally speaking, Sinnoh folklore do discuss the possibility of such matings, notably with Gardevoir, Gallade, or Lucario. The point, though, is that, if we discount the damage we regarded as sexual assault as simply... hardware incompatibility, then we are still left with a motive. The pieces have not assembled.”

Blood, leaking from her midriff as she gasped my name: “Don't look...”

*As the horned one has done,* I articulated to her.

“*Précisément.*” She folded up « *Le Monde* », now starting on « *Les Oreilles* ». “The opinions of Kalos's right-wing aside, they do raise a valid point: why did the Tyranitar choose not to destroy the body, but rather drag it with him? A Trained Pokémon might have known of the penalties attacking a
You think that the Zapdos called forth rain to dissolve the Tyranitar’s Sand Stream?

“I know it did,” I answered. “Coincidence? The universe is rarely so lazy. So, our Zapdos and our Tyranitar face off sometime while it’s unclear if Julia was dead or alive, but Julia was very much physically with the Tyranitar, alive or dead. Depending on the context and time, the Tyranitar took the overland route through the Badlands, over the high mountains surrounding the Steppes, where it possibly ran into the Zapdos upriver of the Tisane. They fight, and depending on the moves utilised, the rain created a landslide. They part ways, with Zapdos crashing here, and then we find the Tyranitar a week later when he finally descended.”

She held up her hands. “Question: Motive? Weapon? Was the move immediate? Did Zapdos witness the murder?”

Then we need to interrogate them, I reasoned.

“I cannot leave the bed,” my dear Trainer pointed out, oh so reasonably. “So you will have to interrogate them.”

The Tyranitar had been isolated. While a Pokéball was a viable prison in some cases, the Tyranitar being a Trained Pokémon without its Pokéball meant that it was isolated from general population. Part of the Pokémon Centre had been isolated, with an Arcanine and Throh standing guard, accompanied with Grimsley and Wikstrom.

All four illustrious fighters nodded as the Lucario doctor wearing a stethoscope walked into the room. It is surprising, how many people never realised that Pokémon workers in the healthcare system were sentient too.

The Tyranitar lay on an extra-large mattress, bound by its own weight plus electronically maintained restraints. A metal plate had been inserted into its partially melted skull, presumably when she shot him.

I consulted the charts first. Aside from the very glaring symptom of magnesium burn, he was perfectly healthy, although there was smoke in his lungs from the aforementioned burn. How odd.

The Tyranitar began to stir.

You are awake, I telepathically began. Do you remember?

He groaned. Who are you?

A doctor. You are currently being held on the charge of first-degree murder, with another possible charge for attempted murder.

Tyranitar groaned. What? What? I didn't kill anyone!

The corpse of Julia of Hearthome was found with you.

Trainer? Trainer is… gone? Where? I was- I was protecting her, my friend!
Here I must note; there is no fixed word for 'trainer', 'master', 'mate' or 'friend' in any language of Pokémon, and these three terms see a certain overlap in any of their uses in a single term. There was no need to differentiate, since it was mainly 'us' versus 'them'. I think it a very good idea, except in an operating theatre, where 'us' was the surgeon and 'them', everyone else. Certainly more egalitarian than humans and their distinctions. (There was also no distinction for 'father', 'mother','son' or 'daughter', plus the parent-child distinction was also rather weak. When I told her this, her only reply was that only humans gave a thought to incest and family hierarchy.)

However, in this case, I must agree that it made the situation hard to understand, as the Tyranitar began crying.

She always tried to shelve off such matters, or broke the news quickly and professionally. Yet, for all our interactions, nowhere had we ever needed to inform a Pokémon that their Trainer had died, let alone the suspicion surrounding them. By rights, a doctor was supposed to summon help and stipulate a recovery plan, before turning over such affairs to the police. There was the concept of justice; then there was also the concept of justice across regions. Kalos might be fine with imprisonment, but the Tyranitar was dead the moment his trial concluded in Sinnoh.

Whatever you might think, I did not want to consign anyone to death.

*Perhaps you could tell us what were you protecting your Trainer from.*

His movement was restricted; to us Pokémon, we communicated with our bodies. Due to the aforementioned transcription and communication problems, I have attempted, with large clarification and help with a map, to lay out the sequence of events:

Julia had gotten a pair of stones in Lumiose City. One was to be given to him, the other kept with her. They had been training in the Badlands; Julia had been attempting to activate the stone, to no effect. A large bird-like Pokémon had attacked from the skies, and while a Tyranitar could resist a Thunder, his Trainer had been less lucky. Tyranitar had taken his Trainer and headed for the city immediately, and yet the bird had diverted him through the mountains, away from the city and through one mountain range that tore from the Lumiose Badlands to the banks of the Tisane. Having braved the river, the bird had caught up, necessitating a battle in which Stealth Rock, Stone Edge and, later, Pursuit was used. The resulting wreckage had toppled corpse and Pokémon into the Tisane, where we found them.

While the original sequence of events were much longer and included many irrelevant and worrying details, I have merely written down the relevant events, since, despite my education, the art of storytelling is beyond me. The subsequent rupturing of a Tyranitar's trachea from burn wounds, in comparison, was easy.

My next visit as a doctor was to the morgue. While the Tyranitar had been under comparatively strict surveillance, the morgue was rather empty. As least, I believed so until I caught sight of the Haunter hovering nearby.

The Gas Pokémon stuck his tongue out and faded into shadows, away from me.

I approached the large container, looking for a name. I found the box, opening it with only a touch of difficulty. I found myself reflecting that perhaps I should have interviewed Zapdos first, but I needed information. I had a feeling that Zapdos's interview would not go smoothly without more information, for us to craft questions.

Julia's own body had been battered and rotted enough that I could not differentiate if it was
electrocuted or battered to death. The less said, the better.

It was only a matter of time to find what I searched for. The collar that I found nursed amongst her torn, bloodied and cut clothes, was matte black. From it hung a hook, upon which the round orb of the Key Stone was nestled. Compared to the stone I retrieved from Tyranitar, it was small, and yet both stones seemed familiar the more I compared them, in aura and in sight.

Having retrieved what I wanted, I was at a quandary. I did as I had done with most quandaries. I locked up Julia, considered the empty, cold underground room, and then headed back to the general ward.

Though, I had to hide the objects behind my back once I saw her silhouette.

“Not the first time, I take it,” she crossed her arms.

Diantha shook her head. “Zachary, in Santalune with his Scizor. Corey, in Couriway with his Manectric. Julia was the most public, since we discovered her Tyranitar was responsible for the Shalour landslide.”

“All from Sinnoh?”

“Corey was from the Unovan contingent. He was running to Couriway on the word of his friend. Zachary was from Hoenn. Why d’you think?”

“You should bring your questions to Augustine,” she answered, dropping her hands. “Daisy Linden is not here, and Marguerite is no help to you. Good night, Madame Carnet.”

Madame Carnet stiffly nodded, walking out. She ignored my presence as she sauntered down the corridor.

She started when both stones dropped onto her lap. “Altair?”

Julia possessed a clé de voûte. As did Tyranitar. They were attacked by Zapdos for this reason.

She frowned, considering the pair on her lap. “A positive identification?”

A large bird-like creature that used Thunder, could it be anything else?

She pondered. “In Kalos... unlikely.”

The Zapdos must have killed Julia.

“Let us consider. A Zapdos flying over the Lumiose Badlands suddenly attacked a Trainer practising Mega Evolution with her Tyranitar. Zapdos's grudge went to such depths that it pursued Tyranitar and his Trainer across the steppes, the Tisane, and caused a rainstorm for the express purpose of ending Julia and, possibly, Tyranitar with her.” Here she fixed me with a look. “Balance of probabilities suggest criminal intent. Yet, there is no way to clarify, or prove it.”

It would be our word against the Tyranitar.

“Yes.”

Your mistress sent you? He bristled when I entered the room. A stench of ozone hung about; the room smelt nominally clean, but without the smell of cleaner and disinfectant that I was inured to.
Greetings, I chose to reply. *I bear word. Your attacker is here.*

The Zapdos crackled as I headed to the IV drip the Pokémon Centre had had him attached to. *I see. A sad thing that those healers have me attached to these disinfectants.*

*They are for your own good.* I demurred, checking the levels of morphine before I injected the bag with a syringe. *How do you feel?*

*Disrespected.* Zapdos replied, leaning back into his makeshift nest. *The mortals are not properly deferential. We are not as respected as our brethren across the ocean, in the heart of the Plateau.*

*The definition of respect does have a tendency to vary across locales,* I agreed, though I had never been to Kanto.

*You have been raised amongst them,* Zapdos gave me a gimlet eye.

*I was born in this city.*

*Then you cannot understand how it must be like for us,* Zapdos cackled. *To accept humans, or perish. I knew... someone. I suppose this is what the child of Mew felt when faced with this inexplicable... thing.*

I remembered, once upon a time, a thesis presented by her regarding the inequality divide of the city and country. There was a story of the Country and City Pichu that reminded me of his situation.

I told Zapdos as much, who harrumphed but enquired about the story, which I told:

*A Pichu from town, a country Pichu*

*Invited in the civilest way;*

*For dinner there was just to be*

*Ortolans and an entremet.*

Here, I forbore to explain the old Kalosian tradition of force-feeding Fletchling to burst before cooking them.

*Upon a Turkey carpet soft,*

*The noble feast at last was spread;*

*I leave you pretty well to guess*

*The merry, pleasant life they led.*

*Gay the repast, for plenty reigned,*

*Nothing was wanting to the fare;*

*But hardly had it well begun*

*Ere chance disturbed the friendly pair.*

*A sudden racket at the door,*

*Alarmed them, and they made retreat;*

*The city Pichu was not the last,*

*His comrade followed fast and fleet.*
At this, Zapdos stirred, almost in alarm, and yet the intravenous propofol had taken effect, leading him to shake his head. *What happened to them? The Tyranitar- the Pichu. Those two friends.*

I tried to recall if it were enough, or I should risk injecting him with more of the milk of amnesia. It was easy to continue the story:

*The noise soon over, they returned,*
As Pichus on such occasions do;
"*Come,*" said the liberal citizen,
"And let us finish our ragout."

"*Not a crumb more,*" the rustic said;
"*Tomorrow you shall dine with me;*
Don't think me jealous of your state,
*Or all your royal luxury.*"

At this, Zapdos gave a weak cry, faint sparks stirring. *No... Tyranitar... why couldn't you leave her? Why? I didn't want to...*

When his eyes fell closed, the last stanza echoed between us, unspoken. Neither of us could speak, anyway.

*But then I eat so quiet at home,*
And nothing dangerous is near;
*Good-bye, my friend, I have no love*
*For pleasure when it's mixed with fear.*

She was telling Darkrai the same story when I came up, having disposed of the syringe on my way into a medical waste bin. I lingered, not interrupting, but listening as she lulled every one of us here quietly through the ninth fable of Jean de la Fontaine:

*Autrefois, le Pichu de ville*
*Invita le Pichu des champs,*
*D'une façon fort civile,*
*A des reliefs d'Ortolans.*

*Sur un Tapis de Turquie*
*Le couvert se trouva mis.*
*Je laisse à penser la vie*
*Que firent ces deux amis.*

*Le régal fut fort honnête,*
*Rien ne manquait au festin;*
*Mais quelqu'un troubla la fête
Pendant qu'ils étaient en train.

A la porte de la salle
Ils entendirent du bruit:
Le Pichu de ville détale;
Son camarade le suit.

Le bruit cesse, on se retire:
Pichus en campagne aussitôt;
Et le citadin de dire:
Achevons tout notre rôt.

- C'est assez, dit le rustique;
Demain vous viendrez chez moi:
Ce n'est pas que je me pique
De tous vos festins de Roi ;

Mais rien ne vient m'interrompre:
Je mange tout à loisir.
Adieu donc; fi du plaisir
Que la crainte peut corrompre.

She smiled once the Pitch-Black Pokémon was asleep, looking up to me from the glow of her Holo Caster device. “How was it?” she asked me.

...forme fruste, I answered. Some complications have arisen.

Her expression turned confused. “Oh?”

Zapdos seemed to have held feeling for Tyranitar, I explained. Along with the Mega Stones, with everything else, with his reaction to the tale of two Pichu hiding from the Furfrou that would have seen them eaten.

“There is no way we can prosecute Zapdos on this evidence,” she declared the moment I finished my tale. “It would not only be troublesome, but it would be your word against his, and this evidence is not concrete. It's even less reliable since it's inadmissible in court. No court would open a case against a wild Pokémon who chose to attack without reason.”

That is not my concern, I related. It was his words. 'I didn't want to.' What could make a legendary Pokémon, a minor godling at that, do something he didn't want to?

She nodded at last. “So... Zapdos has an employer. Had an employer. What did you do with the syringe?”

I crushed and disposed of it.

“A lot of doctors aren't Lucario, you'll be interrogated immediately- well done, you,” she remarked as a heap of tapes landed on her lap. “Now, wake Crystal up. We have evidence to dispose of.”

The next day found that Tyranitar had succumbed to his wounds in the dead of night. Later, as I walked out for a breath of Shalour's air, I saw Nurse Joy and two sombre Rangers levy a body out. Electricity sparked from it, the vestige of a legend fallen.
I had participated in this; justice had been subverted in this course. Was I right? Was I wrong? Any medical ethics board might have questions, and yet I find myself relatively unperturbed.

**What do we do?** I asked when the sun approached noon and she was packing her bags.

“What do you want to do?” she glanced over a list. A habit long began, I remembered from Delphi, when it occurred to her that preparation was nine-tenths of a successful journey.

_I... don't know._

“Then you don't have to do anything,” she pointed out, ticking the last thing on her check-list. “Do you want me to pack some Emmentaler cheese?”

Delphi and I had partaken of that cheese as our last meal together. Delphi was always more of a gourmand than I. _No, thank you._

I would not know if it was right; I am merely a Lucario.

“Okay... done,” Marguerite sighed once the bag was settled. “Bonjour, Monsieur Wikstrom.”

He walked in, but this time Seigneur Wikstrom held only a nod. “Madame du Bois. May I have the honour of escorting you?”

She snorted. “You may.”

“Very good. For I intend to.”

“Doctor? Dr du Bois- whoa.” the boy was here now. “Erm... Mr Wikstrom. Hi.”

“Wikstrom would be fine,” he replied. “The name of de Rais is hardly ever used, anyway. Joyeuse, I shall require assistance, _s'il vous plaît._”

One of her Pokéballs burst open, and Aegis faced, against the other Aegislash, near-identical eye matched.

“Doesn't sound very joyful,” I heard Donar comment to himself.

“Jøyeuse, for the emperor's sword?” she commented. “Might as well have named him Curtana.”

“There is only one of the last three Aegislash to have lived the length of Kalosian history,” Wikstrom replied. “Jøyeuse has been in service since he was awarded to the Maison de Rais by the Princess of Notre Dame.”

Aegis spun to me, nodding. The other Aegislash... it clinked, a grind of steel as it turned from Aegis, formerly Durendal, to regard her with an eye.

I do not believe that I liked the idea of a third Aegislash. She was already walking on thin ice; she did not need another Pokémon attempting to interfere in her future. Watching as Seigneur Wikstrom escorted her out, a hand on the small of her back and a Darkrai in her shadow, I could almost believe that the incident, what happened years ago that killed half our team, could remain in the past.

The past never remains with humans, I realise. It reaches to the future.
The original fable is obviously from Aesop's fables, although the given version is adapted from 'The Town Rat and the Country Rat' by Jean de la Fontaine. It's here.

Here, I think Altair took on a very Victorian approach to telling. It's not a lot of emotion from his end, since he was more focused on telling the story, but I imagine that he tries to make up for it in detail.

Joyeuse is the name of Emperor Charlemagne's sword. Like Durendal and Curtana, it was one of the Big Three in the stories about Charlemagne and his court.

Critique, s'il vous plaît!
XXII: Décider – To Decide

Chapter Summary

There is a crèmerie at the Baa de Mer ranch. I intend to buy some more dairy products when I can. It shall happen when Frogadier has mastered Surf...

"Kalos might have its bad points. Its people are stuck up, proud of themselves, and hold unnecessary arrogance with no knowledge of when to ask for help. Kalos is tarnished, yes. There are foolish, selfish individuals, both human and Pokémon alike. That does not, however, mean that Kalos is beyond saving."

Day 52: There is a crèmerie at the Baa de Mer ranch. I intend to buy some more dairy products when I can. It shall happen when Frogadier has mastered Surf...

… an unlikely prospect, if I may say.

It was on the last day of my convalescence that he arrived.

“Quite a development,” I commented to the man by the window on the day of my discharge. “A Trainer from Sinnoh goes missing, and the Elite Four of the Unova and Kalos Leagues unite against a collective of alphabet agencies..”

Wikstrom did not choose to take the bait. “Unova and Kalos had been some of the hardest-hit by our management of Teams Plasma and Flare. Sometimes I think the Indigo Plateau had a point regarding civilian oversight.”

“Is it worth hiding, though?” I answered. “I presume that this is a common problem.”

“I would not like the Indigo consensus to disparage us,” Wikstrom replied. “The stakes are high; the Hoenn region's dependence on Cottonee cotton grows ever larger, and the Sinnoh region's dependence on Kalosian Mareep wool is grating on the pride of l’Île Muguet. Sinnoh might blow this out of proportion.”

“Were it simply a matter of resources, Unova and Kalos would come out on top,” I agreed. “Julia of Hearthome City... you would rather that it had never happened. With the dead body discovered, though, Sinnoh has every right to back the suggestions of cracking down on international crime, and from there it is easy to implicate the Kalos Elite Four.”

I picked up my valise, making a note to store the thing into the PokéStorage system before I left Shalour with my backpack. “It would have been more convenient if her body had never been found. Perhaps that was why Grimsley was here.”

“I would not have allowed it,” he simply answered.

“I believe you, Wikstrom,” I acknowledged. “However, I do not believe Madame Carnet, or the intentions of Vertress City.”

“Neither should you. Are you alright?” Wikstrom finally asked as he looped an arm around me,
supporting me with a hand on the small of my back. “Are you sure you should be travelling so soon, and with that- wound.”

“Your concern is noted and appreciated,” I answered, giving the dreary Centre room a once-over to check if I left anything behind. Continued proximity to Wikstrom was rather comforting. “I am fine. You have my Holo Caster number. Au revoir, Wikstrom. Do try to keep an eye on our Unovan guest.”

I met Grimsley as I walked out. The Dark-type Master smirked at he caught my eye, deliberately eyeing where Wikstrom had his arm. “Bonjou, Madame du Bois.”

“Bonjour, monsieur,” I demurely replied as we left. “Au revoir, monsieur.”

Instead of the Shalour guest-house of a hotel, though, I made my way to the Shalour Gym. The Gym had just opened for the day, and thus we were relatively early and alone when I met Korrina face-to-face.

“You're a Trainer?” Korrina enquired when I faced her within the expanse of the glorified roller rink within the Gym.

“No,” I answered, standing opposite her as Wikstrom entered the stands to watch. “I am merely challenging the Mega Evolution Guru.”

“With Altair?” Korrina mouthed as my Lucario walked onto the field.

“We need practise,” I demurred, eyeing Wikstrom.

I winked.

“If you say...” Korrina's eyes narrowed as she plucked a Pokéball from her belt. “Let's see if your bond can match that girl's bond with her Pokémon, then. Go, Lucario!”

The Lucario that Korrina summoned simply glared with recognition. Altair growled, before his back paws shifted his weight and he made a gesture of his shoulders. The other Lucario growled.

“Battle!”

About four hours after I found Dr du Bois having a conversation with Korrina in the Shalour Gym, we left Shalour City. An hour later, we were training on the banks of the Tisane. Serena had built her team up to Elmo, Pika, Squirt – currently a Wartortle – and Obscura. Shauna had some wobbly gel-like thing – a Goomy – called Escargot, a Budew named Jeté, and her Chesnaught, Chester. Serena and I were evenly matched in numbers and strength. Noël had Sapin, Borealis – now with a tank strapped to its back – with Jacques and a newly evolved Scylla.

“We need another member,” I confided to my team as we prepared to launch our assault. “For now, though, let's try to hit the pink menace.”

All four looked very grim at the prospect, but nodded.

Jelly was the second-slowest on Dr du Bois's team, but it mattered little when her slowest members had defences to rival maybe a small tank. Despite the shiny Rumble Badge in my collection, we could barely get at her Pokémon. The pink menace was currently being Dr du Bois's sunbathing platform, it was off guard. Hopefully. Maybe.
“Ivysaur, Razor Leaf!” I cried.

Dr du Bois barely looked up from her book; not *Le petit prince*, but *Évolution Magie Histoire #2: L'histoire éternelle*. She was also seated on top of Jelly. “Hex.”

The ghostly energy bounded, strong enough to deflect the cascade of leaves and still hit Ivysaur.

“Toxic,” Dr du Bois continued reading for until Ivysaur was swamped in the soupy cloud of toxins, before the covers snapped shut. “Hex again.”

“Shit! Return, Ivysaur!” I recalled Ivysaur. “Frogadier, Surf!”

Dr du Bois regarded my shimmering Frogadier, book still in hand, before she lightly tapped Jelly with her foot. “Get him.”

The Hex hit Frogadier head-on.

“Bagon, your turn!” I called him out. “Ember!”

“Brine,” Dr du Bois retorted, but leapt off of Jelly as the attacks hit. Bagon squawked, glowing a bright white, before...

It turned into a cannonball. With feet.

“You evolved!” I celebrated. “Bagon- no, Shelgon! Just a bit closer to becoming a Salamence, and then you'll reach your dream!”

“Congratulations!” Noël called as Serena brought out her PokéDex. *Shelgon, the Endurance Pokémon. Within its rugged shell, its cells have begun changing. The shell peels off the instant it evolves.*

My laugh was cut off when Shelgon head-butted me in the stomach, now with the force of a cannonball. “Oof!”

Shauna cackled. “Donar, that's just funny! Your face!”

All five of us – Dr du Bois, Shauna, Serena, Noël and I – had gathered by the banks of the Tisane river, just across the Baa de Mer ranch on the other side. A few Mareep were grazing, the remnants of escapees from the previously rogue Tyranitar having already been returned. Now and then a stray charge would remain on the grass, yet otherwise we were safe, as Dr du Bois sunning herself on Jelly's head proved.

Noël was trying very hard not to look to Dr du Bois's swimsuit as he edged to me. “So, what's for lunch?”

“Sandwiches,” Dr du Bois dragged her deceptively heavy bag – it really weighed about twenty kilos, if the Pokémon Centre's scales could be trusted – and dragged out a large wrapped packet. *Les sandwichs au thon ou aux œufs mayonnaise. I believe that we would prefer to stay around the ranch rather than on this side by dusk.*

“We're camping?” Shauna exclaimed as Dr du Bois unwrapped the beautifully packed, if slightly squashed, packages. “But, I thought...”

“No point in rushing,” Noël agreed, licking his lips. “I don't mind. At all.”

Serena looked torn, but I made a motion of rubbing my fingers together, and she understood what I
meant. In desperation to get Dr du Bois on her best behaviour, I had promised to reimburse Dr du Bois on their behalf. Serena wasn't going to owe her anything.

Serena's opinion changed after taking tuna and egg mayo sandwiches; I could see the ideological shift from where I was as her eyes went wide and she actually made a point of finding crumbs to suck up.

“Are you still wallowing?” I asked Altair, watching Donar and Frogadier try to meander across the Tisane safely. The purpose of Surf was really to teach a Pokémon how to cross water with a Trainer following along, but accidents had been known to happen.

My Lucario partner had yet to look away from the gates of Shalour City. *I was born here.*

I waited. Altair usually needed a while to get his thoughts together.

*Miss Korrina was the Trainer I had before you, Altair continued. And yet she never taught me as much as you did. Numbers, letters, the passage of time...*

“A Trainer's fallacy,” I demurred. “The differences between certain Types of Pokémon is quite stark, that some Trainers never really realise that, for all that they look different, Pokémon are as sentient and self-aware as a human being. Perhaps even more so. Pokémon will recall experiences at some point in their lives.”

*She never realised that I was different, Altair told me. She never realised that was why the other Lucario never really approached me.*

“I can't say, having never met another Lucario,” I replied. “Nor do I have a degree in Lucario psychology. Though, I imagine the fact that the Lucario from Sinnoh you mentioned had something to do with that.”

*Riley was his Trainer's name, Altair pondered. He himself never got a name. I found myself wondering why was it, that he chose not to be distinct from all others. Yet we formed a bond, enough for me to evolve, but no further.*

“Must be a powerful bond,” I commented.

*A bond of ideals. I decided that I would leave the Shalour Gym one way or another.*

I hugged him. It might be odd, but Altair and I had been together so long that partial nudity made little difference to either of us. “You made it, Altair. You made yourself a career, and gave it up for me. Few Psychic-type Pokémon could hope to match your intelligence. You made it.”

*Not without Delphi. Yet, Delphi... they are no longer amongst us.*

“You went to the Shalour Gym yesterday,” I pointed out. The centre of the mess, I forbore to mention, since the other Lucario did not seem to have welcomed back their prodigious son.

*It's just... Altair paused. There is a saying, amongst Pokémon, Delphi had mentioned, that he learnt from his mother as a kit. That humans change us.*

“We're talking about numerous extremely divergent species living with a biologically and culturally uniform species across different terrains,” I pointed out. Altair's thoughts gave me a research idea: that Oak's theory of anthro-Pokémon coexistence as a necessity was a false concession. It could be developed; Pokémon and humanity, how humans favour Pokémon over technology due to
convenience; examples include the Kling line in the Unovan Industrial Revolution, Cottonee and Mareep in the textiles industry, the background of the post-industrial revolution—

“Fletchinder, Ember!”

I looked up to see the Fletchinder barrel into a tree, wreathed in flame. It shook, and from within the shape of a horn took form. The Heracross growled, getting into a stance.

“A Heracross!” Shauna exclaimed.

“A fighting bug,” Donar clarified, smiling. “You want to fight too, Heracross? Fletchinder, we're going to use that move I got that Technical Machine for! Flame Charge!”

Shaking my head, I leant back. Fletchinder would win, unless that Heracross was more trained than it looked. Serena sighed, leaning back before she leapt back up as though stung. “Ick!”

“Hmm?” I stared at the sap gathered on the tree, part of which had dribbled onto the ground for Shauna to step on. No, not sap... I ran my fingers through, rubbing it together before I smelt it.

“Is it honey?” Noël knelt beside us.

“Oui.” I licked the sweet delicacy. “Aspear. A Combee must have been here.”

“How can you tell?” Shauna groaned. “Eww!”

“Honey contains antibiotic properties,” I absently replied. “It's safe to eat. All berry-flavour honeys have a specific flavour, although the market is flooded with Oran honey, that so few actually eat any other honey. Honey of Aspear is characterised by a certain sour edge to the flavour.”

I stood up, rifling through my bag for a small clear jar. “I shall find an Aspear Berry tree.”

“Really?” Shauna doubtfully poked the bark and licked the honey off one finger. “Hmm...”

I felt Darkrai follow alongside me. Sounds and exhales made me look back to see him devouring his own hand. Miam.

“Where did you learn that?” I murmured before I continued walking with him, albeit slowly. Despite my hospital stay, I knew I should have stayed longer, yet any longer would have aroused suspicions. The curse was already working that my limp would magically disappear given a week or so.

It did not take long to find the Aspear Berry tree.

Its boughs were laden with flowers, attended to by Combee. The remnants of honey were clear as the Combee squared off against each other for pollination rights. I had done this since Camphrier Town, using the honey for my tea and to feed myself and the Pokémon of mine that it would not poison. It would be nice to get some more before we entered Coumarine City. Perhaps I could barter some.

“Excusez-moi,” I requested of the Combee that began to drop. “Could I have some spare Honey? I need the fruit, too.”

The Combee buzzed in agreement, parting to allow me some of the Aspear berries. Golden liquid poured from one honeycomb, they dropped, seemingly without hands, and I smiled at the thought of honeycomb on thick-cut baguette as I was gifted the entirety, honeycomb and all. I haven't had honeycomb for a while.
Dinner started with velouté de champignon – the rest of the world called it cream of mushroom – paired with leftover sandwiches from lunch. It was followed by a cheese-scattered risotto that Donar's new Heracross practically accepted his Pokéball for, and ended with a tossing of Oran and Aspear berries. The tartness of the Aspear was offset by whatever honey had been tossed with it with the Oran slices.

“If this is how you eat every day, I'm not surprised,” Shauna hissed to Donar, trying to avoid my overhearing her. Her plate was clean, having literally been fought over by both Pokémon and Trainer.

“Shauna!” he grumbled as Jeté tried to steal my dessert. I ignored the vulgar noises that Noël Duval kept making as he ate his way through.

“It's good,” Serena huffed, trying not to make a scene. Discreetly, I saw Elmo sneak another honey-dipped Oran slice to nibble.

Altair was studiously looking anywhere but at Elmo; guilt or remembrance, I could not tell.

This is sweet, yet sour, Darkrai noted.

“The Aspear berry has hard skin, but the fruit within is sour,” I explained. “The honey produced holds sour notes, but it is usable with Oran juice as a simple preparation or to treat frozen Pokémon. Oran berries are equally simple to prepare, since we only need to peel the skin and eat the flesh inside. We can make candied Oran peel once I get some ingredients in Coumarine City.”

“Really?” Shauna leapt up, eager. “How?”

“These are mine.”

“Ehh...” Shauna pouted. “Donar, talk to Dr du Bois! I want candied Oran peel!”

“Why ask me?” he grumbled before changing the subject. “Doctor, so what are we going to do when Frogadier masters Surf?”

“Since we're headed to Coumarine City, I need to pick up des produits de lait,” I pointed to the direction across the Tisane. “The Baa de Mer Ranch is notable for its Tomme cheese.”

“Cheese again? What's the difference, anyway?” he muttered.

“There are over sixty different types of cheese in the Kalos region,” Noël explained. “All of them are registered by the Regional Institute under appellation d'origine contrôlée. Cheeses are one such varied product.”

“Over sixty?!” Donar moaned. “Even Kanto didn't have that many!”

“The Kanto region has over three hundred fermentations of sake,” I replied, a touch colder. “Even more types of green tea are available from the Celadon tea farms.”

“That's... a lot of beer,” Noël echoed me. “And tea.”

“There's something magic about camping out here, doctor!” Shauna laughed, a sort of blush colouring her cheeks as she faced me. Doubtless, everyone now recalled the matter-of-fact reply in response to the question of facilities.

“Si vous voulez,” I stared at Donar's borrowed Trangia stove, dumping my mess kit into my
foldable bucket of water. “Tomorrow is the Aspear honeycomb on baguette for *le petit-déjeuner*. Let's get across the Tisane in time for lunch.”

We nearly screamed in approval, but that would have caused some more riots and more Pokémon to swarm our camp, so I just gave divided the rest of my dessert with my Pokémon and smirked as camp dissolved. Dr du Bois got a whole tent to herself and her Pokémon. Serena and Shauna had one tent; Noël and I shared another. Somehow, warm and tucked in sleeping bags was one thing I truly enjoyed in the shadow of Dr du Bois, even despite the late Tyranitar's scare.

“I never thought that Berries could be used like this,” Noël whispered, licking his lips. “I know why you stick it out, now.”

“I- It's not like that,” I grumbled, although the point had to be acknowledged. Kalosian food in particular had been an eye-opener, the mess with the Clauncher bouillabaisse aside. I hadn't thought that a Pokémon professor could be this good at cooking, even for picky Pokémon.

Night fell, and with it a cooling chill that belied the peace of the night. Chanting echoed in my ears, discordant; too many echoes of a single song, over and over again.

The Delphox screeched, magnesium-flame with power.

I heard the pattering of footsteps, and I laughed. “Well, Altair?” I heard my own voice, feminine and pitched low, almost familiar.

*Both wings have been evacuated and cleaned,* Altair nodded. *I had no need to be present, not with Mme Drasna on hand.*

“I got it,” I heard myself answer. “Shall we, then?”

*Yes.*

We defeated loads more guys in red suits, with methods that in the Pokémon League would have been cheating, and in some cases truly outright cheating in move manipulation as we kept running. Soon, we arrived at a circular vault and won against a six-on-one Trainer battle, confronting the egg and the tree at last.

“Found them,” I heard myself breath a sigh, approaching the platforms. “I'm going to let you two out, alright? It's over.”

I stepped back.

Sparks scattered over the metal casing as the cables broke, as the tree shook, as the egg began to crack. Both monsters, or Pokémon, bellowed: the walls shook with their mirth. The horns grew larger, the jewels upon it glowing with the colours of a rainbow that it swung as the Delphox used its wand to defend me. Death and destruction began to reign, even as my beloved comrades took to the field-

The deer screamed, trying to rip its horns out as I clung onto them in my stomach, in my stained hands. As the Destiny Bond began to solidify between the Pokémon and I, when I had knowingly sent my few remaining Pokémon away.

“Why did our comrades die?” I whispered. “I don't want this. All of this... Delphi and Deneb- I'm sorry our time is so short. Thanks, Banette.”
The avian menace, the large red one, got off an attack, a red-purplish beam that threatened, hurtling at me-

*How ironic that the immortal shall die with me.*

“Banette love their Trainers,” I heard myself talk to a ghost. “Banette bear a grudge, not for being discarded or how they are created, but love their Trainers so much to despise anyone who stands between their Trainer and the goal. They will not be alive...to enjoy this.”

The horned one screamed, along with the cries of the winged one. My lips moved; I laughed as I raised my head to stare into crossed eyes and slanted pupils in front of me.

“I am the latest of the Kalos Champions, the princess abandoned by her people. If you wish to stop me, try, if you can go beyond my despair.”

My clothes stuck to my back, covered in clammy sweat despite the chill. Frogadier was nudging me. Ivysaur looked at me with the beginning of an Aromatherapy already ready to cast.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” I shook my head, refusing the treatment. “Sorry I woke you guys. You alright?”

Yawning, I shook out of my sleeping bag, trying not to disturb Noël, or the cold that was Sapin's immediate surroundings.

I blinked once I saw that not only was the Trangia stove alight, it was already set with a kettle. This was despite the large bonfire beside it. Dr du Bois's priorities were clear; even here, in her grey jean-shorts and sleeveless black turtle-neck, she was sitting there with her legs crossed and preparing a teabag in her tin mug. Her scarf was squirreled away somewhere, but otherwise, she looked very much put together under her grey hat, feather in her cap and all.

A *crunch* resounded, and I suddenly realised that the sweet smell was not honey, but instead dripping yellow honeycomb situated on a thick-cut baguette, which had probably been roasted over the stove. Darkrai was currently crunching his way through one such thing.

“*Bonjour*, Dr du Bois,” I offered.

“*Bonjour*,” she answered, ladling another dripping comb from a bowl with a tiny spoon. “Pass me one of the baguettes, Donar, if you please.”

The baguettes were in the bonfire. They weren't that hot, but they were smoking slightly when I carefully sliced one open after fishing it out from low orange flames. Dr du Bois slapped some honeycomb on my slice, and set it back into the fire before fishing it out onto my plate.

It crunched as I bit into it. The taste was indescribable. That was one way of recovering from nightmares. Especially with hot chocolate.

“I... had a dream,” I confessed, looking around. A bit of mist had drifted in from the Tisane, and in the distance I could hear a distant bleating of what I assumed were Skiddo, like what I saw in Versant Road. It came quite close to the Kanto ideal of idyllic, I could tell you that. Not the area you want to confess to anyone.

Dr du Bois looked at me. “Darkrai has been very polite. I cannot imagine that you would have ghosts haunting your life.”

The Pitch-Black Pokémon growled.
“I- I don't mean it like that!” I shook my head, wishing that I'd washed my face first, that I was in anything other than a tracksuit I fell asleep in and that I'll be spending most of the day wearing. “I mean... I saw a Lucario, Altair. A Delphox... and... in my dream, it was so real... I had a Venusaur named Deneb, and a Sealeo- and I called myself the latest of the Kalos Champions.”

I lifted my head. Dr du Bois was staring straight into the fire, her green eyes glimmering and wide even this early in the morning. In fact, those eyes were so green, I could see a second ring- contacts?


“...were I any other person, I would believe that your dream was a coincidence,” Dr du Bois finally said after what felt like a geological epoch. “I would dismiss it as hearsay, believing that nothing fantastic or coincidental could ever happen, were I so blind to the world. However, I maintain the belief that there is no coincidence; the universe is rarely so lazy, and this world too is rarely so coincidental. What were you fighting, in your dream?”

“A... something like a Stantler,” I confessed, feeling less hungry at the sound of her tone. “I think I've seen pictures of Sawsbuck before... it was blue with gold horns... and it glowed like a rainbow. With it was a large, bird-like Pokémon that was red and black. Do you... know those Pokémon?”

The kettle bubbled; Dr du Bois took it off the stove and set the simmer ring in, partially closed. She then started pouring tea. “I never knew that Darkrai would affect you like this.”

“This isn't the point!” I burst out. “I want to know why I'm looking at Daisy's dream!”

I realised that it was a bad move; a light in her eye glimmered, already homing in on what I slipped up.

“So, you know that those are Daisy's dreams, or memories, or you have some idea thereof,” she whispered.

“Yes,” I admitted grudgingly. “I... think? Anyway... it's weird. Isn't it?”

“Très bien.” She poured me some hot chocolate. “Close your mouth; I am capable of acknowledging your merits. So, Darkrai aside, what else?”

“Daisy... saw her Pokémon die?” I hazarded.

“And?” Dr du Bois questioned.

“So... why wasn't their deaths reported?” I asked myself, confused at the possibility that was outlined. “The death of half a Champion's team would be pay-dirt for the reporters.”

“What do you think?”

“You don't want to tell me?” I grumbled.

“I fear for your trust in authority if I were to tell you the truth,” she simply replied, her voice quiet. She was mixing some honey into her tea. “The reasons are not as simple as you think. It is also not what one would comment on in public. However, I can say this; somehow, you are dreaming of the circumstances of Daisy's tragedy. The why of wherefore I do not know, and do not care to deduce. It is a phenomenon, and all phenomena occur at one level or another. The only meaning is what you attribute it.”

“But it's got to be eating at Daisy,” I related. “Being unable to acknowledge her partners' deaths,
having to keep this secret... she can't just train another team like that, even if she replaced her Pokémon. Even if she was doing it to continue holding the Championship... I don't believe it. Diantha's still up there, she's still the one we have to fight. So... there's no reason for her to hide."

“I have... two hypotheses,” Dr du Bois suggested after a long silence, taking her spoon out of the cup to taste. “One; Daisy was a selfish girl who wanted to remain Champion. That is a faulty hypothesis, since she could train another team, as you pointed out, plus that is not in the character of Daisy. The other hypothesis; someone ensured that Daisy would be unable to tell anyone without sacrificing the thing Daisy fought for.”

“The thing...? She was blackmailed?” I blinked.

“Blackmail. There are other ways to motivate hiding the truth.” Dr du Bois smiled, sipping at her tea. “To properly understand, I need to elaborate on history. You remember, the story of Jeanne d'Arc?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “She was the first Kalos Champion, right? The legendary hero who created the Kalos League?”

“They were...? She was blackmailed?” I caught on. “That's... a bit weak?” I muttered. “So... regions are established through idols?”

“You heard Serena’s defence. Daisy Linden became a symbol for the people of Kalos to rally behind. Young, capable, and driven; everything ideal exemplified for the Kalos League to rally around, to combat Team Flare,” Dr du Bois's eyes drifted to the side, before centring back to the fire. “The people of any region sleep safe at night, knowing that their Champion will be strong against any of the forces of evil that are villains of our world. Yes, I suppose you could say that every region is established through its idols. With that sort of background, the sort of legitimacy that the League of a region rests upon, imagine that an ordinary citizen of Kalos, without Pokémon or defence or anything but that peace of mind, finds out that the Champion had fallen in battle. The world of Trainers is not kind to weakness.”

“That's... a bit weak?” I caught on. “They embarrass themselves? And their region- oh.”

“The Kalos League not only loses face; they lose legitimacy,” Dr du Bois agreed. “They lose social stability. All the effort placed into eradicating Team Flare would be lost overnight. If the other Leagues find out, the balance of powers between regions approaches collapse, like what had happened to the Johto region in the wake of Gold's defeat. That Pyrrhic victory might, in fact, come at great cost to Kalos. A bunch of hot-blooded, violently inclined Trainers with little political capital and all of the power of fully Trained, fully evolved Pokémon, attempting to muscle in on the Kalos League and to challenge all regions. An inter-region war was considered as a great possibility.”

That... was a horrible thought. Mom always said that fights were bad, and Team Rocket were evil. If Team Rocket's unsanctioned violence still left its mark on Kanto... I didn't want to see what sanctioned violence looked like.

Dr du Bois waved a hand to the Tisane burbling, to the half-meadow, half-forested area next to the river, to the herd of Mareep grazing far off. Her expression was serene, almost worthy of some form
of divine inspiration. “Kalos might have its bad points. Its people are stuck up, proud of themselves, and hold unnecessary arrogance with no knowledge of when to ask for help. Kalos is tarnished, yes. There are foolish, selfish individuals, both human and Pokémon alike. That does not, however, mean that Kalos is beyond saving.”

Maybe, I thought, this was how men felt when faced with the force of Jeanne d'Arc.

She then turned to me. “Furthermore, Kalos is a region with the most Fairy-type Pokémon, and leading in economic and agricultural strength and its alliance with Unova. This possibility leads me to a flip-side.”

“A flip-side?” I blinked.

“Have you thought about why Grimsley is here?”

The side question threw me off. “Erm... he's a Dark-type specialist?”

“Ostensibly,” Dr du Bois admitted. “Yet Kalos is not lacking either. The real reason is because he has a Krookodile handy.”

“Erm... okay?”

“Krookodile are used for body disposal,” Dr du Bois's eyes narrowed. “It's also easier with a Bisharp handy to dice flesh into small pieces. I imagine that, had the search succeeded, Julia's body would never be publicised.”

The honeycomb was cloying in my mouth, as I trembled in fear. She sipped at her tea, before placing the empty cup onto the ground. It landed with a clunk.

“For our comrades, all of us do things against our nature,” she admitted at last, watching the steam from my untouched hot chocolate cool off in my hands.

I do not know what drove me to tell Donar so much. I think he is onto something. He is a rather sharp one, that boy.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois.
XXIII: Débattre - To Debate

Chapter Summary

Dr du Bois flung something, made accurate with the use of her sling. As the rope dropped from her fingers, something blue arced through the air and trapped one of the beasts. It beeped once before clicking shut, and the flames died.

...I like Coumarine. Let's just leave it at that, and thus lead to the reason why I could not do the activities that I would have usually embarked upon in Coumarine.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 54: There was a wedding at the Baa de Mer Ranch. At the same time, the wedding reception was crashed by a wild Pokémon. The Ranch's owner has offered a one-time fifty percent discount on all dairy products should we succeed in capturing and isolating the beast.

Needless to say, I am very keen on the prospect.

The remnants of white lay around us. Tables, formerly laden with food, were strewn about. Flowers were strewn in that mess, and food with it.

I sneaked a Tamato Berry and sat back to watch Dr du Bois. Frogadier and Fletchling were running interference, being fast enough to corral stray Skiddo from spilling out to Fourrage Road.

A ring of blue-black flame hovered, doused by Jelly soon enough. Aegis shifted from the shadows, stabbing onto a clunky spectre of a Pokémon as Crystal set fire to the other orb.

Dr du Bois flung something, made accurate with the use of her sling. As the rope dropped from her fingers, something blue arced through the air and trapped one of the beasts. It beeped once before clicking shut, and the flames died.

"That was anti-climactic," Dr du Bois knelt, picking up the ball as she considered the orange menace left. "Hmm, a Pumpkaboo."

"What?" Serena pulled out her PokéDex. Pumpkaboo, the Pumpkin Pokémon. The pumpkin body is inhabited by a spirit trapped in this world. As the sun sets, it becomes restless and active.

"It's so cute!" Shauna squealed.

The pumpkin bared its tiny fangs before spitting seeds at us, and thus we realised that yes, Leech Seed works on humans too. The argument over who would take what ended when Crystal and Fletchinder set it on fire, where it vanished under a table and disappeared.

"Shadow Sneak," Dr du Bois identified. "It's gone, at least. Now, let's have a look at what I caught."

We leaned over as the ball opened, and from a beam of light appeared... a haunted stump. It was... kinda cute. Dr du Bois immediately gave him an Oran Berry, and the way it ate the berry was
endearing. Like seeing a Glameow or a Purrloin chow down.

“So cute...” Shauna cooed.

“Eh?” I produced my own PokéDex. *Phantump, the Stump Pokémon. According to old tales, these Pokémon are stumps possessed by the spirits of children who died while lost in the forest.*

Shauna gasped.

“No way...” Serena mouthed.

Wordlessly, Dr du Bois petted the creature. It squealed, offering her a Berry that she accepted and bit into. “The Coumarine Gym specialises in the care of Grass-type Pokémon. We can put him there.”

The stump wilted, quite visibly.

“Doctor...” I groaned.

“Tump, stump,” the tiny haunted stump moaned, offering her an Oran Berry that appeared out of nowhere.

“...merci, petit môme,” Dr du Bois commented, accepting the Berry again before turning to the ranch folks. “What do you think, Monsieur?”

“Partez avec lui!”

The ranch owner was happy enough that the Ghosts were off the property, rushing us – and the Phantump – back onto the road in short order once Dr du Bois completed her discounted purchases. We were munching on Berries as Dr du Bois kept glowering at the clingy Phantump.

“Where do you get all these Berries, anyway?! ” Dr du Bois exclaimed as her arms were bogged down with Oran Berries.

“I think she's happy,” Shauna confessed to me.

“Really?” I blinked. Sure, Dr du Bois was more casual with the Phantump than I had ever seen; then again, this was the woman who also read aloud to a phantom of the night regularly.

“It's almost like you have-” Dr du Bois stopped. “Récolte.”

“Hmm?” Noël paused, half a carton of yoghurt smeared on his face and the other half in his hands, still in its carton. “Damn, this is good yoghurt. But, Phantump and Pumpkaboo linger around Route 16, right?”

“Mélancolie Path, yes,” Dr du Bois agreed, still distracted. “I discussed it with the ranch head before, and he said that they might have been left behind by protesters from the ongoing protest about AOC deregulation.”

“Erm, that's something about certifying cheeses, right?” I blinked.

“Wine, cheeses, butters and other agricultural products come under AOC as well,” she explained. “The underlying basis is *terroir*, a 'sense of the land' used to address the special geological, geographical and climatic circumstances of a given land. For example, the Lava Cookie of Lavaridge Town in the Hoenn region is famous and cannot be duplicated, similar to the Old Gateau, the Casteliacone and the Lumiose Galette. With AOC certification, such products are non-fungible, and are thus marketed as municipal specialities. It's possible to construct entire courses around local cities'
specialities in Kalos. However, since such goods become non-fungible, there is no fixed market rate for, say, an average bottle of wine, so there's no baseline for marking of price to sell along the supply chain."

“Supply chain?” Shauna echoed in confusion.

“Let's say that a ranch like the Baa de Mer produces a thousand pats of butter a year,” Dr du Bois explained. “Most of the butter is sold to a wholesaler, or a general food store. The wholesaler sells the butter at a higher price to retailers such as the PokéMart or the various dairies around Kalos. The retailers sell the butter to us, the consumers, at an even higher price to make a profit. The chain of people from producer to consumer is thus called a supply chain, and the longer the chain, the final price of the products usually increase. Without a baseline, the middlemen tend to profit more, and the consumers pay more for food.”

“So... if the butter we bought was a hundred Poké, it could be cheaper?” Donar's eyes bugged out.

“We bought the butter at factory price, with added fifty percent discount,” Dr du Bois pointed out. “But the point is made. Furthermore, AOC also tends to place a higher taxation on foreign goods such as Kanto sake, which is detrimental to large chain-stores such as PokéMart looking to break into the Kalos market.”

“So... AOC is bad, right?” Shauna asked.

“The AOC policy is meant to ensure that farmers get paid more,” Dr du Bois pointed out. “After all, do you think they can afford the upkeep of themselves and their Pokémon on two hundred Poké per plaquette ?”

“Oh...”

Dr du Bois had barely taken another step before vines shot out of the ground and, fangs bared, the little Pumpkaboo was back. The Pumpkaboo's eyes glowed as white spectres surrounding us-

“Trick-or-Treat,” Dr du Bois muttered.

“You don't say,” I commented.

“Wrong. I meant this move,” Dr du Bois pointed out, quite reasonably. “The signature move of the Pumpkaboo line, Trick-or-Treat. It adds a Ghost-typing to any Pokémon.”

“A Ghost-typing?” Serena yelled, backing away.

“Crystal,” Dr du Bois summoned the Chandelure. “Incinerate!”

Fire flared as the Pumpkaboo backed away, screeching with glowing eyes before a Pokéball sailed to land on it. It stopped, beeping once, twice, thrice... and lay still with a final click.

Stiffly, Dr du Bois picked up the Quick Ball containing the little monster, a truly formidable and icy expression on her face.

“Both of you,” her expression was halfway evil. “The Coumarine Gym.”

On any other day, I liked Coumarine City. Set where land met sky and sea, Coumarine City was the largest of Kalos's ports, and also the most cosmopolitan of nearly all cities short of Lumiose. Its mild climate was soothing, its casinos easy to extract from, and the multiple stands of its marché par la
mer filled with goods shipped in from the five regions and across the globe, from rare Berries to Incenses to ribbons and TMs, at near half-prices.

...I like Coumarine. Let's just leave it at that, and thus lead to the reason why I could not do the activities that I would have usually embarked upon in Coumarine.

The first stop for all of us was the Pokémon Centre, of course. I set up Crystal and Jelly for a check-up, planning to return after I dropped the two imps at the Gym. I could have turned them over to Nurse Joy, but Pokémon adoption agencies did not take well to Ghost-type Pokémon. The Gym, at least, could cater specifically to Grass-type Pokémon.

The two imps, as I had dubbed them, were halfway between begging and contrite and repenting. It was not even amusing since I had to march to the monorail station with both locked Pokéballs from the Coumarine Hotel, and leave Crystal for her check-up at the Pokémon Centre.

“Dr du Bois...” Donar tried to hold me back as I marched up the steps of the Coumarine Gym.

I walked in, ignored the Rangers in mid-Training and marched up to Ramos. “Leader Amaro?”

The old man smirked. There was a telling twinkle in his eyes, as expected of one of Kalos’s oldest Champions. “Bonjour, Madame. Why, you're a bit taller than the young sprouts-”

“I have a rogue Pumpkaboo and Phantump to submit to the Gym,” I interrupted, placing both Quick Balls down. “They were haunting the Baa de Mer Ranch, and crashed the Mer wedding.”

“Good riddance, that,” Ramos muttered to himself, almost inaudibly, before turning his attention to the two Quick Balls. “You're submitting these two for adoption, madame?”

“Doctor, this is a bad idea,” Donar had caught up to me, panting. “I mean... you like them, right?”

“Precisely!” a girl spoke up behind me, her dark flyaway hair and dark clothes marking her as a Hex Maniac of a sort. “They’re so cute!”

“My preference does not equal the fact that I have no facilities to care for them,” I argued, trying to push away the Pokéballs Ramos kept placing into my hands. “Pumpkaboo and Phantump are children. I cannot afford to babysit one more child on my work, since I already have full-time care of one.”

“Then give me one of them!” the girl continued. “I'll take care of him, promise!”

“Hey!” Donar protested.

“You are a child!” I told him.

“Hmm,” Ramos considered. “Can I open them?”

I waved with the universal signal for go ahead.

He opened both balls.

Phantump slammed into me – not bad, for a hunk of wood – and was followed by Pumpkaboo whining.

“Stump! Boo! Stump! Boo!”

I fed them some of the candied peel I’d made earlier on the Ranch to shut them up.
“He’s so cute!” the girl squealed, clinging onto Pumpkaboo.

“You break it, you buy it, sprout!” Ramos cheerily said. “‘Sides, you just need to go buy some stuff at the PokéMart, right? Now, one of you whipper-snappers escort the lady out.”

I felt one of the balls being removed from my hand, and then I was bodily escorted out of the Coumarine Gym. I stared at the one Pokéball in my hand, before turning back to see a lock of midnight hair running away into the distance, a Quick Ball nestled in her hand.

“Darkrai, stop her!” I roared as my shadow rippled. “She’s stolen a Pokémon!”

The girl in question turned back, legs apart despite the skirt she wore, and stuck her tongue out as Pumpkaboo was summoned. Behind her, Darkrai appeared, malevolently intimidating. “Pumpkaboo, I choose you! Bullet Seed!”

In any other day, I would have dispatched her immediately. Unfortunately, today was a really bad day.

“Aegis!” I roared, sending my strongest Ghost out in a near-literal throw. “Shadow Sneak!”

“Merde!” She started as the sword went hurtling for her, blade gleaming. “Pumpkaboo!”

Dr du Bois, when cold, was utterly remote.

When hot, she was incandescent as a forest fire.

...wonder if this is going to end up like when she was yelling at the Ambrette people a month ago.

… Hmm... best not to say.

“Comment... vous... vous appelez?” I suffered through my basic Kalosian. In the wake of where Dr du Bois and Aegis tore up the foyer of the Coumarine Gym, we were currently somewhere around the Hillcrest station of the Coumarine monorail, with me and my Pokémon sitting between a Pokémon thief and the utterly murderous Pokémon sociology professor.

“Je m'appelle Léa,” our black-haired thief offered. She was wearing a rather short denim skirt and a black tank top, with high-cut stockings and purple high-tops. “You're a cutie, right, little boo-boo?”

“You have one minute before I turn you in with Officer Jenny for Pokémon theft,” Dr du Bois snarled. “Fifty-nine seconds.”

“Sheesh,” Léa huffed. “Fine, I needed a Pokémon. You had two you didn't want. I just... borrowed one, I was going to release him after, honest. I just need one more badge.”

“What happened to the rest of your Pokémon?” I asked, curious.

Léa shifted from side to side, almost showing off her assets.

“Forty-five seconds,” Dr du Bois said, her voice flat. Beside her, Aegis clanked.

“I... didn't have any,” Léa admitted.

“You stole badges?!” I nearly shouted.

“No, I won them!” Léa fidgeted, almost kissing Pumpkaboo for comfort. “I... I asked the Pokémon
in the wild to lend a hand, usually...”

At this, Dr du Bois perked, staring hard at Léa. Green met almost-clear eyes, and Léa shifted defensively. “What?”

Dr du Bois twitched. Clearly, her rage was simmering. I didn’t blame her. There were so many plot holes in that story you couldn’t use it for clothing. However, what came out of Dr du Bois wasn’t an accusation. “Natural gift of communication, or atavistic properties?”

Léa considered, before dipping her head in a sharp nod. “Natural... gift.”

“Be honest. The fate of that Pumpkaboo still rests in my hands.”

“Fine,” Léa scowled. “I... I'm like them, the Pokémon. Happy now?”

“Father or mother?”

Léa nodded, again sharp. “Father.”

“What are you talking about?” I blinked.

Dr du Bois resolutely ignored me. “You ran away from home?”

Léa sniffed. “I wanted to become a Trainer, like Maman never managed before she married that putain. That putain is the bane of my life, and we both know I'm not his biological daughter. He made sure to note that there was no way I could become a Trainer in Unova without parental consent. He was going to leave me cooped up at home, in the village... I overheard him arranging a deal in exchange for me. I... I made my way to Opelucid and snuck onto a ship headed to Kalos. It docked at Aquacorde.”

“I understand,” Dr du Bois still looked cold in the face of what I realised to be a very sad story. “You won't be the first sob story to have flocked to any other region for a better chance at life. I suppose you're on an independence run?”

Léa nodded. “It was hard, and scary, but... I need one more badge. Just one more, then I don't ever need to look back.”

“What is your name?” I asked quickly.

“Morelle,” Léa whispered. “Léa Morelle.”

Morelle? Where have I heard that before?

Dr du Bois started. “Did you register for all your matches with that name?”

“Oui?” Léa hazarded, confused. “It's my mother's maiden name.”

“Dr du Bois?” I asked as she seemed to pale. “Doctor? Do you... remember the name?”

“... I don't know,” Dr du Bois simply replied, standing up. “However, Mademoiselle Morelle, I cannot entrust this Pumpkaboo to you without knowing his eventual fate. Assuming that this lone Pumpkaboo can even win against the Coumarine Gym, what will you do?”

“What will I- I don't want to keep any Pokémon with me,” Léa replied, confusion evident in her grey eyes. “I... when I'm emancipated, I will make my way to Anistar City. I will beg Olympia for help.”

“Well...” Léa clasped her hands together. They parted, to form a ring of purplish-blue flames.

The miniature conflagration flared before winking out, leaving us silent.

“Léa Morelle and others like her, they are like Pokémon,” Dr du Bois explained to my thunderstruck expression. “We call them Pocket Monsters Morphology-Exhibiting Individuals, or Pokémon. Saule's theory of divergent evolution suggests that Pokémon and humans originate from the same root of binary life form, and developed interdependently into the truly divergent species we see today, but are genetically similar enough to procreate with Pokémon to give rise to a viable, fertile hybrid species. Elm and Rowan have submitted works that counter this theory, but on basis of evidence alone, Saule is the current theory in the field of Pokémon evolution.”

“What?” I shook my head. “Wait, go back to the bit where you skip the thing about Saule and divergent evolution. She's part Pokémon?”

“Actually, she's an inheritor of certain atavistic properties gifted from a union born between a human and a Pokémon,” Dr du Bois considered Léa, who bristled.

“Actually...” Léa sighed. “Can we... not talk about this? Look, I... really should leave. Now.”

“Certainly,” Dr du Bois agreed as Léa stood. “Yet the more you talk, the less I shall be inclined to submit you to Officer Jenny for Pokémon theft, assault and battery in broad daylight, and disturbing the peace.”

Most of the colour drained from Léa's face, leaving her grey eyes levelling at Dr du Bois. “You... that's blackmail.”

“And so is your treatment of the local Pokémon, most of which have never faced a regulated, regimented Pokémon battle in their lives before you threw them in an all-or-nothing melee against Gym Leaders.” Her expression was even more sadistic than when she dealt with Serena as she held up her Holo Caster. A tiny flash indicated a photograph taken. “I think Professor Sycamore shall be very interested in your case; enough to involve the Sûreté. It may involve badge confiscation as well as suspension of your Trainer license, pending regional investigation. Oh, and deportation, perhaps. That is, if the International Police don't just decide to prosecute right here and now.”

“Wait, what?” Léa was in a full-blown panic. “Y- You can't do this to me. I- I had that Trainer license, I... we won those badges, and they... the Pokémon, they helped. It's not fair!”

“Dr du Bois,” I whispered. “Maybe you should- I mean, it's-”

“Those Pokémon risked life, limb and long-term injury,” Dr du Bois spat, “for an ungrateful girl who won badges in battles she didn't take the time or effort to train her companions with, or feed them a hot meal, or even show gratitude to them. There are Trainers who slog their whole lives without gaining a badge. You picked the wrong person to discuss fairness with, Mademoiselle Morelle.”

Yes, I decided. Dr du Bois was truly and heroically cheesed off for no reason today.

“I was going to thank Pumpkaboo!” Léa complained. “...after he won. B- But you were going to abandon him!”

Right. Léa Morelle and one lone Pumpkaboo was going to win against Ramos. For a fourth Gym battle. One against three, all Grass-types.
...Not going to happen.

Dr du Bois knew that too, because she leaned forward, and whatever Léa saw was enough to send her skidding back. I knew that look. We've met.

“I realise that responsibility is a foreign concept to you, Mlle,” Dr du Bois silkily answered in a way that implied pretty much complete contempt, even lower than Serena. “Thirty percent of Pokémon released into the wild after human captivity don't tend to survive longer than a year, even though the law specifies that we can simply release captured Pokémon into the wild. Yet, I decided to leave him at the only place in Kalos that could cater specifically to Grass-type Pokémon like Pumpkaboo, instead of with the Global Trade System. It's not fun, the Global Trade System, but some Trainers do use it to find their Pokémon good homes. Something which you seem to have entirely overlooked. Let's add endangerment of welfare to those charges. So... in a fair world, this ends with you either: in jail, on a plane to Mistraltion City, or facing complete barring from Trainer licensing as well as criminal charges, as well as being deported and in jail.”

Léa turned around.

“Shall we discuss about angels?” Dr du Bois proposed. “I know two very interesting facts about them. One, that sometimes, very rarely, at a point in an individual’s career where he has made such a foul and tangled mess of their life that death appears to be the only sensible option, an angel appears to them, or, I should say, unto them, and offers a chance to go back to the moment when it all went wrong, and this time do it right. I should like you to think of me as... an angel.”

Léa ran. She dropped down, down, down...

... and onto the bench next to Dr du Bois, followed by a cackling Phantump and Pumpkaboo.

Dr du Bois examined her nails, standing up. In the harsh light of Coumarine City, her dark hair spilled out in a sea breeze, and her face was even scarier in its serenity. “The second thing, mademoiselle, about angels. Don't you know? You only get one.”

I have a bad feeling about Léa Morelle. It is just as well that I keep my enemy close.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois.

Chapter End Notes

Also on a note: French terms are from Bulbapedia. So, Gym Leaders = Champions, Elite Four = Conseils Quatre, and Champion = Maître/Maîtresse. It is not a mistake; Ramos is the Coumarine Gym Leader, le Champion de Gym à Port Tempères.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
(cont.) I am very worried.

I want to be... better. (delete)

I... may have grown attached to the boy. (delete)

I am better. I just want the boy to acknowledge my view. (delete)

I would rather be called a monster several times over before he sees my view. It would not be worth the necessary pain and suffering. (delete)

C'est des conneries. J'en ai rien à foutre, Samuel Oak. You wanted this bloody log, you can have it.

Today I strong-armed an illegal migrant Trainer named Léa Morelle. I am convinced that she is a citizen, although she believes that I have the power to deport her. She is with us, at the Pokémon Centre, and I have no idea why am I intervening in this coincidence.

Coincidence?

No. Léa made her choice when she stole Pumpkaboo from me.

Dr du Bois, after her initial blackmail of Léa to follow us to the Pokémon Centre, remained quiet and pensive throughout the ride. Well, she did break out and give a running tour of Coumarine City as seen from the monorail, but nothing really exciting happened. We reached the Centre in record time, where I found Serena, Shauna and Noël in the foyer.

“Erm, guys, this is Léa Morelle. Léa, this is Serena Calme, Shauna, and Noël Duval. All of you share a mutual... dislike of Dr du Bois.” I felt stupid immediately after I said that.

Serena gave me a look. “You're not very good at this, are you?”

“I don't usually have enough friends to introduce to each other.” A lifetime of travelling across regions pretty much taught that friends were disposable things.

Léa, Shauna and Serena glanced at each other, and gave me pitying looks.

“Anyway, we're planning to go to Le marché,” Noël proposed. “It's one of the largest open-air markets, by the port.”

“Oh, I know it!” Léa replied, enthused when Dr du Bois raised no objections. “You can get Berries cheap there, as well as foodstuffs.”

“Great, so... should we go in the evening or in the morning?” I asked.

“Morning,” Léa immediately answered, crossing her arms defensively and trying not to glare at Dr du Bois. “The best bargains are at way in the morning. Now, if you don't mind, I need to go back to the Gym for dinner.”
“The Gym?” I echoed.

“I got no idea why, but Leader Ramos said that I could stay at the Coumarine Gym,” Léa shrugged. “A couple of the Gym Trainers stay there too, ’cause the old man cooks. We have ratatouille often.”

“The ratatouille of Coumarine City is nice,” Dr du Bois agreed. “I believe Ramos grows most of his vegetables on-site.”

“In the Gym?” Noël echoed in interest.

“You'll know,” came the enigmatic reply.

“Why don’t you call the Gym and tell them that you won’t be coming for dinner?” I asked. “After all, dining out with friends is better- Ow!”

I rubbed the area where Dr du Bois had driven her rather sharp elbow into my side, glaring at her. “What?”

“Donar,” Dr du Bois gave me the judging eye.

What? All I did was ask her out to dinner with us.

“Thanks, but... I don't have enough cash on hand,” Léa shyly answered.

Oh.

...she didn't need to hit me. But I guess Dr du Bois was also kind in her own way.

“I'm actually quite interested in the proposal of Leader Ramos,” Dr du Bois commented. “So, I'll leave you young people to settle your own dinner. I'll be waiting here in the Pokémon Centre foyer, so I expect all of you back at dix heures. De quatre heures jusqu'à dix heures... that gives you six hours of free time. Mlle Morelle, I will take you back to the Coumarine Gym.”

“Er, Dr du Bois?” I asked when she made towards the counter. “You're not going for dinner with us?”

“Well, I want to meet a friend,” she replied. “And I need to work. Bonne soirée!”

“What's up with her?” I muttered as she left us, everyone's eyes flickering between her and I.

“What?”

“Did you offend Dr du Bois, Donar?” Shauna warned.

“No! No way!”

I flipped open my Holo Caster to search my contacts, typing out a fast message.

Maintenant, j’suis à Port Tempères, au marché balnéaire. Y a une très meilleure brasserie près du Gym. Ça vous tente? À +. – Marguerite

You're flirting. Why are you flirting? Altair echoed in my head as I walked onwards. Are you
It is surprising exactly how much work one can accomplish on the monorail. There are some scholars that argue that Lumiose had supplanted Coumarine in flow of goods internationally; after all, the Arc-en-Ciel Regional Airport saw much more inflow than *la Baie Azur* in recent years.

I see a large city, divided across a mound of earth, connected by a vein that is the monorail. One side the mouth, through which Kalos accepts its tributes from the world, the other the gate through which the world's goods fed through Kalos, divided by *La Colline de nuages* – Cloud Hill. The city centred on either side of the hill, where bay and butte are bound:

Coumarine City.

The greatest port in northern Kalos. In the traditional defence strategy, Coumarine would stand alongside Cyllage and Shalour as the defence line of coastal Kalos. Standing contrast to the Montagne line of Lavarre, Anistar and Snowbelle. Between them sleeps Lumiose, Santalune and Île-de-l'arc.

To reinforce the defence borders as a stable, self-propagating system under the *ancien régime*, forty great families defended each side, the central line held by the last twenty families as coordinators. Out of the Cent-Feuilles during the Last Dynasty, the three Grand Ducal families rose to high prominence: the Mandragora in coastal Kalos, Coque-lourde in Snowbelle, and Luzerne, based in the heart of Kalos. Despite the Fleur-de-Lis reaching royal status, it can be said that those three lost families controlled all of Kalos, and that their descendants continued to do so.

Léa eyed me peripherally from time to time.

"Is there something?"

"What are you doing?" Léa asked me, clearly suspicious. We were seated side by side in the monorail, waiting as the transport took us smoothly about *la Colline*.

"I need to speak to Ramos concerning your situation," I replied.

Léa was immediately defensive. "He's done nothing wrong."

Under the International Migration Protocol of the Second Millennium, as well as the Pokémon League Covenant of the Inter-Regional Trainer on2010, Gyms are not cleared as a resting location, save under the stipulations of the Gym Leader and Gym Trainer. Furthermore, the Protocol also states that the housing, whether intentional or otherwise, of an illegal alien is subject to imprisonment. I forbore to mention any of this, though, and instead fixed her with a look. "I was thinking that I should establish a reason why you stayed at the Gym instead of at the Pokémon Centre."

"Well..." Léa sighed. "Leader Ramos offered, and he was so... nice, you know? I'm learning handicrafts from some Gym Trainers, and I usually sell them over the weekend at *le marché aux puces*, so... it's really cheap to make candles and incense, you know."

"I was not aware that incense-making was a sideline of the Coumarine Gym," I answered, but it was an idea.

"It's not," Léa admitted. "I actually wanted to make a Sachet, but there's no way I can get enough Oran oil. Leader Ramos won't lend me a Pokéball or anything to get a Pokémon either, so I can't get to Camphrier Town."

"Mmm," I nodded as we walked out of the monorail's Hillcrest Station and towards the Coumarine
Gym. “Lavender is available in Fourrage Road, as is honeysuckle. I’m sure you can gather some.”

Ramos looked up as we entered the Coumarine Gym. In the absence of rushing, I can tell you that the inside of the Gym was not so much a Gym as a miniature forest. Though, in the far distance I could glimpse a set of beehives.

“Are you opening an apiary, Ramos?” I commented to myself.

“Oh, ma chérie, you're back,” Ramos smiled. The smile faded somewhat as I walked towards him.

“Can I talk to you, Leader Amaro?” I asked lowly. “Alone?”

“My office.” Ramos turned to Léa. “Le dîner ensemble, à la salle à manger. Oui?”

“Je le sais, monsieur,” Léa replied politely. “À bientôt!”

“Bon appétit!” Ramos led me to the elevator that brought us to his tree-top study, at which he secured almost immediately.

“Sprout,” he started.

“You know who I am,” I stated.

“Oui.”

“Léa Morelle,” I began.

“Yeah, I know, the Protocol,” Ramos nodded. “You gonna make noise ‘bout this?”

I sighed. “Ramos, you do know that she's an illegal alien.”

“She's got citizenship,” Ramos argued.

“Then she can stay at the Pokémon Centre. Does Siebold know?”

“The sprout is preparing for my party,” Ramos scoffed. “I just wanna drink that XIX century Tempèra with Wulfric, but no, the petit-fils gotta cater my sixtieth birthday party. ‘Sides, you think the Conseil would let me keep Mlle Morelle here?”

“Why?” I asked. “Is this to do with her... family?”

“You already know, how likely the chance is,” Ramos gravely replied. “I knew Rachelle Morelle, trust me, and she fled to Unova to escape Achillée Morelle. Familicide runs in that family, never mind that she's barely of age.”

“And her lack of Pokémon?” I asked. “This is dangerous.”

“I can't let this independence run succeed, not yet,” Ramos agreed. “Yeah, it's a stopgap measure. But... look, if you gotta report this, just wait till I get the girl some way away from Coumarine, alright?”

“The Maison Adonis Goutte-de-Sang can't intervene?” I asked.

“Not unless the Morelle attacks the Coumarine Gym, and they ain't that dumb,” Ramos sighed. “They're waiting for Léa to finish the independence run. Once she's in the Badlands... after four badges, the League don't give a shit.”
I nodded. “You think that Léa Morelle is the lost Morelle heiress.”

“I know she is,” Ramos sharply answered. “She's also possibly a Pokémorph, which is too outstanding. Achillée Morelle might find out.”

“Does he know?” I wondered.

“Possibly,” Ramos muttered. “You know how the Morelle and power are like.”

“The International Police?”

“ Heard that they sent Special Agent Sept,” Ramos grumbled. “Dunno about Special Agents or whatnot, but one guy against the Morelle might mean a bloodbath. What will you do?”

I looked at this fierce old man, this resilient oak unafraid to get hiss hands dirty, if only to fight for a girl who had no idea what coming to Kalos might cost her in the end and whose only fault was to be born to a Morelle heiress, the legal heiress. “I don't know. I terrified her, I put the fear of me in her... and I don't know what to do.”

“She and that Pumpkaboo are mighty close, that,” Ramos commented.

“Right...” I nodded. “I'll see what I can do. But before that, I think I'll go out for dinner. I'll leave Pumpkaboo here to help, since we can't be too careful.”

“Noted. Why don't you join us?” Ramos offered.

“No, I couldn't impose.”

We talked a bit more about his planned apiary – Ramos was planning on expanding out to an ecologically sound model, and was planning out a proposal with the Santalune Gym to have a forest reserve. While Kalos itself boasted the only forest reserve of its kind – through no fault of its own, rather through the multiple Trevenant occupying it – what Ramos was proposing was similar to a miniature habitat within a Gym.

“This Gym holds Grass-type Pokémon from all over the region, and nearby is the Gym that holds Bug-type Pokémon,” Ramos smirked.

“A large, interactive habitat,” I understood. “Not only does it fill its own ecological niche within la Colline, there is a food supply chain already in place within the region. Since Coumarine receives regular rainfall and proximity to the Tisane and Vin and to the subterranean Brière, it also has a constant supply of drinking water, and that open canopy allows for regular sunlight. It sounds viable...”

“Yeah, more work to do,” Ramos agreed as he showed me to the door. “You'll help that girl?”

“I will do what I can,” I answered softly. “Ramos... you stubborn old oak.”

“Little sprout,” Ramos shot back. “Grew into a lovely daisy, eh?”

“Not so lovely,” I answered. “À demain.”

Dinner was partaken of at the brasserie, L'Étape. It sat both humans and Pokémon, so Altair and Darkrai got the places of honour with me when we were shown to our seats. Today I had the Phantump with me, and it clung on tight. I sat him in my lap on the large, reserved table. My dinner date was already here.
“Bienvenue à L’Étape, messieurs et mesdames,” the server walked up to our table. “Je m'appelle Martin, je suis votre serveur ce soir. Vous désirez des boissons?”

“Oui, trois carafes de thé à la Baie Pecha.” The server nodded and left.

“Three carafes of Pecha Berry tea?” My other human companion commented. “I do hope you're not intending to poison yourself with alcohol.”

I looked up from the menu to regard Wikstrom. “Well, now I know that you're here. You finally spoke up.”

“Bien sûr,” Wikstrom answered, an aperitif and hors d'œuvres already in hand. “Siebold is cooking.”

“Très bien,” I nodded, smiling as I turned to Darkrai. “Darkrai, this is the part where you order from the waiter. Do you understand?”

One cyan eye flickered, and Darkrai's clawed hand tried to tighten on the white linen. “I... I don't know how.”

“There is nothing wrong,” I coaxed. “Remember when we covered articles of food?”

...yes. I do remember, Marguerite... I want the clafoutis.

“Right,” I encouraged, even though it meant that I had to coach him through brushing non-existent teeth and plan an extra cardiac workout just to work off the sugar. “How about an entrée and the main dish before dessert, that's a good boy.”

Wikstrom looked at the Scizor and Aegislash that were seated at the table, right as his Klefki joined us. “I suppose this is a group date?”

“Certainly,” I answered dryly. “Mainly it's to get Darkrai used to public life. I don't know how many times he would enter a restaurant, but it can't hurt to coach him through. After all, functioning in relaxed settings like a brasserie is also a stage.”

“Well, Siebold told me that the aïoli is promising,” Wikstrom lightly commented. “Of course, we could just have le menu, if you don't want to order à la carte.”

“Siebold? Is he aware that his grandfather is keeping a foundling in the Gym?”

“I'm sure Ramos has his reasons.”

“So he is aware,” I cocked my head. “Is that the reason for your presence?”

“Actually, Grimsley stopped by here,” Wikstrom crossed his arms. “Something about meeting a woman after his own heart, a gambler like himself. Why are you suddenly asking me out for dinner?”

“C'est « L'Étape »,” I replied, using the name of Coumarine City's top brasserie.

“So you're using me to jump ahead of the queue?” Wikstrom rumbled warmly. “You could call Siebold. He does have stakes in this, you know.”

“Not just that,” I leered. “I need some real conversation. Being around minors for too long drives me nuts. Siebold is a decent conversationalist, but it's his family. It's not good to mix family and obligations. I feel that, if we can resolve the Morelle situation ourselves without Siebold finding out about the potential threat hidden in his grandfather's house, we should try by all means. The girl's
name is Léa Morelle.”

“I was unaware that Madame Rachelle Morelle had chosen to return.”

“No, not Rachelle Morelle, her daughter,” I murmured. “I don't like the danger she poses.”

“This, from a Champion of Kalos?” he asked.

“I'm still planning to fake my death,” I replied airily. “I'm just waiting for Calem to give up on searching Lumiose and Kiloude to get his arse back. I plan to blow up the dummy I already have in place.”

“It will be a sad day for all of us,” Wikstrom answered, so sincerely that I could ill afford to disappoint.

Martin came back with the carafes of Pecha Berry tea, the chunks of Berry still floating within, frozen and cool against the fluted glass. It came to a head where each had a glass/bowl/container by which every one of us drank a cup first.

I turned to Martin. “Pour commencer, je voudrais l'aligot.”

“Comme entrée?” Martin jotted in a tiny notebook. “Alors, vous voudriez le course complet?”

“Oui.”

“Et comme plat, madame?”

“L'aioli, sans moules.”

“Bien. Et comme fromage?”

“Pas de fromage, s'il vous plaît,” I answered.

Martin nodded as Altair made his own order – and I thanked any blessed power that I had gone through this mess six times before – and then turned to Darkrai. “Can you communicate via telepathy?”

...yes.

“Ça suffit,” Martin gently murmured, guiding the Pitch-Black Pokémon through choosing. Darkrai chose a piperade, a brandade, and a clafoutis, the last of which was a fruit and thick custard tart that Darkrai kept eyeing the menu picture of.

“Well, then,” I lifted my glass of tea. “À votre santé!”

A song started up over the speakers, coming from a stage at the far end of the restaurant, blocked by the L-shape construction of the place and the distance from our table and presumably, a jukebox.


Les rêves des amoureux sont comme le bon vin,
   Ils donnent de la joie ou bien du chagrin,
   Affaibli par la faim je suis malheureux,
   Volant en chemin tout ce que je peux,
   Car rien n'est gratuit dans la vie.
L'espoir est un plat bien trop vite consommée,  
À sauter les repas, je suis habituée.  
Un voleur solitaire est triste à nourrir,  
À un jeu si amer, je ne peux réussir,  
Car rien n'est gratuit dans... la vie !

Jamais, on ne me dira,  
Que la course aux étoiles; ça n'est pas pour moi,  
Laissez-moi vous émerveiller et prendre mon envol,  
Nous allons en fin nous régaler... !

“So how do you feel?” I asked as Darkrai reached for his glass.

*I feel... for once, I feel... this is possible.*

*I don't know the words to this song,* Darkrai continued. *But it feels like it should have meaning to me.*

As the bridge continued, the singer spun into view; green hair, white dress, and smiling as the Gardevoir sung on the stage, to much applause.

I hid a smile. Somehow, despite the language barrier, these feelings do not change, and music was one universal language that could touch all.

**La fête va enfin commencer... !**

*Sortez les bouteilles; finis les ennuis,*  
*Je dresse la table de ma nouvelle vie,*  
*Je suis heureux à l'idée de ce nouveau destin... !*  
*Une vie à me cacher, et puis libre enfin,*  
*Le festin est sur mon chemin...*

Coumarine was surprisingly populated, especially as we passed down one street filled with buskers. Little stages had been set up, some actors in costume standing up to monologue about something once or twice. Most of the plays were in Kalosian, but those in Standard or the rarer performance in Kantonese were amazing.

“They look pretty,” Shauna enthused. “Don't you think so, Serena?”

“I... I guess,” Serena crossed her arms, but she looked intrigued.

“Guess we're being dragged around,” Noël commented as our arms were grabbed. So, I ended up
being dragged around and around-

“Hey, what's this?” Shauna paused in front of an incense shop. The smoky rose scent was intriguing, mixed with something... like salt.

“Bonsoir!” the guy offered, cheerful and ruddy in his smile. “Would you like a Rose Incense, mademoiselle? Something for your Roselia, eh?”

“Roselia?” Shauna echoed.

“Incenses and items like these don't just smell good!” the owner explained. “Some of them gives luck in battle, some of them make Pokémon slower or faster, some increase the power of some moves. Look, this Incense's from Johto. Rose Incense is used in breeding Roselia and Roserade to Budew, and it also kills insects. Just light it and leave it for about ten minutes, guaranteed!”

“I'll get one,” Shauna offered. “Serena, are you buying?”

“Erm, I think I prefer the Sea Incense,” Serena deflected.

I picked up one of the different incenses, this one supposedly mixed and for human use. “These are...?”

“Oh, I got those for a song from the Celadon Gym in Kanto,” the man replied.

“The Gym?”

“Yeah, really.” the man assured. “Erika herself told me that the Grass-type Gyms are thinking about branching into some small businesses. You know, handicrafts, candles, that sort of thing. So, what d’you think?”

I sniffed the incense casually. Jasmine, something flowery and solid... with a bit of Gracidea and Oran berry. Dr du Bois would love this smell. Mum could take the sandalwood-

Wait. What?

“Donar, come along!” Shauna yelled, standing with the rest of them some distance away, beside a kebab stand.

“O- Of course,” I replied enthusiastically, running off after I paid for both incenses in their burners.

Maybe, if I acted so, I would feel about as hyped as I projected.

Chapter End Notes

The song is 'Le Festin', performed by Camille for the 2007 Pixar movie, wait for it... Ratatouille. Yes, it is French. I was debating between this and 'Je Veux Savoir' from Tarzan as Darkrai’s leitmotif.

Critiquez, s’il vous plaît!
XXV: Agir - To Act

Chapter Summary

I have decided upon a course of action...
...After I buy out the seaside marketplace.

Sometimes I hate Dr du Bois.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 56: Morning found me back at the Coumarine Hotel. It is a serious coincidence that I found Wikstrom here too.

I have decided upon a course of action...
...After I buy out the seaside marketplace.

Les rêves des amoureux sont comme le bon vin, ils donnent de la joie ou bien du chagrin...

I hummed along the mental tune, my bags filled with goodies that I planned to prepare at the common kitchen in the Coumarine Hotel before we set out. “Who knew that a Gardevoir could sing that well.”

Darkrai’s leg grew out, and he spun in an absent pivot. She was in a troupe, performing in Coumarine, communicated he, so serious and endearing. Operatic, according to her.

“Les Dames Blanches,” I recalled. “Mmm, yes, I recall. How did that song go... Triste et tellement seule, je te recherche...”

“Laissant aller...” came the same voice. “Tout ce qui autrefois comptait pour moi...”

“Bonjour,” I offered to the singing Gardevoir floating alongside Lestrade. “And hello again, Mr Lestrade.”

“Dr du Bois,” the man with salt-and-pepper hair offered. “Altair, too. You found a Darkrai? I thought they were restricted to New Moon Island.”

“He’s my research assistant,” I replied. “Is this your client?”

“May I introduce Droite, leading lady of Les Dames Blanches,” Lestrade gave a theatrical bow. “Since, well, I wrapped up shooting of «L’histoire en commençant», Holmes's agent asked me to represent Droite in a prospective recording.”

“Impressive,” I told the Gardevoir, who blushed and made a little courtly bow.

“We’re going to record Synchro, a new album,” Lestrade continued. “It’s a bit stressful, so- excuse me,” he broke off as a set of screams echoed behind him. Turning around, Lestrade exhaled loudly.
“Holmes. Put the shopkeeper down.”

The Serperior was followed by the sharp, low yip of a Stoutland. The Stoutland carried a basket in his maw; the Serperior just glared at all and sundry.

“I hope he isn't performing,” I murmured as Holmes twirled around Lestrade.

“Hell no,” Lestrade automatically replied, looking at the stall-keeper tangled in part of a grassy tail. “Holmes, no eating the stall-keepers. We can afford not to put you in lock-up on your downtime. Watson, watch him.”

“If you are cheating, I think I shall pass,” I gently told the stall-keeper, making my way to the fruits and vegetables. “I'm not exactly quite sure what is it you do, Mr Lestrade, to be so far from Virbank City. Or was it Nimbasa?”

“Producer, director... looking to branch into agencies,” Lestrade demurred. “Call me Greg, please. Well, I lived out part of my life in Lentimas Town before I travelled to Virbank, starting out small... Hit pay dirt with Holmes, but he was a nightmare to work with. Is. Just... marginally less after Watson came in. Imagine the producer's face when I told him to put my Stoutland on crew.”

“I understand that you are Holmes's owner as well?” I asked.

Lestrade snorted. “No. His owner's a big cheese in Castelia, managed to make it to the Leagues, from what I heard until he hung up the hat for a suit. The Serperior had acting potential and it was bored, so for a lark Mr Holmes signed him up.”

Hanging up the hat. An Unovan expression for leaving the Training world. “He named his Pokémon after himself?”

“No, the Serperior Holmes name was a gimmick,” Lestrade answered. “He doesn't really answer to that name, Holmes, any more than Watson would answer to his own show moniker. Least it's better than that dark vigilante thing I pitched to the studios. Couldn't find a good actor.”

“So both of them suffer from naming syndrome, or do they already have their own names, of which they project in their mind?” I mused as the Serperior finally relented, leaving the embarrassed merchant to leave the marketplace.

“Alors, où est-ce que nous allons?” Droite questioned, her voice high and sweet.

“We’re doing some shopping,” I replied, picking up a packet of baking soda to add to the bottle of olive oil before I considered the next bottle. “Darkrai, what do you think about teriyaki?”

What is that?

“Soya sauce, mirin, and sugar, made into a glaze for meat and served in la viande déglacée. Right, you're in for a treat.” I bought the soy sauce, noting the price. Maybe that light dessert wine...

We parted ways, Lestrade and I exchanging Caster numbers to arrange for something, sometimes. I had the feeling that Lestrade was already spoken for, but having a mildly intelligent conversation partner was almost a relief. I considered the merits and drawbacks of befriending someone like Lestrade halfway through the fishmonger's, and decided that another ally was perhaps a good thing. “What do you think of Mr Lestrade, the both of you?”

Altair paused. The last time you took that tone, you transferred ownership of Vega and I to Professor Sycamore, and let yourself get lost in the Lost Hotel. Are you intending to repeat that?
“No,” I assured them, checking out the patterns by the street cobbler. “Darkrai, I am... how do you feel about Unova?”

Unova? Both of them echoed.

“Altair, especially...” I frowned. “

There is a lot more to explore in this world,” I murmured. “This fieldwork can take up to one, maybe two years, but, if we can... maybe, perhaps, a trip to Unova. There is a theme park there, and with it a Ferris wheel.”

A Ferris wheel...?

“It's a large, wheel-like structure, on which several gondolas hang from,” I related. “People ride it for fun. It's... how do I say it. When one rides it feels like, for an instant, the entire world lies within their grasp. And, when you ride it with another person, for an instant, you create a dialogue between two people at the top of the world. Like climbing the top of a mountain, you look down upon all other people, that feeling.”

And... is this fun?

“Quite.” I nodded. “Altair, we've never rode the Ferris wheel together, right?”

We've never been to Unova together, and carnivals are rare, Altair corrected. The closest thing is the view from Prism Tower, I believe.

“Mmm, ah,” I noted. “How about this, Darkrai. When we reach Lumiose City, shall we climb the Prism Tower together and watch the sunset? Then, if we get to that Unova trip, we can ride the wheel together.”

That's... that's too much, Marguerite. To spend so much on me-

“As my research assistant, it's work expenses,” I promised. “Before that, though... what do you think about Léa Morelle?”

Léa Morelle?

What does she have to do with this? Altair questioned.

“How many families named Morelle exist in Kalos?” I questioned. “The Morelle is a violent family. And... if she approaches closer, my research is at stake.”

So what do you propose to do?

Wikstrom came to pick up my bags at eleven, eyeing the special goods I had bought from that hobby store near the seaside. I had dismissed them for the evening. “Interesting choice.”

“Did you know that Ramos is renovating the Coumarine Gym?” I asked as he assisted me with my bags. “Oh, I'm headed there now.”

“But what do you intend with stump remover?”

I smiled.

Wikstrom left me at the Coumarine Gym, where I found the kitchen and began cooking the stump remover and sugar. Surprising, what kind of videos made it on the Holo Caster network sometimes.
So tempting sometimes.

That was where Donar and the rest of them found me, sticking a thick pen into a hardened, thickened caramel-coloured mix of potassium nitrate, sugar, sodium bicarbonate and powdered dye set in a cardboard tube. Beside me stood three more tubes at attention, all with their own pens.

“You called Shauna here, Dr du Bois?” Donar asked me as I dusted my hands and left the tubes. Behind him, Léa stood with Pumpkaboo, clinging onto the Pumpkin Pokémon gingerly.

“I did,” I answered, watching my other saucepan cooking gently on the stove with the diced peel within. “Try this peel later. Léa, you mentioned that you need Oran Berry oil, right?”

“Yes...” Léa nodded.

I handed her a garlic press.

“What's this?” Léa eyed it.

“Use that, squeeze the Oran peel when you've removed it, collect the oil squeezed out,” I answered. “Make sure everything's clean.”

“Uhm, thanks,” Léa doubtfully replied, sniffing the air. “What are you making?”

“Candied Oran peel,” I began picking some of the peel out, setting onto a plate to dry. “I think we call it fruit glaçé in Kalos. Not bad.”


“Bombs.”


“This scent is awesome,” Shauna inhaled deeply. “What's that... undertone?”

“The bombs,” I chided, laying out the roll of duct tape. “Have either of you started your Gym battles yet?”

“Yeah,” Serena doubtfully eyed my temporary workstation. “That's... a lot of stuff. Can I have some candied peel, s'il vous plaît?”

“Wait until it cools in about an hour,” I dumped the honey-coated saucepan for a quick wash and soak as I rifled around inside for the beeswax, setting it beside my leftover peel and the bottle of newly bought almond oil I got this morning. “Well, I thought since I had some leftover beeswax from the Combee, I might as well make some solid perfume with the Oran oil I shall get from this peel.”

“Can this... work?” Léa looked doubtful.

“There are many ways of extracting perfumed oils,” I confirmed, tearing the peel to fit into my own garlic press while I grabbed a small container. “Cold pressing is one of the easiest processes. If you press...”

The fragrant yellow liquid dribbled out of the sieve, slowly, drop by drop.

“You'll have to do it in batches, but it's quite effective,” I commented as I continued squeezing. “You need a storage container already prepared, but it's possible to make a long-lasting perfume from these
ingredients.”

“So you have the oil,” Serena commented.

“Now, I prepare a small saucepan of hot water,” I commented, readying the slightly sticky saucepan again. “Meanwhile, I measure out what I need. One tablespoon almond oil and one tablespoon beeswax... leave to melt...”

As the water burbled, I ignored them to continue working. These craft projects, ones I took up when I was confined to the hospital following that time years ago... they were second nature to me now, little craft projects undertaken to keep from going completely insane with boredom.

“Eight to fifteen drops essential oil or more, since we're using imperfect oils here... add to the almond oil and beeswax, stir with a small stick, and pour into this nice little box I picked up at the market this morning.”

“Whoa...” Shauna blinked as the finished product was set out, a small porcelain box big enough to allow a finger to fit inside and richly decorated with green glaze in the Johto tradition. “This is real perfume?”

“Mmm,” I answered, measuring out another measure of beeswax and almond oil. Cedar-wood, two bottles, would be handy as both insect repellent and to scent the Focus Sash I gave Altair. I had a mountain of Berries to handle and transform into preserved candies for the lean times up the Montagnes, assuming Donar and I lasted that long, and meanwhile a Morelle to handle before the Cent-Feuilles caught up with Donar.

Well, best to keep busy.

Sometimes I hate Dr du Bois.

I mean, I love eating her cooking – I swear, I ate better with Dr du Bois than at some top restaurants – and she was damned competent and knowledgeable, while at the same time rather cold and sarcastic and calm under pressure. All of which was completely aimed to undermine and make even the most talented Trainer feel inadequate.

Even the fact that she built smoke bombs in the Coumarine Gym kitchen. It didn't change the fact that she built a bloody bomb in the kitchen. With sugar.

“You built it. With sugar.” Serena was echoing. “How?”

“Never mind that,” Noël was already close to worshipping the Doctor over the candied peel. “Viva Dr du Bois!”

“Well, I'll probably fail at Home Economics,” Shauna laughed uneasily. “What about you, Serena?”

“D- Don't even mention it, Shauna...” Well, that was obvious.

“Then, Donar, do you know any good cooks?” Shauna asked. “Back in Kanto, I mean.”

“Kanto?” I blinked. “Well...”

“What's she asking about?” Noël asked Dr du Bois.

“Kanto, Johto, Hoenn and Sinnoh used to be one continent called Ransei,” Dr du Bois explained. “There are certain cultural stereotypes regarding gender roles there. The idea that women should be
placed in the homes, supporting the soldiers that went out to make war on their neighbours for reasons both political and social alike was very popular during the bakufu era of centralised rule from Saffron City. They even have a specific name for it; the Nadeshiko Yamato.”

“Yamato Nadeshiko?” I asked.

“Basically, the ideal Ransei woman,” Dr du Bois warningly replied. “Good at cooking, good at home-making, but unafraid to fight. That cultural norm scuppered any chance of women entering the workforce until the division of Kanto and Johto and the development of Kanto's businesses.”

“Whoever married you must have struck the lottery,” Noël offered.

“You were married to Daisy Linden's brother, weren't you?” Serena spoke up.

I saw Dr du Bois pause.

“...in theory.”

“In theory? How does one get married in theory?”

“A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,” Dr du Bois loftily replied. “But when you're me, you can overcome the glass ceiling by finding an accident-prone flirt, and then, when the vows are finished, and the groom is walking out of the church... everyone pities a widow, you know.”

“You suck,” Serena turned away.

I saw Dr du Bois relax then, as if the question had disturbed her. She was Daisy's sister-in-law... wasn't it?

“What is your work, exactly?” Noël asked.

“I research into the society of Trainers,” Dr du Bois explained. “There are a lot of Pokémon professors, but what about Trainer professors? We use theories to explain social occurrences.”

“So... it explains history?” Noël asked.

“Max Weber said this: that sociology was 'the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which the action proceeds, and the effects which it produces.' By 'action', in this definition is meant as the human behaviour when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful.” She took a deep breath. “The meaning to which we refer may be either (a) the meaning actually intended either by an individual agent on a particular historical occasion, or by a number of agents on an approximate average in a given set of cases, or (b) the meaning attributed to the agent or agents, as types, in a pure type constructed in the abstract. In neither case is the 'meaning' to be thought of as somehow objectively 'correct' or 'true' by some metaphysical criterion. This is the difference between the empirical sciences of action, such as sociology and history, and any kind of prior discipline, such as jurisprudence, logic, ethics, or aesthetics, whose aim is to extract from their subject-matter 'correct' or 'valid' meaning.”

“Dr du Bois... that totally flew over my head,” I replied.

“For example... why do people set out to be Pokémon Trainers?” Dr du Bois crossed her legs. “And after becoming a Pokémon Trainer, why desert that path?”

“That's... a rather deep question,” Shauna blinked.
“Isn’t is common sense?” Léa demanded. “To learn about Pokémon!”

“Instead of chasing after such high ideals,” Dr du Bois continued, “consider the spread of data we have. Noël Duval, you wish to become the next Gym Leader of Snowbelle. Shauna of Vaniville, you have your own reason. Léa Morelle, you did as your mother wished. Serena also followed her parents’ lead to become a Pokémon Trainer. Donar basically has peer pressure, since he has no initial motivation.”

“Oh,” I said, without heat.

“If we follow this cause-and-effect chain, we can hypothesis that people become Trainers because they have something to seek,” Dr du Bois continued. “Be it memories with friends, the Championship, possession of the Gym, searching for something to do, then a Trainer's journey becomes less idealistically constructed and more socially programmed. For example, why do such things like Trainer schools exist? In fact, why do we need regulations like Trainer licenses? Do Trainer licenses work? Apparently not, since criminals still do have Pokémon work for them. So, what does it actually regulate? After all, do people really need a piece of plastic to be acknowledged as a Pokémon Trainer? And then, exactly what determined that a Trainer must traverse the whole region to pursue their goal? How did cross-region travel become a requirement too? Those are part of the questions that come with every task set out.”

Dr du Bois then activated her Holo Caster, bringing up a basic sketch to project onto the table. She continued as if she hadn't just blown our minds. “First, we examine the cultural assumptions about being a trainer, beginning with the veil of glamour over the job...”

I remember, seated there and eating candied peel and surrounded in the scents of various Berries and a hint of sourness. In that tornado of scents, in that storm of the kitchen, faced with the creator of such a storm, I could not help but feel overwhelmed when faced with its female general.

Her Holo Caster beeped.

“Oh,” Dr du Bois stood. “Oh. That reminds me. Does anyone want to see the musical, 'Synchro'?”

“A musical?” I blinked.

“The one performed by Les Dames Blanches,” Serena exclaimed. “You have tickets?”

“Yes,” Dr du Bois nodded. “Does anyone want to go?”

“You're not going, Doctor?”

“I have a date.”

A date? A date? “Are you kidding me?”

“Why would I?” Dr du Bois slyly looked back, belting one of the finished and wrapped smoke bombs onto her belt. “I shall wear midnight and have fun. Don't wait up, Donar.”

We, as in Noël, Shauna, Serena, Léa and I, went with Darkrai. Those tickets were the kind that meant that we got box seats, watching the large stage set in a cavernous theatre and the performance. You would not believe the shock of my life when the leading lady and man turned out to be a Gardevoir and a Gallade respectively.
“Où es-tu?”
“Où es-tu?”

“T- They're talking...” I stuttered. There was no telepathy; the echoes in my ears were of near-flawless Kalosian, sung in pitched notes.

“They're Gauche and Droite!” Serena whispered to us. “They're the brother-sister duo who leads the troupe performers!”

“Est-ce que tu m'entends ?”
“Je te cherche.”
“Je suis si seule...”
“Ne perds pas espoir, j'arrive !”
“Je t'attends.”

Dr du Bois, in all her infinite wisdom, forgot to mention that it was a Pokémon performing troupe. I only got the clue when the Gardevoir began belting out in song:

Dans ce faux paradis dont je suis prisonnière,
Loin, très loin dans ce gouffre au plus profond de la terre.
Je suis condamnée à exprimer mon chagrin,
Venant d’un passé dont je ne sais rien...

J'ai perdu ma place dans le fil de l'histoire,
Mais me raccroche à la voix que j'entends dans le noir
Et je répéterai ces mots jusqu'à ma mort,
J'abandonne mon corps à ce sort.

Malgré mon ignorance,
J'ai vécu toute ma vie,
Connaissant les chants de l'existence.

La chanson du soleil,
La chanson de la pluie,
L'ensemble formant une douce mélodie.

J'avance sur le chemin,
Menant au paradis,
Vers moi se tendent de chaleureuses mains.
Pourquoi ne peuvent-elles pas atteindre l'endroit où je suis?
Sings a Mawile: “Tu continueras à chanter à jamais.”

_Le monde d'en bas se meurt, et je ne peux rien changer,_
_Je ne connais que la peur d'entendre cette voix s'arrêter._
_Dormir dans ce doux chant du passé, d'une époque oubliée..._  
_C'est pour ça que je crois,_
_Que mon sourire doit vaincre mes larmes même si à force, je m'y noie._

Darkrai was very excited; he was nearly hanging over the edge. Frankly, so was I, as the Gallade's own voice echoed. From the circling of Gallade, Gardevoir and Mawile, I could tell that the Mawile was mocking both Gardevoir and Gallade, who were conversing.

_“J'entends cet appel... Mais... D'où vient-il ?”_  
_“Il résonne au plus profond de moi...”_  
_“Est-ce seulement réel... ? Je veux comprendre !”_  
_“Attends-moi !”_

The pair of them, Gallade and Gardevoir, could sing, and sing in Kalosian they did. I mean, very well. Even I, a complete beginner, could tell of the effort behind singing when the Gallade, Gauche, stepped up with Droite's backing:

_Dans ce triste paradis dont je suis la frontière,_
_Je cherche la voix perdue,_
_celle qui m'était si chère._
_À errer dans chaque rue,_
_De plus en plus loin,_
_C'est ainsi qu'est dicté mon destin._

_Dans l'ombre de l'histoire enfin achevée,_
_Je désire absolument reprendre ces jours volés._
_Cette voix en écho tout au fond de mon cœur,_
_Semblait libérer toute sa douleur..._  
_Je ne souhaite pas trouver,_
_L'éternel paradis,_
_Peu m'importe où il se trouve caché._
_Il déforme les voix,_
_Qui me guident vers lui,
Et me tire, me faisant progresser.
De mes propres mains, je voudrais tant vérifier,
   La chaleur de ta réalité.
   Pour cela, je n'hésiterai pas,
       À être blessé... !

   Je chante toujours pour toi !

   Si je me bats, c'est parce que j'y crois !

De cette voix rugissante, je prends l'âme pour laisser,
   S'écrire ce monde qui m'a hanté, et dormir pour l'éternité.
Si je ne peux t'atteindre, mais après avoir laissé la lumière s'éteindre,
   Je mettrai simplement fin à ce faux paradis...
       Au péril de ma vie !

   Dans ce faux paradis dont je suis prisonnière...

   Dans ce triste paradis dont je suis la frontière...

   Je suis condamnée à exprimer mon chagrin...

   “Ha ha ha ha!” the Mawile sings again.

   Venant d'un passé dont je ne sais rien...

   C'est ainsi qu'est dicté mon destin...

   “S'il te plaît, chante!” the Mawile pleads.

   Je prie pour que règne encore...
       (Je me bats jusqu'à la mort...)

       Ce lumineux univers.
       (Tuant cet univers.)

   Des sourires pour ceux qui veulent...
       (Je t'ai vu y pleurer seule...)

   De l'éclat de ce monde, brillant à jamais.
(Oui, je le détruirai.)

Pour tous les jours à venir...
(Pour le passé à ternir...)

Un espoir, à travers cette chanson.
(Par cette chanson...)

Ma vie, elle te l'a été dédiée...
(Ta vie m'a été volée...)

Donner ma voix avec tout mon cœur et laisser un vent nouveau l'emporter jusqu'à ma mort!
(Ta présence se dissipe et disparaît, sous la pluie qui tombera jusqu'à ma mort !)

It mocks: “L'histoire se répète.”

Les voix rencontrent la lumière, éblouies par son éclat,
Elles ne prennent qu'un seul choix,
Celui de retourner dans l'ombre et l'histoire se répétera... !

Les battements du cœur du monde retentissent, annoncent la fin!
Les cloches cessent et les vies fondent, il n'y a plus de lendemain... !

Dans le paradis d'ombres et de lumières, les existences ont repris,
Si cela m'est permis, laisse-moi s'il te plaît réaliser mon souhait ici !

As the curtains fell on the second act, I wondered how was she doing...

Chapter End Notes

The song is Synchronicity ～第二章 光と影の楽園～
Producer: ひとしずくP.
Vocals and French translation by Poucet, available on YouTube.
Original Vocals: Len Kagamine; Rin Kagamine; feat. Miku Hatsune

Synchro is the French name for the Ability Synchronise. Needless to say, Gallade don't have it, but here Synchronise refers to the bond between the twins. Droite is French for 'right', hence her segments are aligned on the right. Gauche is 'left', so his are on the left. Hope this helped.

Since there's difficulty formatting on FF.net, the entire song is written centred; italics for Droite, **italics for Gauche**.
Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
Chapter Summary

"It's only the beginning" I answered. "You may be right the next time you pass it."

"Well, it's supposed to be a musical adaptation of an old Kalosian story, La Pucelle et Le Chevalier," Shauna's brow furrowed. "Synchro is basically about a pair of twin Ralts separated at birth. The girl Ralts, who's the Gardevoir, is supposed to sing for a monster in a cave, so that the monster remains asleep always. The boy Ralts, who grows up into a Gallade, sets out to rescue his sister, who is following her duty. They end up confronting each other in the monster's cave, and there it ends. We don't know the end."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Day 57 (AM): A woman my age really shouldn't be flirting with danger. Especially with a member of the Kalos Elite Four trailing along behind me. The only upshot, besides breaking the bank of the Coumarine casinos, was gaining information on Léa Morelle.

Ramos was right. The girl is in danger.

I still feel ambivalent about assisting her, though. It is none of my business.

They can sing. Pokémon can sing. They can sing in Kalosian. I am incredibly, very impressed. I was so impressed, with Darkrai, that it totally blew my mind over.

"What's the plot?" I asked Shauna. It might have been late, but the story wasn't over yet.

"Well, it's supposed to be a musical adaptation of an old Kalosian story, La Pucelle et Le Chevalier," Shauna's brow furrowed. "Synchro is basically about a pair of twin Ralts separated at birth. The girl Ralts, who's the Gardevoir, is supposed to sing for a monster in a cave, so that the monster remains asleep always. The boy Ralts, who grows up into a Gallade, sets out to rescue his sister, who is following her duty. They end up confronting each other in the monster's cave, and there it ends. We don't know the end."

"M. Martin, our literature teacher, said that the story's central theme was the conflict of desire against duty," Serena continued for me. "M. Martin was very passionate about the subject.

"...I get the feeling that the guy hates guys in general."

Their story, the story of the Gardevoir and the Gallade, seemed to me an echo of what was in Daisy Linden's blue eyes, I recalled. A fire, not unlike the eternal blaze in her eyes, the eyes of the summery queen clad in the red and black of war and death, ugly and real and yet, from a distance, beautiful.

Such was the same. The musical might look and sound beautiful, though its subjects crude and cruel to each of themselves, both travelling vastly different paths that led them towards the opposite side.
Celadon, Mauville and Veilstone might have official Game Corners, but it was in Kalos that gambling must have exceeded mere monetary exchange into a high-rolling art form. Kalos neither fielded Pokémon Contests, nor did it hold great soirées of generalised fun. The casinos of Kalos had survived the wave of Prohibition from Unova, going underground, unseen except to those who knew where to look. The seaside resorts of Coumarine City, the celebrated port of Kalos, coming just after Kiloude and Lumiose itself in wealth, still fielded the green baize battlefields – and, during the battle season of the Île-de-l'arc Conference, more than one battlefield of the bookies.

My adopted home was very much an expensive place to have fun, yet such was the price of life.

This night saw us walking out into cool night sea air with Wikstrom's escort. The Conseil and I found the largest casino in Coumarine, still haemorrhaging drunken revellers and torn, desperate gamblers at eleven. A gibbous moon hung low in the skies; full moon approached despite a denizen of the new moon standing in my shadow. We were discussing Ramos.

"Morelle is trying to buy the Coumarine cave system?" I commented at Wikstrom's news. "Pourquoi? It is a giant, hollow hill."

"So is Sootopolis," Wikstrom pointed out. "I believe Achillée Morelle would attempt something at Ramos's birthday celebration, and Siebold was the one who told me. The two of us, and Grimsley, stopped by on our way back to Notre Dame for this reason."

"If Ramos dies, then the corporation sole of the Coumarine Gym Leader becomes defunct," I agreed. "The property is sold."

"We must thus make sure it is not sold."

"I still feel like it's more about protecting Ramos than Mademoiselle Morelle," I commented, almost to myself as I draped the coat around my shoulders, on the foyer of the Casino Bord de Mer. "Buy-in five million Poké, yes?"

Wikstrom nodded. "Yes."

He gave me an appraising look. "You look good."

I twirled, the lapels of my coat fluttering before I shacked it off to hand to the vestiaire. "Merci. The same could be said for you, Wikstrom."

Wikstrom dressed in a suit was a rare occurrence. Pale grey, with cuff-links of the barest topaz colouring to set them off, and a low collar.

"Je vous remercie, madame." he nodded down to me. "Enchanté."

"Which game...?" I pondered.

A server walked up to us, a card on a silver salver poised. How very quaint. "Monsieur Giima sends his regards from the blackjack table, Monsieur de Rais."

I picked up the card, leaving a mille-note. "A small tip."

"Merci, madame. Would you like to visit the caisse?"

"Oui, merci. I would also like a... Would you like a drink, monsieur?"

"Gin and tonic," Wikstrom flatly stated. "A chocolate liqueur for the lady. Serve both to the chemmy"
"Bien sûr. " The server thus left with renewed instructions.

"What will you do?" I asked Wikstrom, though I already had a clue.

"I suppose you'll need a chemmy partner," Wikstrom mused.

"I can loan you the buy-in-"

"My lady," Wikstrom cautioned. "I understand that you are an independent woman. Nevertheless, verily am I Wikstrom, the steel sword of the Kalos Elite Four, lord of the Maison de Rais. I can break the bank with a fraction of my house's fortunes."

"... sorry," I answered, smoothing over a wrinkle in my black dress. "I forgot."

Wikstrom's arm guided to the small of my back as we approached the table. Compared to the glided and painted ladies milling around, I must be especially plain, especially as I joined the chemmy table. Five other players, plus one banker; the thin, reedy face of our target by the dealing shoe ruddy and shiny.

"Numéro quatre, madame, " the huissier guided Wikstrom and I to seats number Three and Four respectively on the kidney-shaped table. Number Six was intensely regarding his cards, but he did look at us. I caught sight of him; he looked away.

"Banco de cinq cent mille, " the croupier announced, and as the smoking Deçolorois tycoon at Number One tapped the table in front of his fat pile of hundred-mille plaques, "le banco est fait."

The reedy banker crouched over the shoe. He gave it a short deliberate slap to settle the cards, the first of which showed its semicircular pale pink tongue through the slanting aluminium mouth. With a thick fore-finger clinched with a thick signet ring, he pressed gently on the pink tongue and slipped out the first card six inches or a foot towards the Deçolorois on his right hand. Then he slipped out a card for himself, then another for the tycoon, then one more for himself. The banker settled into his perch, immobile, focused upon his prey instead.

With his flat wooden spatula, the croupier delicately lifted up the Deçolorois' cards and dropped them an extra few inches to the right. They lay just before the man's hairy hands, which themselves lay inert like two watchful pink Krabby on the table. The two Krabby scuttled out together, hustling the cards into a wide left hand, while the Deçolorois cautiously bent his head so that he could see, in the shadow made by his other cupped hand, the value of the bottom of the two cards. Then he slowly inserted the forefinger of his right hand and slipped the bottom card slightly sideways so that the value of the top card was also just perceptible.

His face was quite impassive. He flattened out his left hand on the table and then withdrew it, leaving the two pink cards face down before him, their secret hidden still. He lifted his head and looked the banker in the eye.

"Non," said he, quite flatly.

From the decision to stand and not ask, it was clear; five, or a six, or a seven. To be certain of winning, the banker had to reveal an eight or a nine. If the banker failed to show either figure, he also had the right to take another card which might or might not improve his count.

The banker had his hands clasped in front of him, his two cards three or four inches away. With his right hand he picked up the two cards and turned them face upwards on the table with a faint snap.
They were a four and a five, an unbeatable natural nine.

He had won.

"Neuf à la banque," quietly said the croupier. With his spatula he faced the Deçolorois' two cards. "Et le sept," he said unemotionally, lifting up gently the corpses of the seven and queen.

He slipped them through the wide slot in the table near his chair, to the metal canister to which all revealed cards go. The banker's two cards followed them, with a faint rattle which came from the canister at the beginning of each session, before the discards have made a cushion over the metal floor of their oubliette.

The Deçolorois pushed forward five plaques of one hundred thousand, and the croupier added these to the bank's half million pledge which lay in the centre of the table, before taking a number of smaller plaques equalling twenty-five thousand for the _cagnotte_ – the casino payout.

The croupier slipped some counters through the slot in the table which receives the _cagnotte_, and announced quietly: " _Un banco d'un million._ "

" _Suivi_, " the Deçolorois announced. The man sure had money to burn, to follow on his lost bet like this.

My chocolate liqueur arrived alongside Wikstrom's gin and tonic. I sipped, studying the whole table. Banker, Achillée Morelle, head of the Maison Morelle. He gained his power through both legal right and violence, though the Morelle were balanced out by the Maison Adonis Goutte-de-Sang. Its head Ramos was a Gym Leader no matter his advanced age, and having a grandson in the Elite Four never hurt anyone. It would be a tipping balance, though, if Ramos died.

In the next round, the Deçolorois held a three-card four, losing to the bank's six.

" _Un banco d'un million,_" the croupier announced once more. A cautious player, but not averse to risk to place a million Poké at stake so early.

The players on my left remained silent.

" _Banco_," I called.

Achillée Morelle looked to me, the whites of his eyes glazed with red lending something doll-like to his gaze. He slowly removed one thick hand from the table and gave the shoe its usual hard, sharp slap.

During this offensive pantomime I studied the banker. Wide expanse of white face – no tanning in sunny Coumarine? Introvert or preference for indoors – surmounted by a short abrupt cliff of greyed hair, unsmilning wet red mouth – high blood pressure, nervous tic of biting lips, frequency indicate either lack of tell or long practice at fake tells, too frequent to be real if he's playing chemmy at Coumarine's casinos – and the width of shoulders contrary to his reediness that caused them to be loosely draped in a massively cut dinner-jacket – hot, prone to sweating, also possibly diabetic. Lousy tailor – the tailor was possibly Unovan, to use so much cotton and match an argyle tie with that ensemble.

I slipped a set of plaques onto the table without counting them. I did hold ten million with Wikstrom's contribution, after all.

There was an electric storm, somewhere. There was silence as Morelle fingered the four cards out of the shoe.
The croupier slipped my cards across with the tip of his spatula. I still held the banker's gaze, but I reached my right hand out a few inches, glanced down very swiftly, then looked up again impassively. I sniffed, and tossed the cards face upwards on the table.

They were a pair of fours — a natural eight.

A little gasp of envy echoed from the table and the Deçolorois exchanged rueful glances with his Hoennite neighbour at their failure. With a hint of a shrug, Morelle slowly faced his own two cards and flicked them away with his fingernail. They were two valueless knaves – how symbolic.

"Le baccarat," intoned the croupier as he spaded the thick chips over the table to me.

Number Five, an intolerable fluffy specimen tittered. "Shouldn't have let it come to you," she gave a wry smile. "I kicked myself when the cards were dealt."

"It's only the beginning" I answered. "You may be right the next time you pass it."

The curtain lifted on the third act.

The third act lifted from where the second ended. It featured the pair, Gallade and Gardevoir, Gauche and Droite, in a cave opposite the mysterious monster, the nebulous threat that had hung throughout the play that may or may not do anything, but had driven the conflict between Gauche and Droite.

Perhaps...

_Fascinating,_ Darkrai told me mentally, avidly listening to their musical arguments. _Humans are the only species that places so much emphasis on music, as much as Kricketot and Kricketune and Chatot. A Gardevoir and Gallade would have no other reason to master human speech, much less music, otherwise._

"You don't go out much, do you?" I asked quietly. "How d'you know?"

He didn't answer. Darkrai didn't have to; it was obvious. It was the musical making me feel sappy and weird.

Down on the stage, Gauche began a crescendo, with Droite's chiming:

_Piégé dans le berceau du temps,
Je rêvais de songes gelés.
Mais rien que pour moi, tu as chanté,
Cette berceuse d'une voix qui m'a apaisé._

_Dis-moi ce que tu as voulu ?
Un monde qui ne finit pas.
Mais mon choix n'est pas de cela.
Veux-tu un monde perdu ?
La voix est celle de la souffrance,
Le malheur,
Et le rire,
Dans mon chant,
Liés à ma persévérance !

Toutes mes pires douleurs,
Mes plus grands bonheurs.
Transformer mes pleurs,
Ma voix effaçant tes peurs.
Marches-tu vers la fin ?
Je prie pour ton bien !

Je ne veux que ton soutien …
Protéger le monde de son destin…
Protéger ton âme, seulement te sauver,
Nos sentiments ne peuvent se croiser!

Tendre la main et donner au monde la paix,
Stopper la vie, quitter le quai,
Bénir les siècles passés et à venir.
Et pouvoir obtenir un avenir.
Mais je n’arrive pas à communiquer,
Ah, nous sommes incapables de communiquer,
Nos souhaits ne sont que des rêves à oublier.

Cela commence… !

À la lumière de notre futur,
Pourquoi ont-ils tout pris de toi ?
Chanter ce requiem tant que le temps dure.
La douleur, la souffrance et la peine ne reviendront pas.
La lumière brisera ce triste sort,
Je hais à tout jamais ce triste sort,
Les ténèbres seront libérées !
Rien que pour ce jour tout soit libéré !

...

Où se trouve la lumière à présent ?
Dis-moi !
Est-elle dans ton cœur ?
Où puis-je la trouver ?

Regarde bien !
Elle est tout autour de nous…
Elle est EN nous !

...

Crois en moi / Fais-moi confiance

...

Dis-moi, qu’as-tu toujours voulu ?
Que tu ais un avenir.
Le désirais-je moi-même ? Je suis perdu, je crois.
Depuis que tu n'en as plus.

Cette chasse a duré si longtemps,
    Mais pour voir ton beau visage, je ferais n'importe quoi.

    Une chanson d'espoir,
    Brise cette époque noire,
    Chantée à jamais,
    Qui sans prière va périr.

L'appel de nos voix finira également par mourir,
    Reste là s'il te plaît !

Une fois de plus laissons le chant d'agonie nous dominer !
Pourquoi es-tu loin ? Laissons à nouveau l'agonie nous dominer !

Hahaha !

Tendre la main et donner au monde la paix,
    Bénir les siècles passés et à venir,
    La lumière brisera ce triste sort,
    Et les ténèbres seront libérées !

Au fil des heures,
    Chanteras-tu pour moi ?
    Ma voix effaçant tes pleurs
Viendras-tu pourrir toi aussi dans ce gouffre de misère ?
    Je hurle mes prières.
Maintenant au moins, la fin n'est pas loin,
Une fois de plus, laissons le chant d'agonie nous prendre en main !
    l'agonie nous prendre en main !

Dis-moi qu'as-tu toujours voulu ?
    Quel était ce que je cherchais ?
De ta voix lumineuse maintenant partie,
    Ne reste qu'un soupir, j'ai raté toute ma vie.
Et tout seul, je n'arrive plus qu'à chanter pour toi,
    Et tout seul je n'arrive plus qu'à...

    Tu m'avais dit…
    De croire en toi…

    ...

Tendre la main et donner au monde la paix,
    Stopper la vie, quitter le quai,
    Bénir les siècles passés et à venir.
    Et pouvoir obtenir un avenir.
C'est ainsi que notre histoire s'achèvera,
Ah, il est temps, notre histoire s'achèvera,
    Peu l'importe où l'on va tant que tu es là.

La toute première voix qui a déclenché ce récit
    À la lumière de toute notre vie,
Partir vite, fuir cette chaire, que tout se termine et
Chanter ce requiem tant qu’il n’est pas fini,
\textit{Je vais accepter ce triste sort,}
La lumière brisera ce triste sort,
\textit{Rien que pour ce jour, tout soit libéré... !}
\textit{Les ténèbres seront libérées... !}

Dans la plus noire des clartés, ne plus s’éveiller... !
\textit{(Pour toujours…)}

The scent, smoke and sweat of a casino are nauseating at three in the morning. A soul-erosion produced by high gambling — the compost of greed, fear and nervous tension — is quite hard to bear. I suddenly knew that I was tired. I was not always aware that I was tired, but occasion had lent a certain form of clarity via long experience and experiments. Experiments being when I walked into the Lost Hotel with every intention of making it my grave, amongst a horde of Litwick, and emerged with a Lampent to light the way.

"If one could be right every hand, none of us would be here," Number Six philosophically commented. "Ah, \textit{mes excuses}. My name is Gagné, Guillaume Gagné."

Less outstanding than his name of Woten Oak, but still notable.

"Marguerite du Bois," I answered him. "This is my companion, Wikstrom de Rais. Have we met?"

"I doubt so, madame," the self-proclaimed Guillaume Gagné replied, a touch patronising.

The croupier announced a million and a half in the bank. I busied myself with my drink, considering the table once more. The fluffy specimen of Number Five said \textit{"Banco,"} and immediately lost to the banker's natural.

\textit{"Un banco de deux millions,"} the croupier called next.

\textit{"Banco avec la table,"} I replied. Wikstrom contributed the other half of the bet obligingly. He drew a jack and an ace, leaving a one.

\textit{"Carte,"} he announced. Achillée turned his cards over; a pair of twos; a four. I exhaled, waiting for the white finger to extract the pink tongue and for the croupier to serve it up on his long platter. Wikstrom left it face-up; seven.

Morelle immediately took a card. His face contorted, slapping the six onto the table.

\textit{"Le baccarat,"} the croupier announced, before revealing Wikstrom's cards. \textit{"Et huit."}

A sigh rose from across the table, and Wikstrom divided the return between us.

"Are you going to play chemmy the whole time?" Wikstrom asked.

I sighed, stretching my arms high. No one who looking at the plain black dress any longer; they were looking at the pile of plaques. "High stakes, \textit{monsieur}. If it looks likely, our bank looks close to be empty. We can throw the whole on roulette or poker, your choice."

"Against Grimsley?"

"I have beaten the man before."
"Un banco de quatre millions," the croupier called.

Wikstrom and I exchanged looks; Wikstrom immediately opened a bet with the table, and I supplied the funds.

"Lady has the cards," he offered.

"Merci beaucoup." I glanced at the cards as they were slid over again. Five; dangerous. And yet...

"Carte."

Morelle flipped over his cards: seven.

I nodded still, and then looked at the card they sent over, two pips greeting me.

"Tie," I revealed.

All bets were withdrawn, and again a bank of four million Poké offered. M. Morelle was impatient, certainly.

"Banco," I called.

"Le jeu est fait," said the croupier, and two cards came slithering over green baize, the poisoned serpents of greed aimed to strike poison at my heart or my wallet.

I took both cards again, trying not to grimace at the black-shrouded king and jack. The worst; nothing, zero. Baccarat. "Carte."

Morelle revealed his hand; a king and two of clubs. We were in. Now for the moment of truth. Achillée Morelle slapped the shoe, slipped out a card, and slowly turned it face up.

It was a nine, a wonderful nine of diamonds, the curse that meant almost certain victory.

The croupier slipped it delicately across. To Morelle it meant nothing. I might might have had a one, in which case I had the baccarat. Or a two, three, four, or even five. In which case, with the nine, his maximum count would be four.

Holding a three and giving nine is one of the tricky situations, the crossroads of the iron road at hand. The odds, so nearly divided between to draw or not to draw, would be crushing him. The banker was sweating; a thin dribble of blood laved over his lips, swelling scarlet. A nine could only be equalled by the banker drawing a seven at this stage. My cards lay on the green baize battlefield; two impersonal salmon flags, and the faced nine of diamonds. To him the nine might be telling the truth or many variations of lies. The whole secret lay in the reverse of the two pink backs, where king and prince kissed the green cloth.

Rivulets ran the length of either side of the beaky nose. His thick tongue came out slyly and licked a drop out of the corner of his red gash of a mouth. Piggy eyes flashed to my cards, to his, and back. His whole body shrugged and he slipped out a card from the lisping shoe.

He faced it. The table craned. It was a wonderful card, a five.

"Huit à la banque," said the croupier.

I sat silently. Achillée Morelle suddenly grinned. He must have won.

The croupier's spatula reached almost apologetically across the table. There was no one at the table who did not believe in my defeat. The spatula flicked the two pink cards over on their backs.
Solemnly, king and prince looked to the lights.

"Et le neuf."

A great gasp went up round the table, and then a hubbub of talk exploded with congratulations to me. The reedy man fell back in his chair as if slugged above the heart. His mouth opened and shut once or twice and his right hand felt at his throat. He rocked back, the red of blood apparent against the white of lips.

As the huge stack of plaques was shunted across the table to me, the banker reached into an inner pocket of his jacket and threw a wad of notes on to the table. The croupier riffled through them.

"Un banco de deux millions," he announced. He slapped down their equivalent in plaques of a million each.


The players on my left remained silent. I considered Achillée Morelle, this specimen of Hades whose gates rose at Coumarine and Lumiose. We were at the top of the casino, the salle privée, surrounded by brass rails and possibly the hidden fangs of where the underworld lurked. "Banco."

The cards were drawn, and he lost to my five and three. I rose, set aside a million in plaques, and made arrangements for the rest sent towards the caisse.

"Play for me, monsieur," I bade Wikstrom as we both rose. "Put it all on red."

"Madame," Wikstrom nodded.

The barrier surrounding the caisse comes as high as my chin. The caissier, generally nothing more than a minor bank clerk, sat on a stool and dipped into piles of notes and plaques, ranged on shelves behind him, nervously handling the small fortune I had skimmed from the private funds of a violent and powerful man. There would be a telescopic baton, possibly a gun for protection under that table – this was not Kanto, where guns were illegal. Neither was it Hoenn – gun control too high – or Sinnoh – pointless. There would be Houndour, Houndoom or Arcanine, possibly. To heave over the barrier and steal some notes, and then vault back and get out of the casino through the passages and doors would be quite close to impossible. Furthermore, caissiers generally worked in pairs, especially with a standing contract with the Anistar City headquarters of La Banque de Kalos.

I reflected on the problem as the sheaf of cent-mille Poké and then the sheaves of dix-mille notes. I could imagine tomorrow's regular morning meeting of the casino committee.

"Monsieur Morelle lost six million. He played his usual game. Madame du Bois made five million in an hour and then left. She executed three "bancos" of M. Morelle and then left. Durand, the chef de partie, has the details. She played with coolness. Monsieur le Baron de Rais, her companion, made two million at chemin-de-fer. On the soirée, the chemin-de-fer won x, the baccarat won y and the roulette won z."

"Merci, Monsieur Petit."

"Merci, Monsieur le President."

Something like that, I thought as I pushed through to the salle privée and greeted the sentry in evening clothes. The casino committee would then balance its books, and break up to its homes, cafés, or the beach for lunch.
As for robbing the *caisse*, it would probably take ten good men, and they would certainly have to kill employees. I decided that in no way would Morelle try to rob the *caisse*, and that the casino would not cheat a silly academic of her winnings to be wired into her account.

With that decided, I assessed myself. I felt dry, uncomfortable grit under my evening shoes; the sweet cloy in my mouth; slight sweat under my arms. Eyes filling their sockets from exhaustion. Congested nose. Bedtime.

I debated re-entering the *salle*, but the decision was taken out of my hands when I felt the ghostly presence nearby, sneaking a tongue out. I pinched the tongue, earning a yelp, but also revealing a Haunter that seemed to have tracked me from Shalour City. It looked familiar enough with the contours of my legs, *certainement*.

"*Bonsoir,*" I said, feeling for a Pokéball. The last orb on my belt burst open, and Phantump growled towards Haunter as the child-like Pokémon appeared.

"*Haunt, haunt,*" the Haunter growled in answer, its tongue about to sneak out to Lick. The paralytic effects of a Haunter were fascinating, but I had no desire to experience them myself tonight.

"*Stump!*" Phantump insisted, offended.

The Haunter beckoned to me, filtering back into the shadows on either side of the foyer hall. I followed him. Barely five steps, a quintet of men stormed out, Morelle at their head.

"Find the woman," Morelle ordered. "The Elite Four might be ripping off the roulette, but I will not let some plain Jane take Morelle money from me."

The men affirmed, and divided, leaving me alone, hidden but for the grace of a stalker ghost and a floating stump.

I sighed, turning to Haunter. "Altair is going to have a field day..."

I sent Phantump in my place, with a message to Wikstrom; the little Ghost arrived back with him in tow, and about ten million Poké richer. I received five million Poké, which was still peanuts, but wealth enough.

"The rouge sends its regards," Wikstrom answered. "Do you require an escort, *madame*?"

I accepted the crook of his elbow, while Phantump lit Will-O-Wisps around us to light our path and Haunter trailed behind, choked by a thin, dark hand that could only be my very friendly acquaintance from Sinnoh. "*S'il vous plaît. My room.*"

I would tell him. Afterwards.

---

*Tonight I met a Haunter who insisted on following me from Shalour City. It was a fortuitous occasion; I evaded Morelle's men with its' and Phantump's assistance. Were I not overstaffed at the moment, I must consider them as prospective members- perhaps. Yes.*

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes
I doubt that Siebold and Ramos actually have a familial relation, but it's too early to tell. They do look slightly similar...

According to Wikipedia, a corporation sole is a legal entity consisting of a single ("sole") incorporated office, occupied by a single ("sole") person. This allows corporations (often religious corporations or Commonwealth governments) to pass without interval in time from one office holder to the next successor-in-office, giving the positions legal continuity with subsequent office holders having identical powers to their predecessors.

This is an interpretation of the quasi-public entity that Gyms are; technically set up by a private individual, but approved by the public in the form of the local League.

The song is arranged by Poucet again, being *Synchronicity ~巡る世界のレクイエム* by ひとしずくP (sm19618454), vocals: Kagamine Rin & Len.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
XXVII: Falloir - To Be Necessary

Chapter Summary

“Of course she is,” I considered. “With great certainty, Léa Morelle is in grave danger. She is possibly already dead.”

Serena turned to me, her blue eyes shining nervously. “Donar... what should we do?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 64: I won ten million Poké last night in *chemin-de-fer*. 

This afternoon, Donar told me that M. Morelle and Léa met. He never saw Mlle Morelle after that. He is worried, I can tell. His friends and him have approached me for reassurance.

“This will be a one-on-one battle,” Serena called out in the bowels of the Coumarine Gym. “The battle ends when one Pokémon is unable to continue. Begin!”

“Pumpkaboo, Leech Seed!” Léa called.

Pumpkaboo chuckled, beginning to flare up before purple spectres surrounded Fletchinder, who yelped and flew out of the way.

“Not Trick-or-Treat!” Léa yelled up to the giggling Pumpkaboo. “Pumpkaboo!”

“Fletchinder, Agility!” I instructed. “Follow up with Aerial Ace!”

I thanked every single god up there, from Arceus down to even Celebi, that we’d met a Hawlucha that could teach Fletchinder the infamous never-miss move. Fletchinder dived immediately, her body somehow sleeker and faster, so fast that she’d struck before the Pumpkaboo could react. The Shadow Ball that the Pumpkaboo had been preparing, though, imploded, sending Fletchinder back.

“Fletchinder!” I caught her bodily. “You alright?”

“Flet, chinder,” she warbled, shrugging to get back to her feet, wings askew.

“Are Fletchinder supposed to be so fast?” Shauna asked me.

“Fletchinder's got an Ability called Gale Wings,” I explained. “Some Pokémon have alternate abilities, and mine has the alternate of the Fletchling line.”

“That's so cool!” Shauna jumped in glee as Serena jogged to us. “So Gale Wings makes them faster?”

“A Fletchinder with Gale Wings?” Serena panted.

“Gale Wings? Now that's a pretty nifty ability, sprout,” Leader Ramos walked up to us, supported by his giant scissors. “Gale Wings... been a while since I saw that.”
“There's another Fletchling with Gale Wings?” I asked.

“I fought a Talonflame, and a terrifying sight it was,” Ramos demurred. “Talonflame are on average already the fastest of any bird Pokémon in ordinary combat, Gale Wings or not. No, Gale Wings are the mythical 'second speed', that Unovan tales say the god of winds Tornadus blessed the Fletchling line with. Faster than a tailwind, Gale Wings uses control over the local winds to clock faster than even a Pidgeot at that short burst of a Flying-type attack. Doesn't matter about training or genetics. It ignores paralysis, Sticky Web, doesn't matter about the speed of either guy on the field. They say that a properly trained Talonflame with Gale Wings could take on Tornadus and win.”

“Is that... true?”

“Dunno,” Ramos shrugged. “Say, môme, is that Dr du Bois's Pumpkaboo?”

“She doesn't want him,” Léa hugged the slightly singed and bruised Pumpkaboo in her arms. “I can keep him, right?”

“He's not mine to give, môme,” Ramos answered gravely.

Dr du Bois was at the seaside. She had not answered her Holo Caster, and I would have searched her room if not for Altair's reassurance of her safety. She was a grown adult, and she had her Pokémon to protect her, after all... she was safe.

Right?

Noël crowded up. “What's up?”

“Hmm? Nothing, nothing.” I assured.

Noël pondered. “So, who's the lucky lady?”

I gulped. “No, no! There's no... lady. No lady.”

“The lucky guy?”

“No!” I shook my head. “Not a guy, either. It's Dr du Bois.”

He rapidly lost enthusiasm. “Well, if you like your teacher...”

“No! I- I don't feel like that about her,” I sighed.

“I think...” Noël spoke up at last. “I think you should consider exactly who are your friends.”

I was left alone, Noël's words echoing in my head.

Who were my friends? Serena, Shauna, Noël... Tierno and Trevor? Doubtful; I haven't met them. In fact, short of my Pokémon, the only other presence in my Training life was the good Doctor and her team, who were way older than me. Surely... it didn't make me any less of a Trainer, surely. I mean, being a Trainer didn't mean that I couldn't have a support structure. It didn't mean that-

“Donar?” Léa waved in front of my face. “Are you dreaming?”

“What? Huh?” I blinked as she nearly slapped my cheek. “I'm fine! It's... the heat, yeah. That's all.”

Ramos nodded. “El Niño would be starting soon, I gather. It's gonna be a long heatwave.”
“Erm, Leader Ramos...” Serena fidgeted. “About that... project. Erm...”

“Right,” Ramos nodded to us. “Wax, eh?”

We had found some pretty glass bottles in the marketplace. After Dr du Bois's impromptu DIY session, we had gotten inspired to make some solid perfume of our own, and somehow the garlic press saw service in processing Oran, Sitrus and Lum peels for their oils. I had found a Grepa Berry being sold, and I intended to add it into the concoction I would prepare, and...

“If you're entertaining a challenger, Monsieur, perhaps our appointment can wait.”

Ramos turned around, and the lack of smile even with his back turned to us seemed apparent at the frost in his tone. “Ah.”

“Leader Ramos,” the tall, reedy man in the smarmy suit replied, pacing over the grassy floor with barely concealed disgust. “Your plants appear to be spilling out onto the field.”


“Indeed,” the reedy man's nasal voice reeked of menace. Beady eyes set in a splotchy face eyed us, before they flickered towards Léa. “Promising Trainers, to occupy a Gym Leader's time like this.”

“Who are you?” Léa asked.

“Why, I am Achillée Morelle, as everyone in Coumarine City would know,” the man made a short bow that seemed mocking. Neither of them raised a hand to shake. “Now you must reciprocate the introduction. Who are you?”

“I'm Léa Morelle,” Léa said.

There it was again, a silent tension like a guitar string mid-strum.

“There are not a lot who bear our name in Kalos,” Morelle the senior pronounced softly.

“I- it's my mother's name,” Léa defended. Purple seemed to spark from her fingers, and Pumpkaboo hissed quietly as it fled from her arms to hover overhead us.

“Such a coincidence,” Morelle smirked, softly murmuring, almost to himself. “Morelle... is your mother's name Rachelle, by chance?”

Ramos's scissors clicked, beside me.

“Yes...” Léa nodded fervently. “She was.”

“Ah,” Morelle sounded bored.

“Did you know her?”

“I must have,” Achillée Morelle flippantly replied. “I am her brother, after all.”

The Coumarine Gym had the dubious honour of earning the longest stay in the journey of Daisy Linden, who after a blazing trail of two years swept through the Conference and became Champion at twelve.

It was hardly due to the toughness of Ramos's team; I could attest to the fact of the matter. I stayed a
month to fully appreciate eateries which had made the Red Book at one point or another. Donar was in the midst of training for his Coumarine Gym match; I now had time to fully indulge my companions.

“How are you paying for this?” Siebold had pulled me aside after finding out that I had dropped two million Poké for him to arrange a high tea days before.

“Chemmy. Monsieur Morelle was kind enough to finance a menu dégustation,” I answered. “Surely a Cordon Bleu will supply a dessert that inspires my lonely friend there.”

“Madame Linden-”

“du Bois,” I corrected.

“Marguerite,” Siebold patiently echoed, “desserts are not my speciality. You need a pâtissière.”

“Look,” I shrugged. “I want to get Darkrai interested in the world. I think he's already attached to the idea of Kalos, because I'm feeding him good food and he had nice companionship and I don't exclude him from social gatherings. I would prefer that he has a nice experience from his homeland in Sinnoh. You are the only chef I know who can make hakuto jelly in Kalos on such short notice.”

Siebold closed his eyes, breathing in and out through his nose. “From Sinnoh? Dare I presume that he has never left Full Moon Island before?”

“He's cultured,” I assured. “I did teach him table manners. As much as a Pokémon can master them.”

“You exist merely to make impossible demands of the Notre Dame kitchens, I know,” Siebold grumbled, but without heat.

“You love a challenge,” I answered.

“I do,” he rolled his eyes. “Not the hakuto jelly. If it's Sinnoh, then the dessert to choose is cheesecake.”

Hence, our high tea, awaiting guests, at Le Bateau's terrace that overlooked the Azure Bay.

“He agreed,” Wikstrom appraised the moment I sat down, with assistance from the knight. My companions were playing, tossing either a ball, one carafe of iced Pecha Berry tea, or a murderous Crystal, around with Darkrai as monkey.

“He did,” I caught the carafe and took a swig before I dropped it to Altair.

Altair licked a glob and flung it to Liz, who took a floating sliver of berry inside and nibbled, sending it via Psychic to Aegis, who fumbled, allowing Darkrai to catch it and drink at last. Antics. Le Bateau was a true seaside restaurant; in Kalos, it meant that having a waiter serve right beside a wave was extremely possible. This was the land of restaurant battles, after all.

Siebold might be a poissonnier at heart, but he was certainly a formidable chef de cuisine. Barely an hour of conversation between Wikstrom and I had passed, before the infamous cross-region tasting menu of Le Bateau had been served to a team of ravenous Pokémon.

“Cheesecake,” I pressed the slice onto Darkrai, who delicately nibbled.

This is... cheesecake? I thought... I've tried a cheesecake in Shalour.

“Sinnoan cheesecake relies upon the emulsification of cornstarch and eggs to make a smooth texture
and almost plasticine appearance,” Siebold explained by the table. “It's lighter and less sweet than Kalosian cheesecake.”

*This is...?* Darkrai tasted it. *It is refreshing, monsieur.*

“I am glad you enjoyed it,” Siebold replied. “There are good things to be gotten in any region. Sinnoh is not unique in that respect.”

*I agree. There are many good things in any region, and your cooking are amongst them here. I personally rank you alongside Marguerite, in my opinion of the Kalos region. In Sinnoh... I would rank this dessert near the top, if I had ever tried it before now.*

“Here I've also assembled vanilla ice cream with *nata de coco* jelly made from the Pamtre Berry, which grows in Sinnoh,” Siebold presented three bowls to us.

A clawed hand clicked, before Darkrai considered the polished spoon in his hand. *I think... I have eaten this before. On the ship that I snuck upon, they served this to the sailors, you know, with the salted seaweed and vegetables so common on Newmoon Island. It was cheap, overly cloying, and laden with thick cream. I made a Rattata sleep to taste some.*

Again, he took another spoon, another bite. *This must be what freedom tastes like.*

Very discreetly, Siebold rubbed one eye, before making a motion for the next dish of crepe mille-feuille cake. I was left eyeing my own ice cream in reflection.

Time had been kind to me; the millions of Poké that sat in my bank accounts scattered and invested across the globe over six years were for splurging. Long-lived people do have to consider saving for a rainy day, yet until that time, I considered myself fully entitled to buy my way through the pleasures of life. I fulfilled my responsibilities as I could, and when Darkrai was here... it seemed a way to connect with someone as alone as I was, in our hearts. Darkrai had a sweet tooth; sometimes I needed to remind him to take vegetables. Never had I considered that Darkrai's association with sweets must have been his first taste of freedom.

*Je suis heureux à l'idée de ce nouveau destin... Une vie à me cacher, et puis libre enfin, le festin est sur mon chemin...*

Chef and Darkrai shared a look. Siebold smiled; it made him look like Hannibal Lecter. “Any feelings with regards to vegetables?”

*... can I not eat them?*

“We shall see,” Siebold's stern expression did not let up, as he straightened his tie. “I will see to the courses to come. I believe we shall have quite the acquaintance.”

Siebold was in the midst of serving delicate helpings of sago pudding when Grimsley arrived, sinking opposite us. “Sorry,” the Unovan did not sound sorry at all. “Got delayed for a bit in my investigations.”

My brows rose, but I enquired nothing. “My research assistant, Darkrai. Grimsley Giima, of the Unovan Elite Four. He is a Dark-type Pokémon Master.”

“Darkrai. Dr du Bois, how cold,” Grimsley sighed, sipping the glass of iced Sitrus Berry tea that Siebold served. “A rare Dark-type Pokémon and this is our introduction... Hmm...? This tea... was it added during or after cooling?”
“After,” Siebold’s eyes narrowed.

“At home we add the granules while the tea’s cooking,” Grimsley commented. “Gives it flavour.”

“I believe people do that in Hoenn as well,” I replied before Siebold could. “Nevertheless, supersaturation of sugar in tea detracts from the original Sitrus Berry flavour. Sugared syrup is hard to drink.”

“True...” Grimsley allowed. “Syrup or granules? I think syrup is just asking for a reaming, don’t you?”

“Granules are certainly dry and easy to transport, monsieur. However, granulated sugar prices might rise, if the current rise in Cottonee cotton prices is any indication of what might happen to the economy of Hoenn...”

The high tea ended with a selection of Pofflés. Of course.

There were creepy people in this world. Previously I had not known that; but Dr du Bois tended to be an eye-opener. Dr du Bois was creepy, in the theatrical sense. Darkrai was creepy, in the possibility sense. All of Dr du Bois’s team, even Altair, could be creepy.

Achillée Morelle, though was creepy.

“Rachelle was beautiful,” Mr Morelle commented. “In life and death.”

Léa paused. “How did you know?”

“Why else would her daughter be in Kalos?”

“I could have run to Kalos.”

“Then she would be here.”

Ramos sat by the sidelines with us. The elderly gardener looked like he would rather chop Mr Morelle the senior into pieces with his giant scissors.

“That guy gives me the creeps,” Shauna told us, her voice hushed.

“We should take this conversation to somewhere more private,” Morelle recommended with a smirk towards Léa. “What do you say, chérie?”

“I have a family...?” Léa sounded stunned. “I have a family?”

“I think Leader Amaro knew that too,” Mr Morelle glared towards Ramos, still smirking. “I thank you, monsieur, for looking after my niece. If only I’d known, chérie could have stayed at my house by the Azure Bay. Rachelle would have wanted it.”

“I don’t think Madame Morelle would have wanted her daughter near your family, Monsieur Morelle,” Ramos stoically replied.

“How would you know, Leader Amaro?” Mr Morelle replied sharply. “The Goutte-de-Sang have shed as much, if not comparatively more blood, as the Morelle.”

“Do not bring my ancestors into this!” Ramos snarled. “If you would do so, then-!”
“Please, stop!” Léa intervened, physically slotting herself between Ramos and Mr Morelle. “Leader Ramos... thank you for your help. But, I'd like a chance to... have a look.”

“Môme,” Ramos sounded... worried. Afraid, even. “I don't mind. Of course not. However, I would prefer that you remain on the Gym grounds. Purely as a matter of security, bien sûr. There must be a reason why M. Morelle has refrained from contacting your family.”

Mr Morelle gave a small bow. “I shall escort you, then. Come.”

Pumpkaboo squealed as Léa ran after the tall man in a suit. Ramos gave a shout of despair, warning of danger, but I was already pursuing Léa. Serena gave a warning shout, following along until we reached the doors of the Coumarine Gym.

Shauna was the first amongst us to speak. “W- Where did they go?”

“Who knows,” Noël replied, nervous. “The Morelle... she was a Morelle? That's... not good.”

Serena turned to me, her blue eyes shining nervously. “Donar... what should we do?”

A breeze passed, carrying with it the scent of the lavender that grew up on the hill of Coumarine City. As if all trace of Léa had disappeared, the wind had ghosted over their presence. Reason itself seemed to hang like the sun, the day’s eye over the beach's shadows taunting and vibrant.

Joyeuse and Aegis were in Blade Forme part-ways, exchanging blows; I refrained heroically from heckling in the midst of a play-date. Some distance away, Grimsley had accepted an invitation to put Darkrai through some basic motions and strategies for battle. Darkrai might not be my companion in the strictest sense, but it never hurt to give him some exercise and education.

What is the purpose of such motions? Darkrai wondered as they tapped paws and talons.

“Muscular control,” Grimsley replied. “All Pokémon depend more on their body to deliver physical blows, hence they need to keep in shape. Of course, keeping fit is also a good thing, but it's important to be comfortable in your own body. Everything in your body has its place.”

Even fats? Darkrai questioned. I was conversing with some... well, I overheard a few women complaining about their figure.

“Fats cushion internal organs in case of trauma,” Grimsley sighed. “Fats also cushion the joints of the body, and they protect against shock caused by sudden temperature changes in the environment. Of course, some fats are rather inconvenient, but I suppose it's a matter of health and personal preference.”

Jelly burbled from her position in the ocean, and Liz lingered, enjoying the sun while sharing a Sitrus Berry with Crystal and the Phantump. Altair was practising some kata; I knew since I had matched him stroke by stroke before.

Wikstrom tutted. “Joyeuse, Shadow Claw!”

A honeycomb matrix glittered around Aegis, defending the Aegislash.


Aegis disappeared, to reappear and stab Joyeuse behind, but was defended from by the other Aegislash's shield.
“Aegis has done well,” Wikstrom commented after the final clash of blades and the retreat. “Or was it Durandal?”

“Aegis,” I answered. “I found him in the grounds of Parfum Palace. It appeared to me. He is not a Pokémon described in legend.”

“A sword of destiny,” Wikstrom muttered. “It would not be strange. Joyeuse had sworn into service under the de Rais family and my thrice-accursed ancestor. If your Aegis is truly Durandal, the enduring sword that Jeanne la Pucelle once wielded under the siege d’Illumis, perhaps it is a sign.”

“Of what? Destiny?” I laughed. “Heroes... heroes are the reason we ignore collective action problems. To shelve all the problems of the world upon an ordinary person, made to stand on a pedestal for society to admire... No, heroes are not needed.”

Wikstrom’s face set. “You are one.”

“Living heroes, they disappoint,” I commented. “On that, the late Lysandre and I must unfortunately agree. It is only with a certain cloak of invincibility that heroes do inspire... and not always well. Look at your history, Wikstrom.”

“About that...” Wikstrom hesitated. “My family staff found documents dated to the Century War. We are certain of their origin, and we are set to exhibit them privately on a cruise co-sponsored by Morelle Shipping before loaning them to the Lumiose Museum.”

“You believe them written by the Marshal Gilles de Rais?” I asked.

“It seems so,” Wikstrom replied. “‘Tis difficult to prove such matters. It is one of the few clues that Kalos holds to la Pucelle. The gardener-”

“Stop. Please.” I shook my head.

The Maid of Lumiose, the maiden of brightness. A peasant girl, who supposedly pleaded for nothing but her home-town of Geosenge to be forever free of taxes, fought against invaders and united Kalos for a king who betrayed her in the end. Gilles de Rais fell into history as a bloodthirsty monster after her martyrdom. Her moniker, La Pucelle... Lysandre had died smiling with those words upon his lips.

What power could Jeanne of Cromlac’h, Princess of Notre Dame and head of La Maison chevaleresque d'Arc , Champion of the Victory Road, hold over such men. Seduction or inspiration was irrelevant; revolutionaries and monarchists, aristocrats and peasants paid lip service at minimum to the short-lived, but enduring, legend.

Sometimes, I mused, Wikstrom might have imagined making love to the Maid herself. It would have been a difficult prospect, I imagined, until I arrived like history reincarnate.

“We could see them together once you are at Lumiose City,” Wikstrom took my hand, kissing the back of it. “Madame.” My lady.

“Sometimes I think you see me as another Jeanne d'Arc.” I replied.

“You hold the Honour of Kalos, and the style of Serene Highness,” Wikstrom reasoned. “Though your title be cast aside, thou art my lady still.”

“Enough with the ancient language,” I instructed. “Wikstrom... I don't think this will work out.”
Wikstrom remained silent. “May I ask why?”

“When you look at me, what do you see?”

Here, he took a moment to pause. “I see a heroine. One who would rather suffer in silence for her adopted homeland. She is wondrous fair, blue of eye and gold of hair. This day, though, her eyes of emerald and hair of midnight is not... displeasing. I might say it a more natural guise for my lady. I love her as my lady and chatelaine, my indomitable Champion.”

“You love her.”

“I would marry her should she acquiesce.”

“But I am not a hero now,” I explained. “I want to wander the region doing work that would likely topple the known social order given the right edge. I want to feed my Pokémon inappropriate foods and bask with them under the sun and splash into the water. I get sick too, I cry too, I get angry too, and I would like that to be fine. I'm sorry, Wikstrom, because I keep disappointing you.”

I stood and left him. Liz floated by my side. There was a Shiny Stone with her name on it, now if only she could master Moonblast...

There is an interesting paradox to the long-lived investing in companionship. It made one wonder how old must the companions of AZ be now. Years upon years of wandering a familiar land, long before the concept of a region or solid borders became common; anyone would be lost. The long-lived would have to hide their existences, never rising above a certain view, never enjoying public life, invested relationships...

In my pocket, I fingered the glittering evolutionary stone. I took it out to the light, the dim white shining in my hands. It called to me... it glittered in my eye. There was a matching stone in my bag. Violet, violently so, but no less brilliant than the jewel I held now. Unlike its twin, though, I had used that stone time and time again. Wikstrom should know a jeweller.

I arrived back at the Coumarine Hotel with the name of a jeweller in Lumiose. I knew what I would make; it remained to see if any jeweller would break up an evolutionary stone. The Fleur-de-Lis kings, especially the one who sank into history as the Roi-Soleil, had decorated the Couronne de l'Arbre with the evolutionary stones set in facets and topped with the Sun Stone. L'état, c'est moi? The crown of a tree that rule over a garden... were Kalos a garden, its kings would be gardeners, and the gentry the flowers; until the Revolution, that is. Sometimes, a gardener forgot that a garden populated only with flowers would be choked to death by the grass.

Four years ago, I was still an academic nobody; I was at the École Normale Supérieure, as a lecturer in political science and sociology. I had just published my dissertation; next was the associate professorship, possibly tenure. The humanities tended to stick together, especially in my chosen field. I could understand, sometimes, this rivalry of sciences and humanities.

A visiting professor was discussing the 'garden philosophy' practised by Kalosian rulers to justify continued rule and coups, in comparison with the Glorious Mandate of Indigo Plateau during the Ransei era. The entire Champion system, he theorised, stemmed from such politically charged philosophies, and the remarkable degree of agreement between otherwise divergent cultures could have been a result of a common link.

“The mysterious Sea Spirit that hovered over Azure Bay, perhaps?” I asked. “Articuno, Zapdos and Moltres have been sighted before. Perhaps one of these Pokémon granted some measure of inspiration to the rulers of ancient Kalos.”
The professor gained a funny look on his face. “Well, that is an interesting hypothesis, that Pokémon could serve as vectors of philosophy! I congratulate you, Ms du Bois! About this Sea Spirit's Den...”

I begged off immediately. He spent the rest of the evening interrogating the geography professors with regards of the Sea Spirit's Den. The last I heard, he was sunk somewhere between the Azure Bay and Alto Mare...

In my shadow, the Haunter from last night rose, slightly bluish in the light.

“Good afternoon,” I paid little mind to it afterwards as I walked the streets of Coumarine.

“I think you're a glutton,” Donar said when he found me contemplating the *ardoise* outside the hotel restaurant with Haunter.

“I like my food, and so do you,” I answered. *Bonjour, Donar. You appear to have misplaced your manners today."

“Right. Whatever.”

One dose of fear of authority, coming right up. “Would you like to repeat that, Donar? The restaurant has a lovely *consommé*. I understand that Magikarp were boiled to make the stock.”

“N- No! I'm sorry!” Donar heaved a breath. “Just... Noël said something that made me think.”

I remained silent.

“I think... I’ve been overly dependent on you,” Donar confessed. “And... Noël... it's like having my house travelling with me, sometimes. I train with professional help, I eat better than most Trainers splurging, and... I'm very lucky. It makes me feel... inadequate as a Trainer. Like I'm not doing enough if I keep relying on my support base.”

I considered. “Interesting comparison.”

Donar scowled. “It's... Training is supposed to be a time of independence, right?”

“Your story is like those of the Phantump,” I murmured. In the distance, Altair and Darkrai’s forms could be glimpsed walking towards us.

“What?” Donar blinked.

“In times of plague, hunger, or war, the children of the peasantry were often the first casualties,” I recalled. “The forests, in both Snowbelle and Santalune, became the destination for some lost children, orphans and runaways alike. Many found in them only an early grave.”

Jeanne d'Arc, the legendary heroine, was one of these war orphans. She was one of the fortunate ones.

Donar considered. “How does this relate? Not that Kalosian history isn't relevant...”

“The common belief holds that the forests hold a magic where Xerneas had cast, and the children gained lifespans which dwarf those of their human bodies, trapped in the stumps of trees,” I explained. “These children become Phantump, but dying has changed them. Society can do little for these dead, but it has not forgotten. Today, children are taught how to train Pokémon, should they ever need one to survive.”

“... creepy story aside, and thanks for telling me that you're toting around the ghost of a kid,” Donar
said, “how do I relate to them?”

“The story is not an Aesop, but an object lesson, Donar. Infrastructure is *not* part of the scenery. Even should one choose not to use it, does not mean that the choice is not present, that we do not help you to live. Independence is well and good, but that does not mean that suffering need be included. It can be relatively comfortable, relatively safe to journey, if properly planned and executed. In fact, planning long-term is a good example of a Trainer, since it often means that such Trainers survive the trip through Victory Road without needing to be rescued by Rangers.”

“Right. That's a good point,” he nodded.

“You've been learning to cook and set up camp from me,” I commented archly. “I wouldn't call your situation *comfortable* yet. Merely... *prepared*.”

Donar ignored me. “But, I don't get why Léa's uncle didn't meet Léa at all before now. I mean, clearly there's something between them, like some... secret.”

“Léa Morelle has an uncle?”

“Achillée Morelle,” Donar informed me. “Bit of a creep. I don't like him.”

“You shouldn't,” I answered. “What did your friends say?”

“They haven't,” Donar replied curiously. “In fact, they're keeping their distance.”

“Smart.”

“Why?” Donar sounded curious. “I mean, Kalos is a free country, right?”

“In the sense you are possibly thinking of, yes,” I replied. “All regions do hold some form of democratic practise. However, certain families or relationships allow people to seize power via less than democratic means. In Kalos, for example, there was an aristocracy. The Kalosian Revolution happened, which toppled the court and demolished the monarchy. However, the aristocracy survived as the leaders of the revolution; families like the Fleur-de-Lis and de Rais still hold power, and defunct titles such as d'Arc continue. The Morelle is old, and of higher social status than the de Rais. It does not hurt their power base, too, that Achillée Morelle is not squeamish to violence.”

“What do you mean?”

“Association with the Morelle is dangerous,” I cautioned. “Should you interfere, death will almost certainly follow.”

“Léa's in danger?” Donar demanded.

“Of course she is,” I considered. “With great certainty, Léa Morelle is in grave danger. She is possibly already dead.”

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*I hate being an authority figure. It gets you nothing but grief in a child's world.*

*I will not give in. I will not give in. I will not give in.*

– *Marguerite Linden du Bois*
One thing I'm always confused about evolutionary stones is why do they disappear after their use. And, I can't believe no one ever considered using those stones in jewellery. They can't argue that jewellery don't exist; I mean, in the anime they described a case involving a stolen jewel called the Eye of the Liepard. So, I postulated an imaginary scenario of a crown inlaid with evolutionary stones.

The 'garden philosophy' and the Glorious Mandate are terms I coined to describe the Champion system in culturally divergent contexts. Garden philosophy and Glorious Mandate both discuss divine mandate in kingship/Championship, but also allow for the disposal of rulers. Yet, there is also a distinction between civil and military matters; in Kalos, the Champion is the head of state, not necessarily the head of the military. Contrast Ransei, which later divided into Kanto and Johto, where the Champion and head of state are one and the same.

Also contrast Hoenn, Sinnoh and Unova, which I believe developed through different political philosophies which may or may not be discussed.

The 'second speed' is a concept brought up by birdboy's Pokedex

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
XXVIII: Savoir - To Know

Chapter Summary

This is the most reckless plan I shall ever do, I would have liked to say. Taking on the Morelle, even with the backing of Elite Four members, was just asking for a media backlash.

“You want me to rescue your friend when a Gym Leader refused,” Dr du Bois eyed each and every one of us. Disbelief clouded her rather regular features, remote as a Xatu with the certainty of an oracle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 64 (cont.): This is the most reckless plan I shall ever do, I would have liked to say. Taking on the Morelle, even with the backing of Elite Four members, was just asking for a media backlash.

It would undermine everything.

Why am I doing this?

“You want me to rescue your friend when a Gym Leader refused,” Dr du Bois eyed each and every one of us. Disbelief clouded her rather regular features, remote as a Xatu with the certainty of an oracle.

“Donar said that you could do it,” Shauna pleaded.

“If you're a decent person, surely you'd try,” Noël added sarcastically. “Wait, you're not nice at all.”

“And what did Ramos say?” she questioned, ignoring the barb.

“Leader Ramos said... he called the police, but it's a while,” Serena related, somewhat civil in the presence of Dr du Bois's apparent interest in Léa's case. “We can't search the Morelle villa, and Morelle himself denied knowing anything... who knows where Léa is...? Why would Léa be kidnapped?”

“Money,” Dr du Bois simply replied. “Since the Warring Ages of the X century, Kalosian inheritance law traditionally favours the chatelaines, or heiresses, to keep the stability of various noble posts within families. From the time of Kalos's transition to industrialisation, females have also been favours for inheritance due to the presumption of legitimacy. Various other factors come into play as well, but absolute female primogeniture is still within the Inheritance Statute of Kalos, due to be revised in a year's time. In any other region and family, Léa Morelle would have been grudgingly accepted, but the Morelle are a cruel family. Achillée Morelle might do anything to protect his position within the family, especially since the burden of inheritance would fall to Léa Morelle once her family bloodline has been conclusively proven.”

“We have to find Léa,” I quickly took over once it seemed that her patience was fraying. “Please, Doctor.”
“What are you expecting of me?” she sighed. “Léa Morelle is gone, under the supervision of the Coumarine Gym, and presumably with the Morelle family. We are talking about one of the old, powerful families of Kalos.”

“But you can stage a rescue, right?” I begged desperately. “I mean, the house is permanently under surveillance at the moment...”

Dr du Bois considered. “If it is, then all Achillée Morelle has to do is lay low until the furore disappears. None of us can remain in Coumarine indefinitely, and police presence would decrease after a month, perhaps more. Presuming that Léa Morelle is not already pushing up daisies, that means that she is at an unknown location within the Morelle villa, presumably safe and unharmed.”

I nodded quickly. “Yeah, the villa is under watch.”

“Were that so, there are two typical answers, on a hypothetical basis, to start,” Dr du Bois continued. “One is to bribe someone to keep in contact with Léa Morelle, bring us proof of life, and to convince Achillée Morelle that Léa Morelle alive is better than dead, at least for the moment. An impossible feat, since that would require bribing one of the security guards, and they already know that all of you are with the police. We might hasten her death instead.”

That... didn't sound good. “The second option?”

“A sting operation, to push Léa Morelle into the public sphere for retrieval,” Dr du Bois elaborated. “This can only happen under the given conditions.”

“ Merci beaucoup pour téléphone r au Gym à Port Tempères,” a soft, human female voice answered. “ Comment pourrons-nous vous aider? Notre horaires d'ouverture sont de huit heures jusqu'a vingt heures.”


“ C'est de la part de qui?”

“ Je suis une professeur de sociologie au Laboratoire Platane à Illumis. C'est urgent. Où est Champion Amaro ? ”

“ Ne quittez pas, s'il vous plaît. Je vous le passe.”

I waited until I could hear Ramos's gravelly voice. “Allô?”


Noël Duval walked in once I had finished the call, shaking snow from his jacket. “Well, the Coumarine Hill is covered in snow. This had better be worth Officer Jenny yelling at me.”

The conditions upon which a rescue can be established: First, that the ground be rendered hard enough the digging through would be impossible. “You have just saved Léa from a shallow grave.”

Serena and Shauna called my Holo Caster next. “Shauna just called, no one's buying lye. And, I just checked with all of Coumarine's motor shops, no sulphuric acid on demand.”

Second: that there are no large supplies of sulphuric acid, lye or cement anywhere near the Morelle
Donar called next. “All passage from the house is being monitored, Doctor. Thanks, Fletchinder!”

“Fletchinder!”

Third: that there is no way of easily getting rid of a body out to the Azure Bay or Route 13 from the Morelle villa without notice.

Ramos had coughed delicately when I laid out the plan. “You want me to call Morelle?”

“With a very indelicate warning, yes,” I answered. “I trust that you can concoct something.”

“That I can do, madame, if this will save Mademoiselle Morelle. Merci.”

“Merci. À bientôt.”

Last: that Achillée Morelle is extremely aware of all the surveillance, legal or otherwise, upon him and his men.

I set the Holo Caster down, and waited for most of the players at hand to arrive. With all conditions fulfilled, then our plan can proceed.

“The Morelle family,” Dr du Bois produced a document headed by a blazon. “Coat of arms: A saltire sanguine on argent, three leaves of nightshade arranged like a fleur-de-lys. The motto: Chacun sa part; to each their own. Its formation dates back to the original dukedom of Coumarine, the city itself consolidated between the now-defunct Maison Mandragora, the Maison Goutte-de-Sang who's still around, and the Morelle. Since the Age of Exploration from the XV to XVII century, the Morelle has held a partial monopoly over the shipping done in Coumarine, as well as in the maintenance of order within the city limits. Its current head, Achillée Morelle, is living within the ancestral villa, some distance from the Azure Bay. Léa Morelle, the girl he kidnapped, is presumably within the house. The villa is currently under surveillance by both police and Ramos's very dedicated Rangers as of three hours ago. It is guarded by Ghost- and Dark-type Pokémon. Our plan is to get him to bring Léa Morelle into the open, and thus stage a rescue.”

“Question!” Shauna raised her hand. “Erm... how are we going to do that?”

“We stage an infiltration,” she answered.

“Erm...” Serena gulped. “If we can break in, why don't we just rescue Léa?”

“Because, afterwards, all of us would be hunted and killed by the family, since a rescue via breaking and entering is inadmissible in court as evidence,” Dr du Bois replied coldly. “Every crime has two parts; actus reus, the act itself, and mens rea, the guilty mind. If Léa Morelle is rescued, the evidence of actus reus disappears. In both short- and long-term, we must lure Morelle with Léa Morelle out to a place of our choosing at which the extraction attempt shall take place.”

Serena grumbled, but subsided.

“Our plan,” Dr du Bois produced a leaflet, “is to lure Morelle to place Léa Morelle up on this cruise ship, the S.S. Azur. It is owned by Morelle Shipping; that is, Morelle's own cruise ship, commissioned to sail through the Azure Bay, turn around the Sea Spirit's Den, up and down the Kalosian coast and then go up the Vin River to dock at Lumiose. There is a window of time during which the Azur will be in international waters, which is the most likely time that Achillée Morelle
can—” she made a motion, “-pitch Léa Morelle overboard. A drowning girl in the middle of the ocean... quite perfect.”

“So how are we going to make sure that Léa gets there alive?” I asked.

Dr du Bois smiled. It looked way creepier than it should. “We won't be. Monsieur Morelle will deliver her himself.”

I looked at my full retinue of Pokémon. Not counting the missing Pumpkaboo presumably within the Morelle villa, and Darkrai, I had six Pokémon. I was going to have to choose something appropriately strong and non-threatening, rare yet not so rare as to be near-mythological. Discounting Aegis, Crystal, Altair and Phantump, that left Jelly and Liz. Jelly was unwieldy; Liz it was.

“We're going to have to do this,” I told the Single Bloom Pokémon, who nodded in answer.

“Flo!”

Why can I not go? Altair questioned, lingering behind me.

“You're the trump,” I replied, studying the outlay of Pawniard at guard outside the Morelle villa. “There are Trainer-Pokémon stereotypes we can use to our advantage. Lucario Trainers are traditionally shown as perceptive, and I need Morelle to underestimate us. Plus, if Morelle is distracted by my presence, he won't think that I have an agent searching his house for Léa Morelle, much less a Pokémon. This gives you the chance to break in with Darkrai to check for signs of Léa Morelle or Pumpkaboo.”

You won five million Poké off of him. I believe Morelle already knows your capabilities.

“In a casino, guaranteed by a member of the Elite Four and the Kalos Bankers' Guild,” I corrected, smoothing out my skirt. “Not on his turf. I could have been lucky. Okay, what do we know about their security?”

Altair closed his eyes. Even partway downwind of the fancy villa, his range of aura was far more encompassing than a hacker would be able to reach. Four Pawniard; the two sentries and two guards on the ground floor. Two Houndoom, patrolling in a twenty-minute cycle, one human minder per Houndoom.

“Their boss,” I noted. “Carry on.”

Achillée Morelle on the first floor. Two more Pawniard, one Bisharp. Aerial defences, two Murkrow. No minder in sight; possibly wild Murkrow offering a service.

“If you can, see if you can bargain with them,” I commented. “We have a connection to Capo on Mélancholie Path, after all.”

Noted. Basement: two more Pawniard, one Pumpkaboo, and... Léa Morelle.

Eh, good enough. “Excellent. Are you ready, Altair?”

Yes.

“Darkrai?”

I will be lying in wait to drive Morelle mad? Darkrai questioned.
“Not in slumber,” I corrected. “This works only when the mark is conscious and unaware; that is, at night. We need suggestions, not objective arguments. An entire house having nightmares is the presence of a Darkrai; one person in a nightmare is paranoia overdrive. In short, as long as the mark does not fall asleep, you have free reign of the house. Once the household is asleep, get out. Understood?”

Of course. What about the smiling shadow?

I looked down towards Haunter, who grinned to show its blue tongue.

A *shiny* Haunter.

Of course. My life could not get any more interesting.

I gave Haunter a Sitrus Berry that he enjoyed, floating alongside Liz as I walked up to the gates and requested entrance. It took only a while before I was shown into a drawing room. Dark red curtains, dark red *bergères* and matching ottomans, blazons on the walls fitted with spackling... a literal Red Room, and within it a dark bishop.

“Dr du Bois,” Achillée Morelle rose in greeting. “I did not anticipate your... visit. What beautiful specimens, and a shiny Haunter at that! I salute you, madame.”

“*Bonjour*, Monsieur Morelle. Wikstrom was very forthcoming when I expressed a desire to expand my horizons,” I replied, faking the demure lady persona. “Academia is not confined to the walls of the *École Normale Supérieure*. Neither is training. I like to think that they... chose me.”

“Neither are nerves,” Achillée bowed his head, smirking. “Madame is possessed of both. Bisharp, the lady is our guest.”

“In-house guards?” I asked, feeling the Sword Blade Pokémon retreat behind me. “Quite the sentinel you have, *monsieur*. Equivalent to the royal guard of the Court during pre-Revolution times.”

“My family has trained Pawniard and Bisharp for generations,” Morelle admitted. “The infamous Bisharp general at Parfum Palace was one of ours. Came to work for our house after the Revolution, left his pawns here. If there was a market other than the Agavé, but...”

“Yes, having those with trained Watchog monopolise the security industry must be so hard,” I sighed theatrically.

“Can’t even get any Watchog trainers with me, not when they all go to the Agavé or Alternate Community Executives,” Morelle agreed. “Did you know, that Team Rocket was created right after ACE set up their little contract with the Pokémon League? Exclusive security rights to all League events, and League sponsorship for outstanding Trainers to enter.”

I was very well acquainted with ACE Trainer executives when Kalos was sending aid and assistance to the Orre region. Scholars do not exactly discuss that segment of League history and sociology, about how some companies do manage to clinch a large segment of the global market in a given industry despite the League’s mandate of meritocracy. Morelle did not need to know that. “Part of my research concerns the career paths of a Trainer, and ACE is a prominent part of that research. But, Watchog are the standard for security. I remember, a little girl drowned on the SS Aqua and a Watchog caught her just barely in time.”

“Hmm,” Achillée paused. “Another person, merely a footnote in history.”

“So glad that it was passing through Indigo waters instead of the Decolore Straits,” I continued. He
was on the hook. “International waters would have become incredible amounts of red tape. Tentacruel are truly cruel, but they are also part of the natural habitat.”

Achillée tutted. “Compared to us, the Tentacruel and Honchkrow of the world have truly carved their niches.”

“The Tyranitar have done a better job,” I pointed out. “Every region in the word has them classed at Class A in tradeable cross-region trade. It’s a tyrant for a reason. Though I do admit that Honchkrow have their uses.”

“Sadly I don’t have a Honchkrow,” Morelle admitted gently as a butler served a carafe of iced tea, the ice gently clinking in sway. “I do have a Honchkrow contact who has a human agent in some Lumiose bureau, though. Iced tea, madame?”

“Oh, yes,” I laughed as a glass was delicately served to a small table by my bergère. “S’il vous plaît. I’m just... so nervous. It would be my first cruise on the Azur.”

“You’re taking the Azur cruise?” Morelle sounded interested. Line.

“Wikstrom is taking me to view his newest donation in private first,” I delicately replied. I realised that it sounded like the Baron de Rais was in the midst of courting an academic, but it was believable. “Letters from Gilles de Rais, to Jeanne la Pucelle. He is... quite the romantic. The other day he took me out for a walk in the snow- oh! I’m digressing, monsieur.”

“Well,” Morelle smirked. “Perhaps there might be a Dame de Rais in the future?”

I felt my face getting hot. “I’m sure... Wikstrom prefers the company of the likes of Maîtresse Carnet. Even though cruises are so isolated. On a ship, the world is completely excluded to the denizens upon a ship... monsieur, anything can happen out at sea.”

“Yet it shall be romantic,” Morelle commented. “There will be a tournament of poker, madame. If your nerves are as good as in chemmy...”

“I thought about turning tricks in bridge,” I smiled inwardly as Morelle's smirk deepened. “But there's only so many games Wikstrom is willing to play. Perhaps I could convince him after our little victory five days ago at the casino.”

“Why, yes, you must,” Morelle indelicately flashed an incisor, and some... force about him reminded me of a Sableye poised to strike. Or Grimsley Pieris Giima at the poker table. “Do bring Lord de Rais out, he’s always been cooped at home.”

Sinker.

I started the walk away soon after, and found myself milling in the snow-covered gardens for a spell. Noël Duval had truly made thorough work of the gardens.

“I’m assuming that it went very well, or very badly,” I commented once I judged myself a safe distance away.

Altair dropped from his perch on a telephone pole. We found Pumkaboo. The little pumpkin knew Shadow Sneak. I wrote a note and left it for Miss Morelle, explaining how to destroy it.

“Very good.” I paused. “I didn’t give you a writing instrument. Or paper.”

Darkrai filched some from the human minders. Altair paused. The Houndoom have Early Bird as
their Ability, and the Murkrow have Insomnia. Fortunately for us, our avian and canine security are controlled by or report to humans, who are useless when they are asleep.

I groaned as Darkrai appeared from the shadows underfoot. “Sit rep.”

I have rearranged materials within our target's offices, rooms and laid simple traps throughout his suites, Darkrai triumphantly declared. The humans fell asleep via the chemical means your kind calls alcohol.

“They were drunk on duty?” I blinked.

No. I drugged their canteens.

I pondered. “Well, in a normal social situation, that is wrong. This is not a normal situation. Do you understand that?”

You have explained that distinction, Marguerite. Darkrai replied, with perhaps a touch of asperity.

“As long as your understand,” I shrugged, motioning to Haunter to give him a hug. “Haunter, meet Darkrai. He's your fellow stalker, cum companion, cum hanger-on I drag along for the ride. Now, I believe L'Étape has a dinner special.”

The entire team was assembled there, and I took the chance to think over an excellent soupe au pistou at the four Mareep chewing their food. Donar was perhaps the only one to recognise this.

“Doctor...?” He asked, rather timidly.

“Thinking.” I pondered. “Out of the five of us, mine is the only face he would not immediately associate with Léa Morelle. Achillée Morelle already knows all of your faces; none of you can be deployed immediately. To that end, I called Augustine and made him hand over some cruise tickets.”

“Made him...?” Serena commented quietly.

“M. Duval, Serena and you shall be aboard the Azur as representatives of the Sycamore Laboratory,” I explained, pulling out an envelope from my jacket pocket. “Donar, Shauna, the two of you will be mingling with the crowd first thing to get aboard the ship with the main crowd. Shauna, I need you to stage a confrontation with Morelle right before the ship casts off, and directly after, you will go to the Coumarine Gym and inform Ramos, before going through Route 13 towards Lumiose City to await us. If I do not send a signal, you will call the Lumiose authorities. You will not be aboard the ship. Donar, Serena, your task will be to distract the two Elite Four, one Champion Emeritus and one Champion aboard the ship.”

Donar nearly spat out his soup. “What?!?”

Serena just stared. “Champion... emeritus?”

“I just received a passenger list,” I commented vaguely. It was slightly illegal, but illegal was usually faster. “Siebold is catering his grandfather's birthday party, hence only Grimsley and Wikstrom should be aboard the ship, along with Steven Stone and Cynthia Shirona. It is essential that none of them approach Morelle when I am with him.”

Guillaume Gagné was aboard, but no matter. He would probably be distracted with keeping tabs on Morelle and I, to note his son's presence.

“Why?” Serena asked.
“They will recognise that I am interrogating him,” I looked at Serena as the main dishes came in. “And that is the plan. We will keep in touch using our Holo Casters. No direct contact, unless to fit the role. I will be buying hands-free sets for all of us. Our individual preparations shall begin after dessert. Now, what shall we eat?”

I imagine, if I did not have my studies to occupy me, I would have become a criminal mastermind. A functioning, alcoholic criminal mastermind.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

Kalosian law itself might be more complicated than what Marguerite is depicting, but the main point is that they need to prove beyond reasonable doubt that Achillée Morelle had both intent and had taken action to kidnap Léa. There can be no ambiguities, otherwise Morelle could escape and come after them.

Also, note that the floors refer to the British scheme, which is what France follows. So, first floor is the storey above ground level.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
“I remember,” Stone commented in a tone of flatness. “You reviewed Dr Yew's article of Teams Magma and Aqua being a greater reflection of the great economic inequality shared between the desert-dwelling and sea-dwelling population as a result of Devon Corporation. 'Economic nationalism', was it?"

I gaped at her as she left in a waft of flowers, trying to decipher her meaning. I comprehended as around the corner, on the other corridor beside the one Dr du Bois departed through was Cynthia, Champion of the Sinnoh region.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Day 67: This is a bad idea, this is a bad idea, this is a- yes, Darkrai, repetition would possibly drive in that fact! Is this one of those undesirable influences that young Trainers supposedly fall prey to, which corrupts their moral sense and leads them astray from accepted League policy? Or is it merely the wild influence of the young, to lead them to search for edifying adventure?*

*(Delete paragraph)*

The burn of Malva's Chandelure on my hand stung under the bandages. Burning the traitor's face had never felt so good, and were it anyone else who had suggested the anti-psychotics, I would never have done it. She deserved everything she got.

Even from a disgraced Champion, telling all and sundry that one of the Kalos Elite Four was a Team Flare member was akin to a public death sentence. Malva would never tell, and Diantha would never allow her to do so, even if Daisy Linden disappeared as a result.

And she shall.

The Basculin in the river were delicious, field-dressed and salted with whatever there was in the few supplies I brought out with me. Daisy Linden went camping without warning in Brun Way, entered the Lost Hotel... and she never came out.

So I intended.

In this world, there are settlements that, in and of itself, left no other intrinsic value to humanity, but Pokémon congregated around as some form of hybrid habitat. Kanto's Pokémon Mansion; the Old Château somewhere in Sinnoh; the Strange House at the base of Reversal Mountain in Unova; the list went on. The Lost Hotel had barely survived being torn down due to the active presence of Litwick within. Humans tended to get leery about cohabiting with the former habitat of Ghosts, especially those who fed upon life force. The coming procession of Litwick that hovered in the Lost Hotel was chief amongst the reasons why building in the heart of trickster ground was a bad idea.
While Lampent were not unknown in the wild, wild Lampent tended to stand out due to their heightened consumption needs and thus proximity to inhabited areas, which tended to encourage capture. Those Lampent would never have known that a bottomless well of energy had walked into their territory.

I had Pokéballs on me; yet, capture was not on my agenda. Bereft of companion, alone and surrounded, I watched the indigo flame of the Candle Pokémon flare with my life force, my eyelids growing heavy with every passing moment.

Was I right?

I came here with an idea; the idea that, given enough effort, even an immortal like AZ would die. Even despite eternal life, the human body was mortal; it would age, weaken, break like any other. If I broke this body long enough... I could not have known, for I did not die. The pain of the burns on my hands proved that.

On hindsight, the fact that I could feel pain through burns were signs of my nerves regenerating. Yet at the time, I was more concerned with the fact that, even in death, it could not be peaceful. I was left on my back, bleeding on the palms of my hands and onto a dusty carmine carpet that was the hotel's legacy.

This procession of Litwick left, leaving only a tiny runt, possibly the runt of a whole litter. She – the Litwick had very prominent eyelashes – was tiny, her indigo flame guttering with any passing breeze that ghosted over the skin of my cheeks. The Litwick, glowing, floated ever closer, her flame barely keeping growing in size. She kept sucking feebly, with a sort of sickened determination I had seen in those Pokémon afflicted with Destiny Bond Syndrome. The most unsettling fact of Pokémon medicine, was how a dying Pokémon looked when Yveltal's sleep haunts them and they clung to the blessing of Xerneas all the more; ugly and cruel and real for all the tragedy it is.

The oncology department of the Université Illumis-Sud Neuvartault had a Pichu cancer patient that was its poster child. I had seen it many times on campus, as the medical programme's youngest student. Now, comparing a Litwick trying to kill me in order to live with an electric rodent suffering from growths all over its body, I had no idea which was more determined to live.

The irony of it all.

Consciousness drifted in and out as a boat that came and went through the Styx. A Murkrow came in now and then, bringing food and water it forced down my throat despite lacking anything training to identify foods consumable by humans. Why, or how, I did not know, but I was thankful enough to appoint him as the boss after I tracked down a Dusk Stone. A Trubbish helped him; moments like this led me to doubt myself sometimes. A Klefki tried to steal my keys; I bent its own out of shape until it relented and escaped. Rotom cracked through the wires, sending the already dim lights flickering through the hallways, confusing dawn and dusk. I must have been revived innumerable times between death and life, the latter clinging like some microbe or disease while the former would not hold.

Time passed oddly, adrift in eternity and oblivion within lucidity. The Litwick grew strong, stronger than I thought possible; she was growing in size, gorging herself until now, she resembled something like the trained Litwick that Trainers brought in sometimes.

My hands healed, in time. However long a time had passed before its waxy body had a glassy sheen, I could not tell; barely a day had passed before she evolved spontaneously, wax to steel and glass.

The laugh escaped from my lips, though the newly evolved Lampent could not escape my grasp.
“Haa...” I breathed as I heard the howl of a Lucario growing louder, Altair coming in with a fluent Kalosian curse that could only be Augustine. “A Lampent...”

I clung onto her, each and every moment waiting for that moment to pass, for my soul to be stolen from my body. I must have died once more in her fiery embrace, waiting for a death that never came.

Perhaps this was what Malva had felt when I used her own companion to burn her traitorous face. It almost made me pity her. I made up for it later when I stole Malva's properties from right under her nose, subsuming her contacts to create Marguerite Linden du Bois.

I breathed in and out, willing the pain to disappear, for the Lost Hotel to break, for the Lampent that would become Crystal the Chandelure to disappear. I then opened my eyes.

For this is not the future, or the yet to come... this is my past.

“Darkrai...!”

I fell; I hit a thick shag carpet. Above-head, Darkrai loomed. A samovar floated beside me, filigree silver on black.

I frowned at it, and then at Darkrai. He shrugged. “I did not forget everything about the land I came from. The humans of the region you call Sinnoh, they used this device to dispense tea.”

“Why are my ears perceiving you?”

“Because this is your dream. I am a guest.”

“Is this the effect of Dream Eater or Nightmare?”

“Dream Eater.” He studied me. “Most humans would be telling me to get out.”

“People will fear what they do not understand,” I took the samovar and set it upright, opening the lid. “If you are here in my dream, I assume that you have a good reason. I would also anticipate that you do not abuse the privilege, and if you do, I shall be disappointed in you.”

“You were having a nightmare. Haunter decided to dive in. I just barely stopped him.”

From the shadows, came the wide, guilty eyes of Haunter, set with a false grin.

“Duly noted,” I checked the samovar. “Do you know what is this, Darkrai?”

“A boiling vessel, I believe. A vessel that everyone likes.”

“Not really,” I pondered. “The samovar is more common in west Sinnoh, I believe. It's a part of Sinnoh tea culture, really. Erm, you'd fill the burner inside with smouldering material, wood chips or pine cones, things like that, then you add hot water around the internal pipe that leads out as a tiny chimney. It's a self-boiling water heater with a dispenser, basically. Sinnoh, and especially Snowpoint tea culture, revolves around very concentrated black tea, called zavarka. So, it's done like this...”

I would like to think that weirder things happened in my life rather than an impromptu dream tea-party conducted in the Sinnoh manner — a communal setting over a protracted time period — had occurred in my life. Unfortunately, no. It was extremely fun, though, that with some direction from the nightmare expert, nightmares soon became enjoyable dreams, ghosts transmuting into jam jars and honey or sugar. The funniest must have been Darkrai's reaction; even I laughed with Haunter as...
the Pitch-Black Pokémon fretted over the choice of honey or jam with milky black tea.

I awoke in the midst of displaying a Johto-style tea ceremony, frowning at Crystal's smirk and the smell of green tea hanging in the air. Idly, Darkrai floated beside me.

“I would appreciate if you would give some notice before dropping into my dreams,” I replied. “Having to plan an entire tea menu on the fly is tiring.”

A pause, before Darkrai faced me. *Marguerite... you relish the challenge.*

I gave him the evil eye and shoved him on top of Haunter, such that they made a lovely bodily pile for Phantump, Crystal and Jelly to mock. Aegis even clapped. So, it was to such a scene that Altair returned from his early morning meditation.

My companion Lucario beheld the Pokémon pileup with something akin to resignation.

**“Did I miss something?”**

“No,” I laughed. “You didn't.”

*The weather seems clement.*

My smile faded somewhat at that reminder. “Thank you, Altair. It looks like we should prepare.”

Morning of the cruise dawned with two victories and two Plant Badges issued to us.

“Well, that Fletchinder looks mighty capable with her Ember and Aerial Ace, can't wait to see her with a Flamethrower,” Ramos joked.

I smiled weakly; Fletchinder had pretty much mowed down his team with Aerial Aces left and right. I hadn't had to field Heracross at all. “Thanks, Leader Ramos.”

“You're just as good as that girly,” Ramos smiled, turning to Serena, who had also won just as quickly. “I now present to the two of you, your Plant Badges.”

We accepted the badges with respect, but for me it was also filled with foreboding. It meant that the cruise, and Léa's rescue, was about to take place.

“My friend Monsieur Duval has completed the Coumarine Gym, and Shauna is not due to battle the Gym again,” Dr du Bois had assessed. “Donar, Serena and you shall require experience. Don't come back until you've gotten the Plant Badge. Also, pack your bags before you leave to the Gym. We'll be boarding the SS Azur directly after you've visited the Pokémon Centre following your Gym battle.”

So I had gone to the Coumarine Gym, challenged, battled with Fletchinder, and won. The Plant Badge hung in my badge case, heavy with responsibility and the four badges that marked my independence. The only question was... was it enough?

Coumarine City was nice for a seaside city, and there wasn't a lot to say about it. Dr du Bois would have given it a lot more description. Being the teenager I am, Coumarine to me was summarised as: great food, nice view, and a great marketplace.

Plus, a cruise ship.

The SS Azur was bloody huge. It looked sleek and modern, without any great chimneys but still looked a behemoth of a ship. Lifeboats and those lifebuoys studded every railing on the deck, and on the ship's hull was painted in flouring text, its name and a few numbers. Guards surrounded the
Beside me, Shauna frowned at the crowd being managed by a pair of guards. “How are we supposed to get there?”

“...I think Dr du Bois meant for you to distract them,” I commented as I saw a retinue headed by Morelle walking up. The slimy bastard was smiling and making small chatter.

“What should I do?” Shauna hissed to me. “Serena's better at these things than I am.”

I looked at her. “Actually... Dr du Bois said that he was buying a Krookodile.”

Blink. Blink.

“We froze his garden, watched his house...” I waved my hand. “But... Léa might be Krook-food-”

Shauna’s back snapped straight. She immediately charged, striding with her pigtails waving in her wake, and I headed for the gang-plank. The guards was distracted with the echo of a slap and shouting started in Kalosian, loud and personal as I climbed up, safely in the background.

I didn't know what 'fils de salope' meant, but Shauna using it couldn't be good.

Dr du Bois was on the deck, as she stated. She was by the big bow thing, the place where you stand right at the ship’s head, and leaning back on a reclining deck-chair. Her buttoned shirt and tan shorts ended with sock-clad feet, and she looked up at me with curious eyes. “Good afternoon.”

I paused. Then I realised that the plan was already in motion. “Hi. I'm Donar Oak.”

Dr du Bois arranged her hands demurely in her lap as she sat up. She was... well, elegant. Her face was generic and rather plain, plainly pretty but not outstanding except by the sheer force of her personality. Seeing her act in another way was like seeing a stranger for the first time. “Marguerite Linden du Bois. Bonjour, Monsieur Oak. You are with le professeur Sycamore, yes?”

“Erm... Donar, please.” I stuttered. “You're... you know Professor Sycamore?”

“Indeed. I am an associate professor of sociology at the École Normale Supérieure d'Illumis. He does talk about his students... occasionally.”

I snorted involuntarily. “That sounds like him.”

A vacant expression of amusement came over her face; how did she manage to make herself familiar and alien at the same time? “Interesting. Your friend distracted the crowd with her accost of Achillée Morelle, buying you a distraction to sneak aboard. I wonder what would happen if I were to summon a crew.”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Sheesh. No need to be hostile. I'll just be on my way.”

“You shouldn't be,” Dr du Bois said, rising up. “Well, I’d better go now. I don't want to interrupt your tête-à-tête with Madame Shirona.”

I gaped at her as she left in a waft of flowers, trying to decipher her meaning. I comprehended as around the corner, on the other corridor beside the one Dr du Bois departed through was Cynthia, Champion of the Sinnoh region.

Grey eyes narrowed on me gaping. “Excuse me?”
“I- I’m so sorry,” I babbled. “It's just, well, you look a bit like... someone I know, erm, well, I'll just be on my way, sorry- oh, come on!”

I had fumbled, tripping on air and spilling my Holo Caster and PokéDex onto the deck floor. Cynthia helped me up, the two of us scrambling for the fallen electronics.

A glaze came over her eyes as she held up my PokéDex. “Wow, this brings back some memories.”

“Erm, my PokéDex...” I echoed lamely.

“Oh! Of course.” She handed it to me. “Pardon me, but what's your name?”

“I'm Donar, Donar Oak,” I babbled. Sure, I had talked to Daisy Linden, but Daisy was... well, she had a link to Dr du Bois. She was Kalosian, around my age. She was more or less familiar. Cynthia was like, world-famous. “Not related to Professor Oak, really. Though my family's from Kanto. We moved to Kalos before I started my journey.”

“Oh!” Cynthia exclaimed. “I'll be sure to remember that name! My name is Cynthia. I'm a Trainer just like you.”

“Yeah,” I nodded furiously. “Erm, I was at the Parfum Conference, I saw you. Well, Professor Sycamore sent me there with his colleague, something about... politics. I wasn't really interested. I'm not a stalker, really.”

“Well, that's something we have in common, then,” Cynthia airily said. “I've been studying Pokémon mythology lately, just out of curiosity. At Parfum Palace, for example, there are statues of two powerful Pokémon. Have you seen it already? According to myth, they were extremely powerful Pokémon. Who knows? You may encounter something like it while you're travelling with your PokéDex.”

“Right,” I agreed. “Erm... Zekrom and Reshiram, right? Truth and ideals? The guide at Parfum Palace was going on about its three hundred years of history and the depiction of Reshiram and Zekrom.”

Cynthia nodded. “The history of Kalos is very... interesting. Very bloody and tragic, of course, but also very entertaining.”

She paused. “I'm sorry, it's... rather new and interesting and the upcoming event about a Zapdos sea burial being conducted at the Sea Spirit's Den on the itinerary kept me occupied.”

“Of course,” I said despite my ignorance and surprise. “There was a Zapdos at Shalour City. What are the chances that...?”

I trailed off when the Sinnoh Champion considered me. “You saw Zapdos? Zapdos is a legendary Pokémon.”

“I have it on good authority that there is, in fact, more than one Zapdos...” I trailed off at her sharpening stare, “...but what are the odds that they are the same?”

“More likely than a person seeing two different Zapdos in their lifetime. A Zapdos died, and they are giving it a sea burial...?”

Cynthia's lips parted. Her eyes were overcome in a sort of manic gleam. I got the sudden feeling that, if I introduced the Sinnoh Champion to Dr du Bois, they would take over the world. That thought kept me way occupied until the sun set. “How... strange. As if they have something to hide... when I
came to the Riviera, I had no expectations aside from politics and history, hardly even Pokémon mythology. But this... this is a mystery.”

The Riviera was the line flowing down from Coumarine to Ambrette; the coastal line of Kalos. It encompassed the entirety of the Muraille Coast, and the line was also referred to as the Côte d’Azur. The SS Azur would be taking a circular path through the Azure Bay, before turning back to go up the Vin River to end its cruise at Lumiose City. Aboard it, Achillée Morelle had planned a minor sudden-death Pokémon battle tournament, music, dance, and a history exhibition centred around the legend of heroes, headed nicely by Wikstrom's donation to the Lumiose Museum. Now, Wikstrom led me towards the centrepiece.

“The box of Gilles de Rais was clearly meant to store documents, being lined with resin in the Eastern tradition,” Wikstrom stated. “It tallies with the near-certain view that Kalos was invaded by invaders from possibly as far as the Sevii Islands, perhaps even from the Indigo continental shelf too. So the Museum curator tells me.”

“But, you said that it has not been tested,” I pointed out.

“See for yourself,” he indicated the box laid on the podium. It was made of dark wood, inlaid with a round cabochon that gleamed dimly, untouched by centuries of dust. It had been cleaned, certainly, yet I could not smell lemon or vinegar or chemicals.

“Has it been authenticated?” I demanded.

“No...”

“Why?”

“My ancestor laid a curse upon this box,” Wikstrom confessed. “Tis truly powerful, to stop anyone from even touching or opening the box.”

I peered closer. “Gilles de Rais, the dark blade of Jeanne. What a trap.”

“Trap?”

“Consider the possibility of an incredibly long-lived Pokémon.” I paused, considering the cabochon. “So you intend to display a cursed box from Gilles de Rais as part of 'secret documents'. I'm sure your insurance company was very happy that the box came with its own in-built security, Wikstrom.”

“Then what do you think it is?” Wikstrom asked.

“I would gamble that this stone is the key,” I pointed. “Oblong, carvings, and old. Possibly a Dark-type Pokémon. Balance of probabilities. What kind of Pokémon is old, very long-lived, bored enough to guard something like this box, and small enough to fit in a stone?”

“A Ghost-type?” Wikstrom exclaimed. “That is-”

“Not going to help,” I sighed, lifting the box carefully. “These words on the pattern could give us a clue.”

“Words?”

“Yes,” I looked to Wikstrom. “The Unown alphabet travelled to Kalos via the Deçolorois naval
invasion in the XIII century, it could be a transformed derivative of that original alphabet, not even accounting for regional accents or syntax change.”

“Hey, you!” A man in a lab coat bustled up to us. “You need to put down the exhibit, miss!”

“My apologies, Dr Ancolie,” Wikstrom persuaded. “Dr du Bois is merely an acquaintance of mine I have requested take a look.”

“Has the standards of the history department fallen so far that a restoration expert that reading simple Unown has them completely lost?” I interrupted him. “You, which professor do you work under?”

“P- Professor Marron-” Ancolie stuttered. “I work at the Lumiose Museum!”

“No one of that name works in the history department, much less the Museum.” I pointed out. “The Lumiose Museum is attached to the École Normale Supérieure d'Illumis, I would know you, and you would know to fear Associate Professor Linden du Bois. So, either you're in the wrong department, or you fail as a historian... or you're not a restorer at all.”

A beat of silence, before the man off like a bat out of hell. Before Wikstrom could tackle the intruder, the intruder backed up, tripping over his shoes in fright before he was lifted bodily by an unseen force and flung back to hit face-first before my bowed shoes.

“Nice job, Metagross” the grey-haired man in a suit beside the giant steel Pokémon complimented.

“Metagross?” I commented. “A pseudo-legendary Pokémon, native to the Hoenn region, and the final form of the Beldum line, exclusively under the ownership of the Stone family located in Rustboro City. The Rustboro City authorities once tried to have the family's Beldum colony declared as city property, and thus subject to their control.”

“Well, that's a rather cynical and accurate way of summing up my identity,” the grey-haired man bowed. “My name is Steven Stone. I'm here representing the Devon Corporation. We're displaying our own historical artefacts.”

“Bonjour, Monsieur Stone. I am Marguerite Linden du Bois, associate professor of sociology at the École Normale Supérieure d'Illumis. I'm attached to the Sycamore Research Laboratory at present to do some fieldwork,” I summarised my name and purpose. “Wikstrom was kind enough to invite my students and myself upon this cruise to view the treasures of his family being displayed, amongst others. I trust that this is enjoyable.”

Stone laughed. “Oh, yes. I'm especially looking forward to the legendary crown of Kalos being displayed, even in such a formal setting. Is it true that all known types of evolutionary stones were embedded upon it by the Roi-Soleil?”

“Yes,” I replied, attempting not to intimidate the younger Stone or give him any impression that I was anything other than an academic. “I had students do a group presentation on you once during a course on historical continuity with regards to class differences.”

“I am... flattered?”

“Yes,” I replied, attempting not to intimidate the younger Stone or give him any impression that I was anything other than an academic. “I had students do a group presentation on you once during a course on historical continuity with regards to class differences.”

“I am... flattered?”

“You should be. They were very glowing on your Pokémon Navigator and how its introduction into professional Pokémon Training graduated battles into a match of strategy and tactics.” I forbore to comment on the political science students who were rather more scathing of him.

Stone pondered for a moment. “So what were Pokémon battles before the PokéNav, if you would pardon my asking?”
“I cannot say for everyone, although the prevailing academic assumption was as a blood sport,” I demurred.

“Well, it would be a somewhat rudimentary assumption to factor in,” Stone agreed. “Not one that everyone agrees with, but an accurate enough idea.”

“Not everyone in academia can be a competitive Trainer at the same time,” I admitted. “I aim to change that with my research.”

“Hence your occupation with a research laboratory specialising in Mega Evolution,” Stone concluded.

Oh, the man was good. Admiration rose in me where Wallace had invited dismissal. “Due to its affiliation with the École Normale Supérieure, my work and that of Mega Evolution are somewhat tied.”

“I remember,” Stone commented in a tone of flatness. “You reviewed Dr Yew’s article of Teams Magma and Aqua being a greater reflection of the great economic inequality shared between the desert-dwelling and sea-dwelling population as a result of Devon Corporation. 'Economic nationalism', was it? It made the Hoenn Swellow.”

I blinked. I hadn’t expected him to have read Yew’s work; I hadn’t even heard that the article I edited and reviewed made the Hoenn region’s premier centre newspaper. It was... not exactly politically correct in Hoenn. Dr Yew herself had received quite the backlash that had nearly endangered her position at the Rustboro University of Hoenn. “Yes, I did. Dr Yew is not very popular in Hoenn, as she led me to understand.”

“You supported her conjecture that Devon Corporation cripples rather than strengthens Hoenn’s economic base,” Stone now looked rather more upset, though it was hidden very artfully. “The resulting fallout scared off any chance of a merger with Silph Corporation.”

“An inconvenient truth,” I allowed. “Yet one that must be said, monsieur. I apologise if our peer-reviewed papers spoke an observation that was damaging to your company. However, I cannot apologise for making them. If I recall, Devon Corporation turned to Unova for negotiation regarding the lifting of cotton tariffs afterwards, and cotton became more widespread.”

Stone frowned. “Yes. We’re now getting our Cottonee cotton supplies in from Unova and preparing to merge our supply chain. Unova supplies most of the world’s Cottonee cotton, where else could we go?”

“I would think that Wurmple silk would be adequate material to be used,” I observed.


“I imagine that I should be the one asking the question, monsieur,” I smilingly bit back.

“Not a lot of sociologists visit exclusive historical exhibits, I imagine,” Stone commented, his voice deceptively light.

“Sociology and anthropology have the same historical roots, tracing back towards the study of history,” I pointed out. “Samuel Oak tends to take a scientific view towards anthro-Pokémon relations, using hard ecologically based data from the natural sciences to justify a common link between humans and Pokémon. I use the social sciences to prove my studies of Pokémon Trainers, and by extension Pokémon, in society.”
“I’m sure you take your work very seriously,” Steven Stone replied with a small smile playing around his lips. It was a small, ineffectual effort. Sociology is not a real science, it screamed. My field of current choice was one of the misunderstood and underestimated amongst the social sciences; people do have a great tendency to neglect that which questions the powers that be.

“I do,” I loftily replied. “I advised Dr Yew to change her argument that Devon Corporation did indeed play a part, however minor, into the political geography of the Hoenn region with respect to economic imbalances, but Dr Yew felt that it was criticising too harshly upon Devon Corporation. A shame; perhaps had she done so, the fallout would have been worth it.”

Steven Stone opened his mouth, but was temporarily distracted as a familiar besuited man sidled up to us. “Mr Stone,” Achillée Morelle commented. “I see you’ve met the redoubtable Dr du Bois.”

“Mr Morelle,” Stone acknowledged. It was a touch cold, perhaps. “Thank you very much for lending us your ship for both events.”

“It was a pleasure,” Morelle’s eyes were half-lidded. “It does us good to pay our respects to the lost god of lightning.”

“Excusez-moi?” I asked.

“A Zapdos fell during the Shalour landslide,” Stone explained with a touch of patronisation. “The Ranger Union have concluded its tests, and to prevent illicit use of its bones or to commit offence to the reported Moltres and Articuno, they’re sending it out to the Sea Spirit's Den. Mr Morelle offered to make it a Viking funeral.”

“How interesting,” I commented faintly. “Complete with flames midway at sea?”

“Yes, of course.” Morelle was standing by the side, smirking despite himself and hands in his pockets. The line of good Kalosian tailoring was ruined by his hands inching towards his pockets. He’d just got himself a legally sanctioned way to get rid of evidence at sea with the aegis of the Ranger Union; he would be smug. The bones of a Zapdos, a legendary Pokémon, due for cremation out in the open sea, and presumably Léa Morelle with it? It was a clever plan by half. Very clever.

I activated my Holo Caster. After a moment of pondering, I decided on the appropriate message.

Fires on the high seas tend to erase evidence very easily, with the body of a thunder god.

Steven Stone is a man to be admired, partly for his sangfroid in the face, partly for his role in our little drama, and mainly because he accepted over a million Poké in insurance and damages during the subsequent rescue of Léa Morelle. I believe that Champion Cynthia and he could have a meaningful relationship. I shall be watching Steven Stone's life very closely; the man could out-muscle Silph Co. one day.

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know about Cynthia, but I imagines that she dons a nice personality each time she talks to a new Pokémon Trainer. It's like she's partly tsudere sometimes.
Here, though, I tried to make it like Donar is not low-educated, since he's been hanging out with a loquacious professor for months.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
XXX: Recevoir - To Receive

Chapter Summary

I pondered as mints and coffee were served. “If you must, toss them overboard.”

I could not finish hearing what the men said, even through the Houndoom growls and screeches of Murkrow, for I felt a strong hand on my shoulder. Almost immediately after, Frogadier's screech rang in my ears as the floor left my feet and I realised, alongside Serena's terrible scream, that I had been thrown overboard, looking at the one who had done this, with his garnet eyes and tall ears and expressionless face.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Savoir-faire – To Know and To Do

X XX: Recevoir – To Receive

Day 69: Most of the work through yesterday and the day before involved reconnaissance work. It took a while, but I had finally located Pumpkaboo within the ship. The Pumpkin Pokémon might not have human contact other than their captors, but it could send messages via Pokémon telepathy, albeit abbreviated ones. The implications that Achillée Morelle were onto us were disturbing; perhaps the Morelle as a whole held Sableye blood in their veins.

The worst, and best, piece of news I had gotten as well: the sudden announcement, that not only was Ramos onboard, he had brought Siebold with him...

Ramos was saved from my accosting by Guillaume Gagné. To be more accurate, an undercover Woten Oak accosted me with a gun pressed to my sacrum.

“Why, bonsoir,” I began once the man had discreetly pressed me away from the main crowd in the exhibition hall of insured antiquities into a side room, presumably a box-room meant for storage, and the gun was in front of me instead of threatening severe spinal damage. “Monsieur Gagné?”

“Cut the crap, Doctor,” Woten Oak growled. “Why are you here?”

“Pardonnez-moi? ” I falsely answered. “I was unaware that a scholar could not take an interest in matters outside of her field of study.”

“Dr Marguerite Linden du Bois,” M. Oak patiently continued. “I know you know who I am. If you are working for Morelle, and you have Donar onboard, I promise you will not survive this cruise. Now. Where. Is my. Son.”

“...The situation for the first caveat happens to be the complete opposite,” I answered, watching his black gun, held in a meaty fist ending in the cuffs unique to Kalosian haute couture. “The latter caveat, unfortunately, is true. Yet I must add that the situation fell into the rescue of the Morelle girl.”
Woten Oak stared.

“‘It appears that you do not know,’ I added. ‘Léa Morelle and your son share... an acquaintance. Mademoiselle Morelle is, unfortunately, detained at the expense of her uncle aboard the Azur at the moment. I believe that she might be shipped out along with the Zapdos corpse aboard this ship for its funeral by boat, and presumably burnt along with the corpse.’”

At this, Woten Oak's face took on an interesting sheen. “Intelligence said that Morelle was trafficking the Zapdos corpse to Unova.”

I could feel an eyebrow twitching. “Some targets are too recognisable to traffic, and a Zapdos corpse is assuredly being kept under view by the Ranger Union's agents.”

“Achillée Morelle is a known supplier,” Woten Oak stubbornly insisted. “Particularly of Pokémon body parts. Transporting a Zapdos wholesale to be chopped up and sold for some inane, superstitious reason and desecrating a Pokémon corpse at the same time to prevent their reincarnation is exactly what he would do.”

“I see you're a believer in that Sinnoh myth,” I observed. I wonder how he would react when faced with the Lumiose Museum's taxidermied Pokémon. “That does not, however, solve the dilemma of Léa Morelle and your son.”

“I thought as an authority figure, you were supposed to stop them,” he accused me.

“Without my input, I am very assured that they would have gone about their merry way, gotten caught, and you would have dredged perhaps a finger from Route 13,” I replied. “This way, I have organised three Elite Four members aboard the Azur for my assistance.”

Woten Oak's eyebrows shot up. “Wikstrom?”

I did not reply directly. “Your gun, monsieur, will be a distraction if I have to slap you out of this box-room.”

He tucked it away.

I slapped him, charging out with vitriol spewing from my lips in a full effect. This also had the effect of drawing all attention to M. Gagné rushing out of the box-room, charging to me as Wikstrom strode up. For a chevalier, Wikstrom can and would fight dirty. He punched the man; I winced. Those gauntlets would *hurt*.

Either way, Wikstrom's diatribe of insulting the honour of a lady did not go remiss while Serena, Donar and Noël Duval snuck out of the exhibit room. There were security cameras to worry about, or there would have been if I had not already posted Darkrai and Altair on the case.

I hope they were having a better time of it than I, at least. So I thought when Wikstrom was literally going to fight bare-handed and Siebold had to intervene. The chef was surprisingly competent at Savate.

The night before we enacted what I called Operation Rescue Léa, and the Kalosian press called the impromptu arrest of Achillée Morelle on kidnapping and attempted murder, was pretty sleepless for Dr du Bois. She was poring over schematics of the SS Azur that I had no idea how she got on such short notice, and didn't want to know.

“What could happen?” it was a light-hearted joke, but then Dr du Bois fixed me with a glare.
“We could drown, and our bodies rot, and until we float up and reach some dry land no one would ever find any of us.” Dr du Bois detailed. “Plus, your friend would die.”

So I was the only one who went to sleep upon orders, turning in with a light shining through the adjoining door where Dr du Bois kept her own room in the Hotel Coumarine.

I dreamt that we were in a three-on-three battle.

I was seeing that Delphox again, this time strutting on the field in an elaborate kabuki move. It was unlike Elmo; where Serena's partner started and ended with efficiency and power, this Delphox seemed to focus more on showmanship and fighting dirty. Some of the moves, such as using Future Sight without command, was really frowned upon, and it appeared not to have been remarked upon. The Delphox had also snuck in a Sunny Day during a delay where it strutted around the battlefield to taunt its opposing Toxicroak, who was still and not attacking from surprise. I could see its aura of power, much of it controlled, tamed to be cast if only to sucker the opponent into a loss.

“Can y'all control your beasties, gal?” my opponent scowled.

His face morphed, though, when the Future Sight knocked the Toxicroak right out.

“Excellent, Delphi,” I praised, the words foreign on my lips as the Delphox gave a curtsy. “It's your turn, Deneb!”

Deneb turned out to be the Venusaur, who faced an Electivire. The Electivire was about to rush during the prep time for Solar Beam, but the Solar Beam, surprisingly, hit extremely fast and powerful enough to send it flying out of the battlefield.

“Damn... it's your turn, Roserade!” my opponent commanded to the Bouquet Pokémon he summoned. “Roserade, she's downed Toxicroak and Electivire by cheating, we definitely won't let her win!”

“Cheating?” My voice sounded cool. “The League battle regulations state that, as long as the moves hit after the declaration of battle, it is permissible. The fact that it caught you off guard was merely good strategy. Now, Deneb... let us finish this.”

I could feel my arm lift, and I was wearing some sort of black manacle, the stone set into it shining with hidden light.

“Deneb... Earthquake.”

I awoke.

I had no idea what any of that meant; why I had a Delphox and a Venusaur, named Delphi and Deneb respectively, when that Delphox had skirted tournament regulations and when that Venusaur evolved. I was shaking; the memory somehow tinged with a bitter sweetness that made no sense to my conscious mind.

I got out of my bed and the sheets I tossed about; around me, my Pokémon slept peacefully. I was the only one affected with this curse of Darkrai... or was it something else?

I tried to make sense: throughout the Azur infiltration; after I got away from Cynthia, even now as we searched the storage area of the ship while Dr du Bois played her merry hell upon its other passengers.

“We should split up,” Noël said. “Keep your Holo Casters on for quick message.”
“Right...” I nodded. “Serena?”

“I- I’m following.” Serena swallowed. “I can't see in the dark.”

“Neither can I. What makes you think I can see in the dark?”

“Well, you hang out with that creep. Maybe you learned something.”

“Yeah, about babysitting and cooking on an open fire. Not night vision. How does anyone learn night vision, anyway?”

“Children,” Noël sighed. “Just keep it down.”

“Sorry.” We said together.

Serena and I left Noël, spreading from the storage area out towards the decks. Crates and boxes and barrels surrounded us, mainly wood or plastic or steel painted over in plain colours. Some of those looked awfully like... a large cage.

By the back of my belt, a Pokéball burst open, calling Frogadier by my side.

“Thank you,” I whispered, reaching down to give Frogadier a pat on the back. “Watch my back, please?”

"Fro, gadier, fro," he rumbled. “Fro?”

I looked at what Frogadier indicated; a large, glided coffin of black lacquered wood, with gold gilt. There were no guards, but the glimpses of red lights in the darkness seemed like there were electronic eyes upon it.

“What's going on?” Serena demanded behind me.

“We found the Zapdos corpse. Turn back. Léa should be somewhere around.”

A few steps later, I bumped into a crate, stifling my gasp as the pain shot across my hipbone. “Ow...”

A hissing imparted around my knee, before a miniature orange light glowed. I blinked as a ring of blue-white flame appeared, precisely circling it-

Pumpkaboo spat, ignoring us in favour of the ambush that had surrounded it. Around it, little vines crept out of the ground, defending the little Pumpkin Pokémon. Several Pawniard were apparently congregating on the little Pumpkaboo, warily skirting the ring of vines that they could cut, at great cost to themselves.

“Heracross!” I called my newest Pokémon, who blinked in the dimness but growled. “Brick Break!”

The Pawniard scattered, about to attack physically when the Will-O-Wisp descended upon them. Something like sandpaper echoed, and it took a while before I realised that they were screams of pain. An additional flare of purple light glowed, lighting on blonde hair-

“Léa?!?” I called.

“Donar?” Léa poked her head out of the shadows, nervous. “Oh, stars. Donar, Serena!”

“Well, looks like that woman was right,” Serena admitted grudgingly. “Are you alright?”
Léa nodded stiffly. “Uncle- Morelle, Achillée Morelle, he locked me in his basement. Then he put me in a crate and got me onto this... where are we?”

I looked around. The storage area was small... definitely smaller than what I thought, and if what I thought was true... “We're in a separate boat,” I realised. “The same boat that's going to float out Zapdos, and you, Léa, and then... those crates...”

“Donar?!” Serena's cry cut off as I tore towards a crate beside a barrel.

“Heracross, please help me open this,” I called.

“Herc!” A Brick Break splintered wood to release the contents of it; several packets of some flat, dry substance.

“Black stone?” Serena picked one up.

“Charcoal,” I grimly confessed, checking out the barrel. “Gasoline, and a starter. We can catch up after we get out of this explosive situation.”

“R- Right.” Léa grabbed Pumpkaboo, running out alongside me.

We were nearly out to the deck when the howls of Houndoom echoed.

“There must be financial records.”

Around us, our Pokémon were eating, which was good since I had only six Pokémon to feed; Aegis was self-sufficient in that I didn't need to give him food, and I had dumped Jelly into the sea before boarding the Azur. The salt-water environment would do her a world of good. Both our Aegislash; my Aegis and Wikstrom's Joyeuse, hung around.

Wikstrom blinked from his hachis parmentier. “Excusez-moi?”

“The unfortunate Mr Gagné,” I referred to the undercover International Police agent in the ship's infirmary, “was investigating the possible trafficking of that Zapdos corpse by our gracious host. He must have been paid half beforehand, or why would anyone try a crime of such magnitude? Especially a cautious man. I'm thinking a ballpark of ten million. Minimum.”

“A financial transaction of such a magnitude to an individual is suspect,” Wikstrom nodded. “Say that you are right, and the company is being used to process the transaction. It's merely a matter of investigating, yes?”

“Not with Steven Stone aboard,” I looked around the dining room. Men in suits, mainly; most of the children had elected for either an early or late dinner, while I played the crowds and Mr Morelle. There must be no connection. “How many people are there?”

Wikstrom joined me, after glowering towards Morelle and Grimsley. “Too many people. Scholars like yourself, a few – certified – professors from the Musée d’Illumis, too afraid of you to approach.”

I snorted into my helping of hachis. “Unsurprising. I see law school types, and a law professor. Lawyers around Steven Stone, too.”

“And?”

“This is a buyout,” I concluded. “No witnesses, no reporters... secret negotiations to be under way presumably after the act.”
Even if Léa Morelle could be rescued, there was the problem of the rest of the cruise. I had no desire to be continually running around a limited space from Morelle's guards, nor of dragging anyone down with him. Any leeway would allow the man to escape, and some men were like Lysandre Fleur-de-Lis. If I had my way, Morelle would not survive his cruise.

First steps first.

I considered my options. Cynthia was peering – rather indiscreetly, I might add – towards my direction. Steven Stone was dining with the Sinnoan Champion; they looked awkward, rather like a couple on their first date. The Lumiose Museum staff were trying to shy away from our table; I caught sight of one doing the opposite, and vaguely recalled an undergraduate beginning on his honours thesis.

Was Cynthia with Stone in this? Certainly unwitting, if she were; Steven Stone was, and is, many things, but stupid was not one of them.

A few movers and shakers, including the Deçolorois millionaire from the Casino Bord de Mer. The best odds were the millionaire, but how would I go about it...? Was it a good idea? Back-burner first.

Darkrai floated out of my shadow. Almost at once, Wikstrom's Klefki and Scizor stopped eating for a pause, before the entirety of Wikstrom's team went back to their meal. It spoke well for their awareness, especially when Phantump floated to my lap.

“You'll love the St. Honoré cake,” I told him as the server escorted a large, sugary confection up. The classic dessert was a circle of puff pastry at its base, with a ring of pâte à choux piped on the outer edge. After the base is baked small cream puffs are dipped in caramelized sugar and attached side by side on top of the circle of the pâte à choux. Crème chiboust was present within, I knew.

“*Il est avec vous, madame?*” the server asked.

“*Oui,*” I answered. “*C'est bien?*”

The server shook his head. “*Qui dormait ici, madame ?*”

I could get behind the sentiment.

What did he say? Darkrai asked, already starting on his portion of the zest-infused dessert.

“He said that people who sleep here deserves what's coming to them,” I replied. “Gallows humour, that one. The ship is big enough to isolate the Bad Dreams ability into either here or the exhibition hall.”

Of course. Impression of hostility resolved, Darkrai turned back to his St. Honoré cake. *This is very good,* he declared with the air of an explorer.

“And the fact that you are on a ship once more?”

A strange feeling. Like a new adventure. A pondering silence ensued. *I am very lucky. The taste of liberty at hand, aboard a conveyance to another world, not knowing what was coming, better or worse.*

The Oran zest soured on my tongue, pleasantly flavourful. I hummed, licking the crème off of my dessert spoon. Life was rather peaceful. I shared the rest of my dessert with Phantump, who crooned at me.
The mind of Altair was a marvel, blue-steeled and tempered as a honed blade might have been even in telepathic communication. Léa Morelle is onboard. I also sensed the boy and girl, along with Noël Duval. They bumped into a portable first-aid kit along the railings; it contains bags of pressurised blood, transfusion tubes, and a portable operating theatre, possibly. Why so much equipment?

I did not like the idea of the Duval heir-apparent so close to my protégé; yet, it was so. Very well. Léa Morelle had been located, and so had the Zapdos corpse. Donar and Serena would not keep Léa in the lurch, despite my plan; they would rescue her, as I knew Noël Duval would follow. Then, when primed...

The security onboard found them. Houndoom and Murkrow, as predicted, though the Murkrow have been convinced.

“Use the bagged blood as a distraction,” I pondered as mints and coffee were served. “If you must, toss them overboard.”

“Return, Heracross! Frogadier, Water Pulse!”

The blue spheres hit at the same time as the red light containing Heracross made it back to the Pokéball. It was lucky, too; the Fire Blast would have impacted quickly and sent the storage area, along with most of the ship, up in flames.

“Spout, Rapid Spin!” Serena told her Wartortle, who complied to knock over a bunch like so many bowling pins. A Murkrow screeched overhead on its dive, but other than that the dark birds seemed to hang around as bloody sirens through the background noise.

“Leech Seed,” Léa commanded, watching the vines sprout around us. “Oh no, we're trapped-”

“Kill them,” came the war cry.

Frogadier released more Water Pulses, but the Houndoom kept advancing, burning through the flimsy vines that clung no more than a hindrance. Frogadier tossed Spikes; they kept coming.

“W- What do we do?” Serena nervously whispered as Will-O-Wisp surrounded us. Léa's eyes burned bright as she cast the flames with a flick of her wrist, yet the ghostly conflagration burned out against a giant Fire Blast that we narrowly dodged.

“They're Fire-types, right?” I blinked. “Will-O-Wisp doesn't... work...”

The howls increased in volume, earning a collective cringe. “They realised it,” Léa panted, slumping against the railing. “What do we do now? Wait for the fiery death?”

Against the night sky, surrounded by smoking wood and the char of a horde of Houndoom about to barbecue us, a ray of light I saw. Then a sphere of light flew, striking Léa. Blood flecked the railings, and I felt the cold liquid strike my skin. The splash echoed in my ears, but I could not feel, could not think in the chaos as my friend disappeared into the inky blackness of the Azure Bay.

Pumpkaboo screamed as both of them went over the deck with a splash.

“The girl is-”

I could not finish hearing what the men said, even through the Houndoom growls and screeches of Murkrow, for I felt a strong hand on my shoulder. Almost immediately after, Frogadier's screech rang in my ears as the floor left my feet and I realised, alongside Serena's terrible scream, that I had
been thrown overboard, looking at the one who had done this, with his garnet eyes and tall ears and expressionless face.

The face that only a Lucario could produce.

---

It is a truism that Pokémon Trainers are glory-seekers. It is true that, sometimes, Pokémon training can be regarded as barbaric, a blood sport.

Even so, it must be said, that a battle of powerful Trainers were akin to miniature armies clashing for supremacy. The only way not to have innocents caught in the crossfire... was to excuse them first.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
XXXI: Déduire - To Deduce

Chapter Summary

“I am here to help you,” I laced my fingers. “Let us talk about angels, M. Stone. Specifically, let us discuss Morelle Shipping.”

“I am going to kill him,” I spoke to nothing in particular. It didn't change anything. Altair, and more tangentially Dr du Bois, had still thrown us overboard the Azur.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 70 (AM): Amazing, the little degrees of relaxation one can have while executing a well-planned assault. Especially without children to account for.

The moment Altair had flung the children overboard the SS Azur towards safety, Cynthia Shirona and Steven Stone approached our table.

“Mr de Rais, Madame du Bois,” Cynthia acknowledged as she approached us. She wore a little black dress in place of her signature trench coat. “Good evening.”

Ever the preux chevalier, Wikstrom stood in acknowledgement to bow over Cynthia's hand and then shake hands with Stone. “Bonsoir, Madame Shirona, Monsieur Stone. Comment allez-vous ?”

“Bien, merci.” Stone and I shook hands, before Cynthia and I shook hands. His accent was atrocious; he must have picked it up from Jumpluff Lingo. “Et vous?”

“Comme ci, comme ça,” I answered. “Did you enjoy the exhibits, monsieur et madame?”

“Oh, yes,” Stone nodded. “Seeing the Couronne de l’Arbre was very enjoyable. Nine stones cut into cabochons and set into a single coronet, the largest portable collection of every known evolutionary stone of medieval eras. Is the Everstone set within?”

“It is, or so I've read,” I agreed. “The symbolism of the crown was supposed to represent the unchanging state in the face of the world's facets. It was unsuccessful, but it did produce a pretty historical trinket in the end.”

“Really?” Cynthia commented. “I was more absorbed in Monsieur de Rais's donation of documents regarding Jeanne la Pucelle. I understand that they have not been translated?”

“There is a Spiritomb in guard over the documents, a remnant of an ancestor's curse,” Wikstrom explained in a matter-of-fact tone. “From what I have managed to glean, though, I believe that Jeanne d’Arc enjoyed St Honoré cake, the same recipe that was served today aboard the Azur. Did you enjoy it?”

“Very much,” Stone agreed. “The food is certainly a bonus to this trip.”

“If I may enquire-” I began.
“Of course,” Stone inclined his head towards me. “Why did I come to Kalos, yes?”

“Hardly,” I shook my head. “Your reasons for travel is yours alone. No, what I wanted to enquire was aboard the Azur.”

“Aboard the Azur?”

“The Zapdos funeral must be covered by the press,” I commented. “Look, over there. That boy's a journalism major with an internship at the Lumiose Press.”

Steven Stone twitched. “I see.”

“Morelle Shipping is looking to sell, I understand it,” I continued. “Wikstrom, weren't you looking to buy into it?”

“It would be promising,” Wikstrom neutrally replied.

“Pardon me.” Steven rose. “Ms. Shirona, my excuses. It seems that there is a call I have to make.”

Cynthia kept staring at me, even as Steven left. “You're... who are you?”

“Marguerite Linden du Bois,” I replied.

“Who are you?” Cynthia insisted, more certain. “You're with that Kalosian girl, aren't you? Daisy Linden, Marguerite Linden du Bois... this is Steven's chance to improve Hoenn's prospects!”

I felt my expression fall into neutrality. The Hoenn region was an embarrassment of paradoxes; with all the resources expected of an archipelago, and lagging behind most regions. As expected of most sea-dwelling communities, the hope for Hoenn's economic revival lay in trade. Air routes were always uncertain, given the migrations of Flying- and Dragon-type Pokémon; sea routes, established sea routes like the one through the Decolore Archipelago to the Azure Bay were rare, and foreign corporations were subject to restrictions. A local company like Morelle Shipping, though...

“If the Kalos League is looking to disrupt Hoenn's prospects, Ever Grande City is not going to back down on this,” Cynthia continued. “Lily of the Valley Island will use all of its strength-”

“Go on, then,” I riposted. “Of course, you'll risk a potential alliance between the Leagues of Hoenn and Sinnoh being public, prompting the Indigo League to apply sanctions before Unova and Kalos reunite in our traditional alliance, and thus restart the balance of powers that begun the Mondale Wars of the XIX century in the first place.”

In my peripheral, I spotted Stone talking into a PokéNav, his expression frustrated and unhappy as he presumably checked the stock exchange. He then made a call, sharp and angry. I turned my head to see Achillée Morelle on his Holo Caster, paling.

Surreptitiously, I sent a message on my own Holo Caster, to my next best friend. My stockbroker was worth every Poké I paid the man. With Morelle's attention focused, I made a wave, catching his eye. An exaggerated wink set the bait; I faked a yawn politely, waiting for Wikstrom to dismiss Cynthia and offer his escort.

“Merci, monsieur,” I replied.

Men were surrounding us loosely, waiting for when I stepped out. Instead, I found Steven Stone, homing onto the hunchbacked figure by a lone table.
“What do you want?” he demanded.

“I am here to help you,” I laced my fingers. “Let us talk about angels, M. Stone. Specifically, let us discuss Morelle Shipping.”

“I am going to kill him,” I spoke to nothing in particular. It didn't change anything. Altair, and more tangentially Dr du Bois, had still thrown us overboard the Azur.

Under me, Jelly burbled. Léa was perched on top of the bloody beast, shaken but otherwise rather unharmed, soaking wet with Pumpkaboo floating above. Serena was like me, clinging onto her Wartortle for dear life. Our Water-type Pokémon had hit the water at the same time we had landed and bounced on Jelly, thankfully saving us a lot of pain as we trod water, floating behind the ship.

“She planned this,” I realised.

“Who did?” scowled Serena. “I have salt and seaweed in unmentionable places now.”

“She was always going to fling Léa overboard,” I frowned. “Or something; she threw Jelly overboard not to let this menace feed on other Pokémon, but to get to us.”

“Whatever,” Serena cursed.

“Are you guys alright?” Léa sniffed.

“We're fine,” I glared at the Plimsolls painted onto the boat; it seemed to mock me, hovering above the sea level as it did. “You, Léa?”

“F-Fine,” Léa shakily drew a breath. “Was this planned?”

“Not with us.”

“G-Good,” Léa nodded, before a purple flare erupted from her fingers, bright in the gloom over the sea. “Is this D- Dr du Bois?”

“Yeah,” I sighed.

“Fro, fro,” mumbled Frogadier.

“Yes. She's a bit... tough.”

Léa nodded. “I am going to kill her.”

Serena opened her mouth, and that was when a series of gunshots went off. Some splashes followed, and as I looked up, I saw Siebold calmly and decisively fling some guy off of the sea to hit the water quickly. His head bobbed before he swore, the unknown man falling as the silhouettes of various Sharpedo started on him.

“...never mind,” Serena decided.

I was in a good mood. There was a spring in my step. I danced with Wikstrom, had a good time, and walked out just as Morelle’s guards started to gather on me.

Running from a horde of Pawniard was harder than expected. Murkrow hovered nearby, and the howls of Houndoom were physically painful to my hearing. I stumbled, and a man in black nearly
caught me before steel flashed and the man let go.

Twirling his knife, Siebold kicked, head-butted, and then defenestrated the man into the Azure Bay. “I'll hold them off here.”

“Thank you.” I stumbled past the decks and into cramped hallways, hallways were two Houndoom and their minders accosted me later.

“Come with us,” they said.

I was about to call my own when Ramos tapped one shoulder. The minder looked back with a snarl, faced a pair of giant shears, and then Ramos used the shears to knock him out.

“If you don't mind,” he bowed.

I started when a Weepinbell dropped onto the second guard before spores scattered around, and held my breath. The minder fell asleep with his Pokémon. The pair of Houndoom began to fall asleep too, and that was when the silvery powder took on a purplish tinge that was Poison Powder.

“Thank you,” I nodded to the Coumarine Gym Leader, running still, towards the largest public space on the entire ship, the one where the Zapdos corpse would be parked, in preparation of the largest burial of a non-Trained Pokémon open to the public.

The exhibition hall held low-hanging lights when I entered it through its side entrances. The coffin took pride of place, lying closed. Either side of the Zapdos corpse lay the valuables of Kalos; the Couronne de l'Arbre, the Kalosian monarchy's regalia, glittered on its right. On its left was the box containing documents from the first Baron de Rais, the kind used for keeping loose documents before the invention of codices and to prevent curvature damage from scrolling a work. Here, I also found Achillée Morelle.

“It's over,” I started.

Achillée Morelle jumped, looking at me with wide eyes. “Dr du Bois! Why, I thought you had met with a tragic accident at sea.”

“You men had a tragic accident with Siebold,” I answered. “You aren't doing this deliberately, I understand.”

“Of course you do. You did ruin my business with Devon Corporation, after all,” Achillée tilted his head. “Is this the part where I explain to you my plan?”

“Don't bother,” I answered. “I don't care.”

“Yet you intervened so much to save my estranged niece from merciful death,” Morelle answered, the thinness of his face harrowing in the dimness played off from the Couronne. “One would think that you have a saviour complex.”

“Perhaps,” I agreed. “I have a fundamental disapproval of plans that require the murder of a relative. She could have been your heir, you know.”

“What for?” Morelle laughed. “I have no son, no heirs. There's no need to prepare for the future. Merely to enjoy my power, and gain more, though my loyal servant fell at last.”

“Your loyal-?” I blinked. “The Zapdos?”
“With resources like the ones behind the Morelle, we tamed a Zapdos and set it loose on specific Trainers,” Morelle smirked. “Getting the lost of Trainers who had graduated from the Tower of Mastery was a daunting task, but we managed it with Korrina none the wiser. Of course, once I learned that the Couronne de l'Arbre was present, I needed to find for myself the *clé du voûte.*”

“Mega Evolution,” I realised. “You want the power of Mega Evolution. The Morelle and the Goutte-du-Sang would have had a rivalry, never mind that Lierre and Morelle have an ongoing rivalry stemming from historical distrust.”

Morelle clapped his hands slowly. “As expected of Professor Sycamore's associate. However, did you know this? The Kalosian crown, this one, is said to contain the key that unlocks the secret of Mega Evolution. The largest key ever found in the world naturally. Once the Couronne reaches Hoenn, and I disappear amidst the crowd in Lilycove, I will have unlocked the key.”

“The world's largest Key Stone,” I murmured.

“Yes, but first-” Morelle overturned the document box of Gilles de Rais. It bounced, shadows grew, and as the lights flickered, I saw it forming.

Haunter appeared, trying to drag me off, defend it from me, anything. Phantump was whimpering, eating Sitrus and Lum Berries and so on as they felt the pressure rising, the scope of fine control lost for the briefest of moments due to the mistake of one truly stupid man. The box had split; the Odd Keystone broken off.

Morelle was screaming; I ignored him to scoop up the box. It was large, of wood, the grain unseen under the lacquer but the scratchings clear, I could feel them as tiny notes. Bar lines, clefs, notes-

“Music?” I picked up the box. “Who writes music all over their notes?”

It was framed, I realised; the lines were barely perceivable in light, but the lacquer made their appearance to touch all the more vivid. I focused, wondering why would anyone frame their notes this way.

Morelle's screaming cut off, and I realised that the spectre of Brocken was expanding in my direction. I tried to flee, but my legs had sunk down, unmoving and rooted.

Haunter howled, and Phantump lingered. There were babies, they couldn't move. I couldn't leave them.

I would never leave. It hovered.

*Marguerite!* Darkrai howled mentally, somewhere far away where I had mandated him to take down the rest of Morelle's guards with Donar's father. *Marguerite! Don't die!*

Magnesium burned, the strontium ions colouring it red though it passed harmlessly through an ethereal body. It loomed, murderous and angry and unfettered now.

I clutched at the box. It was foolish, I know. A wish as foolish as yelling, when death was imminent...

The Spiritomb reared back, waiting, its presence not unlike a coiled snake.

… like a prayer. The song was a prayer, a hymn.

I had solved a mystery on less evidence and luck than I had gotten. There was nothing left but to try
the absurd, to hope that the decision to carve the musical notation of a hymn was not mere vanity on the part of Gilles de Rais, but a vital portion of taming the Spiritomb.

So my lips parted as I read the difficult notation, ignoring all of them to focus only upon the words that tripped off of my tongue.

They were strange, and yet familiar... like some trance had overtaken me. I was fully aware of what I was doing, though unsure as to the reason.

Fleurissent, les fleurs sauvages,
je te prie de m'en laisser voir la fin...
Des personnes sans âge,
se battent comme si c'était bien...
La vie, n'est pas infinie...

Je suis telle une fleur digne,
Que voyez-vous à partir de là?
Pourquoi les gens disent-ils,
qu'ils ne peuvent vivre sans signe?
Moi, je pense que, cela arrivera...

Quand la pluie d'été terminée,
Je n'oublie pas le passé,
Tu n'es pas seul avec toi-même.
Je me souviens de ton désarroi,
tremblant juste en face de moi,
Laissant, crier à l'intérieur ta peine...!

So this is the key, I reflected as shadows seemed to scatter in the lighting of the ship's exhibition hall. The key was written upon the vessel it was meant to protect, meant only for the eyes of Marshall Gilles de Rais. Gilles de Rais... he who loved Her Serene Highness, that even in death his words seemed to echo her wishes. Such arrogance, and such... devotion.

So that was where Wikstrom got it from.

The shadows clung onwards, though the hymn seemed to have calmed them. It trapped me there, the pages held within its flimsy vessel scattered to an ominous wind. Spiritomb laughed, its voice... not sinister, even for a Ghost as I mumbled through the words.

L'esprit foudroyé, te conduit à la mort,
Inutiles sont, les larmes jetées sur ton sort!
Les feuilles tombent sur tes secrets,
Tu t'éloignes, mais tu le sais,
Souviens-toi de ce que je disais...

Quand le soleil d'été est caché,
le vent va à nouveau chercher,
tout ce qui peut te ressembler.
Je chanterai à ta mémoire,
je te regarde sans te voir.
Ton nom est perdu, mais je chante...
Pour toi...

Euterpe recognised, a voice echoed in my head as the Odd Keystone fell from its setting and into my hand, surprisingly light. Pokémon telepathy...? Welcome back, madame. Monsieur has left me guarding his words to return to you.

The Spiritomb must date back towards the Century War, making it about seven hundred years old at minimum. It is senile. It must be.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics are written by Poucet, also featured on her YouTube channel as the French version of Euterpe, originally in Japanese by Egoist. Also the leimotif of Savoir-Faire.

Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
Floating on a Jellicent was a surprisingly difficult move. Maybe because Jelly was, like her namesake, bouncy and without footholds. Léa was balanced atop the Jellicent, but for Serena and I, we were reduced to clinging onto our Water-type Pokémon and floating for dear life towards the SS Azur because the pink menace didn't even lend a tentacle.

Léa looked to the floating tentacles under her perch, exhausted. "Is she poisonous?"

"Yes," I answered shortly. Frogadier blew a few bubbles in the seawater, and I kept quiet.

Serena had no such thoughts. "I'm going to kill her."

"I'll help," I groaned as we managed to get close to the hull. "Léa?"

"I..." Léa swallowed. "How did you guys find me?"

"Well..." I sighed, my anger cooling a bit. "Dr du Bois devised a plan after making sure that you'd be aboard. And then she threw us overboard in rescuing you."

"Oh," Léa subsided, before piping up, "I'm sure she had her reasons."

We reached a short hanging rope, each of us climbing up with help from our Pokémon. Frogadier and Squirt panted tiredly once their bodies hit the deck. Soaking wet, we shivered as a sea breeze passed us.

Serena began squeezing water from her skirt gingerly. "My clothes are ruined."

I gasped, squeezing my cap. My jacket and T-shirt clung to my skin, but at least I was warm... somewhat. "Everyone okay?"

The bangs and clatters echoed up and down the ship as I said, and I regretted it once I saw a dark figure fly over the deck railings. The slim blade of a chef's knife glimmered in the dark light, and then I saw Siebold of the Elite Four advance, a giant cannon hovering behind him.

I blinked at the shrimp holding the cannon. Then I felt stupid. Obviously it must be the evolution of Clauncher, Clawitzer. However badass the Pokémon itself, though, Siebold's knife terrified more.

"Are you alright?" Siebold began without preamble. "You must be Dr du Bois's student."

"D- Donar Oak," I nodded in answer.

"Stay close to the wider corridors," Siebold warned, turning to go.

"W- Wait!" Serena hissed. "What's going on?"

Siebold opened his mouth, but then Léa screamed, throwing herself down. Serena and I followed her, slamming onto the hard unpolished wood. Siebold joined us, his Clawitzer aiming as the blue Water Pulse shot out.

(cont.) In the interest of safety, I had Donar evacuated. I believe that Donar does not agree with my assessment, despite my assurances. It is very few factors in my favour that currently result in the whole field trip not being cancelled...
"Get up!" Siebold snarled.

I came up to the deck to see Dr du Bois running, shadows and the ghosts of a Haunter and Phantump floating around her, winged by shadows like some war goddess. Darkrai and Altair were nowhere to be found.

I couldn't see for the life of anyone before I saw a dark figure behind her. I shouted: "Dr du Bois!"

Dr du Bois started, and the gunshot rang in my ears as I saw her murdered.

A few times in my life had left me at a loss for words. When I had gained my baccalaureate, perhaps. When I had graduated as the youngest student of the Université Illumis-Sud Neuvartault in xeno-medicine. When I had, at the greatest crossroads of my life, chosen to take another identity and turn towards society and Pokémon. Philosophy was not for me; sociology and anthropology might be another matter, and had become another matter.

Perhaps, I reflected, my viva voce might present a less stumping argument than this Spiritomb.

"...excuse me?" I answered the stone in my hand.

*Madame, surely you have not forgotten I.*

I dropped the Odd Keystone. It bounced on the thick carpet, much like what I felt like doing.

"Pardon me," I answered. "I do not remember meeting you. In fact, it is my first time meeting a Spiritomb, especially one as old as you... say. If you claim to have existed during the Century War, I request that you face me immediately."

Shadows gathered over the Keystone. They coalesced into an ethereal composition of swirling purple fog. Green crescents were set in the heart of that fog, much like a Gastly, as its jagged mouth opened. Within those crescents, spirals swirled, no different to the spirals about the fog of its head.

*We have met, madame.* Its eyes shimmered. *Since that awful war, since the start of your reign, perhaps even before it. Since the Siege of Lumiose...*

"You are mistaken," I reluctantly answered. "It's been seven hundred years, as you have said. Jeanne la Pucelle is... dead."

...you are not Madame?

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I am not the Madame you are looking for."

*You must be Madame. Madame is returned from the dead. Giratina can assure no less for an existence that would disrupt the balance between the Distortion World.*

I silently counted the first ten digits of pi, finally realising that there was nothing more to it than the babbling of an old Pokémon, possibly senile. "Fine. You will explain as best as you could later. If I am your Madame, then I assume that you will be an exemplary companion. In that case, would you follow my command?"

Its eyes glowed green. *Understood, my Euterpe, madame.*

"The muse of lyric poetry," I considered. "And did you have a designation?"

*Poucet, Madame.*
"I see," I answered, as Phantump hissed and lingered. On the ground, Achillée Morelle began to stir. "Come, then... Poucet."

I hummed the aria as I walked, and all the time while Darkrai joined me I had the thumbling for a shadow. At least, until a gunshot sounded, and something of steel rang behind me, and I realised that Morelle's men were still onboard. They were also shooting me.

I ran with the Phantump, Haunter lingering by my feet as I did and Poucet shadowing my every step. Footsteps echoed like a herd of rampaging Tauros, and Morelle's scream of rage echoed as he yelled for my blood, for anyone to shoot me.

"Dr du Bois!"

"Do-" I started, but then the shot struck.

Guns were subjected to strict control in our world. It was more than practicality; when your guards could shoot fire and survive earthquakes, guns were more than a little moot. Some of them still appeared now and then, Rocket grunts smuggling them from Kanto or Plasma extremists looking for a toehold into the Kalos region from Unova, you name it. Without knowing where to look, getting a gun was almost impossible. Almost.

I thought of none of those, sadly. All I could think of was the pain that tore through my back, even as I drew the bright orange Very and fired a load of hot magnesium. My weight landed on the shot, and I cursed, but at least my spine was functioning. My dress clung wetly, and I cursed for a bit. Phantump cradled close by, as did Haunter. Something scratched, like crystals striking each other.


"Marguerite..." claws graced my head, and Darkrai looked sorrowful as he embraced me. "Marguerite... please don't die.

Pain flared in my skull, and I heard soft foottfalls. Oh, no...

"Yes," I whispered. Blood dribbled from my back onto the Azur, held only by my own weight and the magic of Xerneas. "This is going to be so hard to explain."

You got shot! Altair's mental shout was about as loud as the actual howl of a Lucario might be. This was a bad idea in the first place! I told you!

He had said the same thing years previously. And back then, against Team Flare. How else did I know the feeling of being shot, if Flare hadn't taken those pot-shots at me before?

"You did," I agreed. "Now be a dear and get the rest."

My Lucario snorted, the better to mask his worry. Darkrai, you get them. I'm a doctor.

"What happened to 'first do no harm'?" I asked.

That applies only to me, the cracks as my Lucario cracked his stubby knuckles echoed. Not him.

Marguerite... stay safe. Darkrai's wispy white hair fairly waved by itself, the spectre of nightmares floating to regard the pack of Houndoom coming for us.

I closed my eyes at that dark promise. "Altair... there's more guards, right?"
...Yes.

Right. There went primum non nocere.

My hand thudded onto the floor, Phantump's screams of horror cutting off. It held a manacle, one that was set with the jewel of the cle du voûte the Keystone. Rose-coloured motes crawled up through like vines, the cabochon of crystal glimmering as the curse in my body began to overflow the vessel with life. The Phantump and Haunter hovered closer to my hands, maws gaping, awaiting the futile moment when my soul tried to leave my body to feed upon my life, receiving a feast of it. Their bodies began to glow with light; the light of evolution.

That... should not be possible. It shouldn't be... It couldn't, and yet-

My eyes fell on Donar. How was I supposed to explain to him? In fact, how would I explain this to the rest of them?

"Evolve."

Then I saw the rock Haunter was pressing next to the Keystone, the same Haunter feeding upon the fount of life that was myself-

---

I had absolutely no idea what happened aboard the Azur. It made its way back to Kalos the next day, barely the worse for wear. The Zapdos corpse made its Viking funeral, the boat and bones lost somewhere else. Police swarmed onboard, and I could barely remember what had happened. I gave my story of events, uncertain as to what I had seen.

Dr du Bois fell. Ghosts screamed. Altair and Darkrai appeared, facing against hordes of Pawniard and packs of Houndoom. Pumpkaboo floated over, screeching in horror and fear while Léa screamed, her voice thin and reedy from lethargy. It happened, and...

...I can't believe my eyes.

Altair was there, and yet he was not. The cream fur had grown, his legs slimmer. Spikes dotted the back of his paws and on his shoulders, which have turned crimson. The aura-sensing appendages had grown longer, much like the makeup I had seen back at Geosenge, two of them tipped in crimson.

Phantump had grown, too; six roots bent like spider legs, two zigzag indentations wrapped around its body from missing bark made its growth apparent. Two large, crooked horn-like gnarls stuck out on either side of its head, and another smaller gnarl on its forehead, with a tuft of green leaves in the middle and a large, menacing dark-red eye below them. Thin upper arms and thick forearms grew from its trunk like gnarled branches, missing rings of bark clear at the elbow and below the shoulder, a single spike or leaf making it clear that it was still a haunted tree of sorts. Green foliage still dotted it at the wrist, connected to hands with three wooden pincer-spikes for fingers.

My PokéDex clattered as I stumbled and fell. Trevenant, the Elder Tree Pokémon. Using its roots as a nervous system, it controls the trees in the forest. It's kind to the Pokémon that reside in its body.

The monster, though... part of its body had sunk into the ground. An unblinking yellow eye glimmered, like X-rays; it seemed to see through everything. Its spikes had grown, its ears projected back... it was a spectre, through and through, and the fact that it was white did not help.

The Houndoom skidded, warily considering the new threats.
Altair moved; faster than I had believed possible, he had taken out three Houndoom with a Bone Rush. Murkrow swooped from the skies, down; they were warded off as Will-O-Wisps surrounded all three in a ring of fire. Green light began to shine from Trevenant, before the Houndoom reared back as though struck, before the Dark Voids got them. They were up soon, though; then Darkrai pulled out the Dark Pulses and Nightmares. Sensing something, Altair reared back. It allowed the white... monster... to begin unleashing its battery of Shadow Balls.

I knew, somewhere, that Dark-types were resistant to Ghost-type moves, and yet seeing the assault of Shadow Balls, the Houndoom were falling like dominoes. Murkrow tried to run, and Siebold pulled us to retreat, but there was a tug and we fell down, being pulled closer, slowly, ever closer to the menacing white spectre.

"Shadow Tag!" Siebold was no longer calm, in fact trying to escape. "Clawitzer, Dark Pulse!"

The Clawitzer levelled its gun, shooting a blast of dark energy that had the monster reeling with shock and pain. Its glazed eyes turned upon Clawitzer, unleashing a Shadow Ball that nevertheless glanced off Clawitzer, but had the Howitzer Pokémon reeling back, but unable to escape the Shadow Tag too.

Frogadier geared up with a Water Pulse, which seemed only to piss the creature off even more. My breath quickened at the look at this beast, this thing that had the security Pawniard and Murkrow cowering, trying to escape.

A hand landed on the thing. The pulling stopped.

Slowly, Dr du Bois pulled the Mega-evolved Gengar towards herself. Even weakened as she was, none of the Pokémon left her side. "Enough," she whispered, cradling the monster close. "I appreciate the favour. It's enough."

The ferocious creature was calmed, its white façade shattering soon in a burst of rose light to reveal a Gengar, one that clung to Dr du Bois. She pulled one of the branch-arms, the Trevenant rumbling before she used it for a pillow.

Altair powered down, I think; the fur receded, the spikes disappeared, and he looked normal now. Darkrai lingered, hesitant before Dr du Bois's hand made the decision for him.

The Lucario doctor looked down, snorted, and settled to eye all of them, before giving us the universal signal to get up from his perch on the deck railings.

It was the weirdest thing, watching the impromptu dog-pile of Pokémon and Trainer.

"Is it... gone?" Serena finally said, after a hushed silence in which we shivered.

Siebold looked grim. "I am... uncertain. That Mega Gengar... and a Mega Lucario? To evolve two Pokémon at the same time..."

Aboard the SS Azur and its voyage towards Lumiose City, I was uncertain. I had seen Dr du Bois fall from that shot, and now... as emergency personnel approached us, bearing stretchers and blankets and whatnot, the piece fell into the jigsaw of the mystery.

Dr du Bois's dreams. The dreams about Pokémon dying and the thing with horns and the other thing with wings. The dark humour... the Mega Evolution... and how had I not seen it? Hair and eye colour meant so little with dye and contact lenses, and Dr du Bois had always been good at acting...

Wikstrom was coming now. Head bent, he went on bended knee, genuflecting before Dr du Bois.
He cradled her to his chest, his expression sad.

Her arm fell over, revealing the manacle, set with a Keystone. Mega Evolution.

The chain of reasoning was flimsy, I was probably insane, and possibly this could all be explained. I was pretty sure, though, that my observer and travel companion was the Champion of Kalos.

Siebold came later to make us sign through several NDAs. Of course, I knew the loophole to every single one, but Donar and I signed them all. The better to plague the League's data entry system with.

Wikstrom visited me, sincerely expressing his wishes for me to get well soon. I might feel better once arrangements to enter Lumiose were enacted... and once I've settled the Morelle girl. The Gourgeist would make a suitable addition, as would an extra Trainer to the Coumarine Gym's stable.

Yes, all will be well.

– Marguerite Linden du Bois
Chapter Summary

“Wait!” Léa pleaded. “I... I've won the Plant Badge from Leader Amaro. Leader Amaro offered a place in his Gym, and I'm very grateful. But, I want to learn about Ghost-type Pokémon. And... so... will you be my teacher?”

Dr du Bois was Daisy Linden, the Champion of Kalos. That made me feel... rather inadequate. Definitely.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 72: We arrived at Lumiose City. Here is the centre of Kalosian power, the most revamped and oldest urban settlement in the entirety of Kalos. The birth, of the modern region...

The birthplace of Marguerite Linden du Bois. (delete)

The birthplace of legends.

Hospitals were flooded with the smell of cleaner and ammonia. That was a universal fact. And yet, here in the Hôpital de la Luminosité Éternelle, Lumiose City’s oldest and first hospital, it seemed as though it had been graced by some otherworldly presence... as it had. Marguerite... no, Daisy Linden, Dr du Bois, was as otherworldly as it came.

There was proof. Of course there was proof. It lay now in the... Gengar... and Trevenant, and Gourgeist now lingering by the foot of her bed. The bed of Marguerite Linden du Bois, the wonderfully, infuriatingly mysterious woman of my teacher, née SAS Daisy Linden, the Champion of Kalos.

The woman herself stirred.

Wikstrom had arrived on the scene first, his anguished expression apparent as he carried her bridal-style down from the Azur. L'Hôpital de la Luminosité éternelle now had Elite Four and Gym Leader guards, and yet with Altair standing by, I doubted any of them could stop a Champion’s Pokémon if Dr du Bois decided to escape and run...

Altair growled.

I flinched. It made me remember how he'd used those teeth on those Houndoom.

You are afraid.

I looked from Altair to Darkrai, the other terrifying one. “I- I don't see why not,” I replied carefully.

One green eye opened. Dr du Bois stirred, her body rising from clean white sheets with utter grace. “Mmm?”
“Dr du Bois.” The acknowledgement came out colder than I intended. “Or... Daisy Linden?”

Her lips parted in a small yawn, eyes narrowed in pain as her diaphragm fluttered with every breath she took. “You know me as Dr du Bois. Why change it? I did not suddenly change my name, you know.”

“Because you're the Champion of Kalos!” I nearly shouted at her. “Because you did some freaky thing, and those ghosts evolved even though they usually can't, and now I have no idea what's going on! Altair and that Gengar Mega-evolved because of something you did, and I'm going to need a therapist if I don't die first because of something you omitted! What else are you lying to me about?!”

She didn't deny or encourage it. She just twitched, wincing as if the lights, my volume, everything of her surroundings hurt her. Maybe it did. Maybe dying and returning did hurt her.

“Well?!” I demanded. “You got Altair to fling me overboard!”

“And I saved the lives of your friends and yourself,” Dr du Bois answered. “What are you expecting?”

“The truth!” I threw up my hands.

She shrugged. “Explaining the situation would feed into the executive centre of your brain, your reasoning and argumentative centres. I could explain, but it would be pointless were you subconsciously disbelieving.”

I drew the chair up, plopping myself into it and crossing my arms. Then I realised that, in the dressing gown the hospital staff forced me into after my wet clothes, I crossed my legs. “Try me.”

Dr du Bois did not seem to have noticed anything, curious as she was. Petting the Gengar on its grinning blue head, Dr du Bois looked far away, as if absorbed in mulling over my proposal. Shadows gathered from around her, gathering into a green-purple ghost.

“Poucet, Donar. Donar, Poucet,” Dr du Bois absently commented, ignoring the Spiritomb.

“...hi,” I sighed. I had long resigned myself that Dr du Bois would pick up dangerous pets.

“So...” I started, as if it would sink in if I repeated it enough. “...You're the Champion of the Kalos region.”

“Technically, former Champion,” Dr du Bois corrected.

“But everyone calls you the Champion.”

“The team that won me that title is no more,” Dr du Bois admitted.

Yes, I know. They died. My heart throbbed for her, and by my side Frogadier shifted, pushing against my leg.

Altair walked to stand by her bedside. Paw and hand met. The Gengar and Trevenant crowded. Gourgeist had left to watch Léa; obviously, that Ghost was not attached to the Doctor.

“I had mentioned before, that the legitimacy and social stability of a region is dependent upon its Champion's strength,” she finally began. “The truth... goes beyond that. Should you realise the truth, you will never be able to see Pokémon the same way ever again. You would never be able to

Pleasure.

“...hi,” I sighed. I had long resigned myself that Dr du Bois would pick up dangerous pets.

“So...” I started, as if it would sink in if I repeated it enough. “...You're the Champion of the Kalos region.”

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“I had mentioned before, that the legitimacy and social stability of a region is dependent upon its Champion's strength,” she finally began. “The truth... goes beyond that. Should you realise the truth, you will never be able to see Pokémon the same way ever again. You would never be able to
connect with Pokémon the same way as anyone else.”

“...tell me,” I answered. “S’il vous plaît.”

Dr du Bois clicked her tongue, and I thought I glimpsed wisps of the same rosy light as she raised her right hand. “Fine.”

Gengar licked her hand eagerly. The Ghost/Poison-type Shadow Pokémon was... “What... are you doing?” I stuttered.

“In exchange for your service, I will feed you,” Dr du Bois told the Gengar, pulling a Pokéball from her belt and tapping it onto its rotund body. “And with our bargain, I christen you as Mignon.”

The Gengar disappeared into the Pokéball. It blinked once, then stopped shaking. The capture had been concluded.

Dr du Bois opened it, and the Gengar gleefully began sucking at her fingers. Watching her hand get swallowed by that imp of a ghost made me feel sick. “What are you feeding him?”

“My life,” Dr du Bois planted a kiss on its forehead. “Ghost-type Pokémon require some form of energy to sustain themselves. Most Ghost-type trainers would remain in a spiritually powerful nexus such as Mt Pyre or Ecruteak City, or an emotionally charged area like Hearthome City, for that purpose. Yet, life energy is the closest substitute to feed them.”

“You're...” I stared at the Gengar in no small amount of horror. “You're insane! Are you throwing away your life? Is that how you feed the pink menace too?! And Phantump- I mean, Trevenant?”

“It can't be helped,” Dr du Bois shrugged. “This life overflows within me. My life force is an infinitely more palatable food to my Ghosts. If this would grant them some small succour, I would feel at ease. That at least, I have done something out of love.”

“Don't demean yourself!” I insisted. “There are people who are about you! Why don't you realise that people would be sad if you died?!”

“Daisy Linden should have died six years back,” Dr du Bois reflected, her hand moving to cradle her stomach. The same place, I realised, where she had been gored in the dream. The girl in the dream had laughed, even in defiance, taking the legendary Pokémon down with her by dint of a Destiny Bond...

“During the last, final raid on Team Flare, mere years after my defeat of Lysandre at Geosenge, Team Flare managed to capture Xerneas and Yveltal again,” she told her tale. “I defeated the grunts, but the Legendary Pokémon were freed and angered. I was forced to take them both on in battle, with my full team. Of the six that accompanied me in battle, only Altair and Vega, my Flygon, survived. I lost Delphi, Deneb and Sealeo. Their bodies were gathered, burnt to ashes and scattered amongst the tombs of Geosenge by the Kalos League, at Diantha's orders. My Banette was lost, presumably having deserted. And the lie of Daisy Linden's existence became completed, when I tried to step down and was barred from doing so.”

“That's... that's unreasonable!” I shook my head. “Why?”

“Who knows,” Dr du Bis shrugged, and it gave her an air of a martyr. “Politics, perhaps. No other region had to lose their Champion to win against great evil, nor did that Champion have to make battle against the local Legends to protect the region, and live to do so. I was alive, so was the rationale. I was immortal now, something beyond human. I could train more Pokémon, and I would be an everlasting pedestal to lead Kalos. Even if it went against every ideal of the Pokémon League...
Kalos had never liked Charles Goodshow, or the rise of Indigo Plateau."

“I... have been living a half-life ever since,” Dr du Bois continued, still with that same dreamy look on her elegant features. True, she bore the same grace of Daisy Linden, the easy confidence of all Champions. “Four Pokémon, along with Daisy Linden, died that day.”

“And the Kalos League covered it up,” I whispered, my tightening. Altair's resolved look as he evolved... Darkrai's quiet fury, even the Gengar... why would the Kalos League do this. “Why?”

“Because I had become something more than human,” Dr du Bois reflected. “Daisy Linden is pitiful. Not because she stumbled and fell, but because, in attaining the goal of all Trainers, of becoming the best, she had lost herself. Daisy Linden had carved her mark into history so young, had eaten so greedily at the banquet of life, that life's pleasures held no further meaning for her years down the path.”

“But Marguerite Linden du Bois has meaning,” I insisted, some form of passion pushing me to argue with this goddess of reason, this figure so far from my imagination that one of her servants would crush me with but a thought. “You have given Darkrai, Altair, even I, meaning. We would be sad if you were to die.”

Her lips parted, and she flushed up with pleasure at my words. Possibly, Dr du Bois was as sensitive to flattery as any other girl.

“...Oh.”

“Your life has meaning.” I repeated. “Not to feed to your ghosts alone. You keep saying that you've lived a half-life, but look at you. You're wealthy, connected, famed, and knowledgeable. You are the most accomplished professor I know, and will have the privilege of knowing. You have trained a Lucario as a surgeon, a Darkrai as your assistant, and you will probably train Liz as a medic or something, but you are so much more than living now. Those demons, you have conquered it. So please, don't throw away your life.”

Dr du Bois considered me for a long moment, before she reached up to her eyes. I saw her dig into her fingers with some alarm, before she drew out the contact lenses within.

Altair held up her bag for her to rifle through, dropping the tinted lenses into a lens case before snapping it shut.

The blue-green of Daisy Linden's eyes met mine, and I felt the pressure of Dr du Bois's presence.

“I'm tired,” she announced. “And injured.”

“...I'll leave you to rest,” I automatically replied when Altair elbowed me in the gut. I escaped with Frogadier, but not far. I only managed to stumble back to my own bed in the general wards before I freaked out.

Dr du Bois was Daisy Linden, the Champion of Kalos. That made me feel... rather inadequate. Definitely.

Then again, Dr du Bois made me feel inadequate on a daily basis, so that was okay. That was OK.

...Right?

No one would ever say that Daisy Linden would have been a good patient. No one would ever say
the same for Marguerite Linden du Bois.

“Doctor...”

“I’ve been in bed rest for three days,” I complained. “Altair, back me up here.”

“Doctor, you were shot!” Donar argued back. “Altair, don’t you dare.”

My Lucario looked from me to him, and plainly ignored us.

“You know I’m fine, I know my limits, I am going out,” I pointed to the double doors that Donar was blocking me from with Shelgon and Ivysaur. Ivysaur’s maw opened in something approximating a laugh. “Where are my discharge papers?”

“Altair, back me up here!” Donar started yelling.

Altair shrugged.

I felt branches around me, before I was picked off the ground by Cyprès, the Trevenant. “Cyprès, what are you doing?”

“The nurses said rest,” Donar replied, a tad gleefully. “That includes not running around Lumiose City.”

“You little...”

“I’ll give your regards to Serena and Léa, then,” Donar waved as I was carried away.

From my shadow, Mignon cackled. Aegis provided amusement in my room by clashing his tasselled arms on his shield.

“Oh, shut up,” I crossed my arms and glaring at Liz, Crystal and Jelly waiting for me. “And what now?”

Crystal gave a hiss, while Jelly began waving her multiple arms. Both moves brought great discomfort as I realised their message, along with Liz’s chiming.

_I believe the boy won this round, so you should_- Altair paused as he saw what I was doing.

“...I understand,” I told the three Pokémon heavily. “Jelly, your circumstances I shall handle before we set out for Lavarre City. Crystal, I shall have to negotiate something with Capo. Liz... I have a gift for you.”

The blue Floette widened her eyes as I produced the Shiny Stone I had retrieved from Miroir Way.

“All Floette must choose, at some point in their lives, between longevity and power,” I told her. “If you accept, then you shall attain power at the cost of a finite lifespan. Such is the curse of your kind.”

Liz floated, hovering so close to the stone, about to touch it... before she gave a reply of high, twittering syllables.

I nodded, my hands still holding out the gift. “Never let it be said that Marguerite Linden du Bois does not fulfil her obligations.”

Then, Liz hovered to perch on my shoulder, pecking my cheek for a brief moment.
“You...” I smiled, even as Altair clarified her wish to me. My boredom and frustration seemed to have melted away, warmed in a rush of relief that had nothing to do with Lumiose City's oldest hospital and everything to do with my personal catharsis. “I... will try.”

I settled myself at Cyprès's feet, the shade refreshing even indoors. The melody of the song was still apparent, even as I hummed it. Mignon and Cyprès waved in time to the music of their rebirth.

So cute, I reflected. I hated myself after thinking those thoughts. Patting Crystal and Jelly, knowing of meeting and parting, whether willingly or otherwise, whether it be far away or close in the future...

It was... surprisingly relaxing, I admitted as Poucet hovered nearby, and Darkrai began to infiltrate the room to join us. I had nothing against a cappella, but I preferred the accordion. Still, extremely sentimental, I was sure.

“Well'll share a Galette,” I promised Darkrai.

We... will?

“Yes,” I promised. “We will.”

A knock resounded on my door.

“Entrez,” I commanded.

It opened to reveal Léa Morelle, and Gourgeist, as well as Ramos.

“Léa Morelle,” I greeted. “Are you not supposed to be meeting with your friends?”

Wisps of flame began to gather around her, her personal Will-O-Wisp. Her grey eyes glittered, the gems cold though her soul burned. “You...”

I looked to Ramos, who seemed as lost as I felt. “Sorry, sprout. She wanted to meet you,” the elderly Gym Leader told me.

“You have my gratitude,” Léa Morelle told me, quite formally. “For Gourgeist, and for rescuing me. Leader Amaro said that... that you left Gourgeist for me.”

Gourgeist chirruped, the bass tone reverberating to wake up Cyprès, who replied in a groan like creaking wood.

“I accept your gratitude,” I answered. “Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Léa pleaded. “I... I've won the Plant Badge from Leader Amaro. Leader Amaro offered a place in his Gym, and I'm very grateful. But, I want to learn about Ghost-type Pokémon. And... so... will you be my teacher?”

At first I didn’t realise she was asking me when finally I understood. I expressed that I was both flattered and surprised. Since I’d never expected this request, and I was a little daunted in the face of it, I paused. I promised I would do my very best to accomplish a task that was, for me, as demanding and difficult as any I had ever contemplated. It came with an expression of gratitude for the trust she placed in me, and I almost came close to being moved by it.

It later transpired that I had said none of this out loud. In fact, my default response was to sigh, contemplate, and order Mignon to haunt them out of my room.
Chapter End Notes

Now the Lumiose Arc shall begin! Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!
Épilogue : Expliquer – To Explain

Chapter Summary

“You know, more than anyone else...” Augustine smiled bitterly. “... where the reins of power across the region lies. And as the one most correctly placed, you bear the power to stand at the top.”

A fire extinguisher appeared, and people started to make calls to their insurance. The hum of panic hidden by élan and ennui echoed, and in the relaxed air of Lumiose City, I saw someone take out their Holo Caster and start filming.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day 75: I was due to report back to the Sycamore Laboratory in a few days. Augustine laughed when I told him the situation. Donar had returned with lousy results against the Lumiose Gym, which is going to need some training of his own devising. The Morelle girl, despite settling her situation, insists on having me as her teacher, as if that should hold merit.

I am seriously considering it, after being told of the assassination attempts on her...

The scene outside of the Sycamore Laboratory had stirred a crowd of multiple people. Silent pickets milled about the entrance, blocking the streets with their mindless chanting.

I struggled out of the taxi, paying the necessary two thousand Poké. My style had marked me as unique, to the driver, but I still believed in paying the proletariat well. Especially since the driver was a sometime student of mine. “Be careful, Gilles.”

“What?” the redhead driver scowled, albeit a bit faintly. “I’m always careful, Dr du Bois. But... this is serious, isn’t it? The Morelle changing leadership?”

“Achillée Morelle is arrested, leaving a girl as head of the Morelle family. You tell me, M. Moreau.”

Gilles Moreau, sometime taxi driver and attorney at the avocat commis d'office was silent. “Damn. Better tell Sibyl to prepare for gangland warfare?”

“Well, we are discussing the Coumarine and Lumiose Gym Leaders taking on the Morelle's underlings,” I answered lightly. “I suppose, yes.”

“And do I get backup?”

I smiled, and walked into the Sycamore Laboratory. A picketer jumped in my path.

“Hey, hey!”

I kept walking. He kept following.

“Do you think this society stifling?” he started. “Don't you want to change things? Starting first with
this weird trainer policy! Like giving equal rights to Pokémon!”

I stopped walking. In a heartbeat, Altair popped out, facing the protester, who shrank back.

“Look!” he shouted. “You're resorting to violence to get your way!”

“You claim to support equal rights for Pokémon,” I corrected. “Altair is capable of forming his own arguments. He shall be your debate opponent.”

“Him?” The protester stared to Altair. “But... he can't talk!”

What other talking Pokémon would bother to argue with you guys?

I left Altair at the steps of the Sycamore Laboratory, as Lucario and human began to argue. Not that Pokémon kidnap was any less of a worry, but to kidnap Altair required far more than simple daring and technology, especially a sentient Pokémon like Altair, capable of articulating to all but the most psi-null of humans.

I felt Darkrai detach from my shadow to join Altair. It made me feel lighter.

Why do you keep them with you when they trouble you, Euterpe?

“My name is Marguerite. As for the answer... Altair, Liz, Cyprès, Mignon, Aegis,” I counted my Pokémon. “You... Darkrai is my research assistant. Understand, Poucet, that I have not offered you a position as my companion yet.”

Of course. Mes excuses.

“Who was your former master before this?” I asked.

My master was the illustrious Gilles, baron de Rais, the first Marshal of Kalos. I have also served under the personal command of La Pucelle.

“The original Bluebeard and the crimson holy virgin...” I commented, waiting by the elevator doors. I must be a sight, talking to myself, but I suppose the receptionists had learnt to fear me to keep their distance at last. “Quite the résumé there. So, why do you wish to join me, Poucet?”

You possess the power. The Spiritomb loomed. As you are, you stand as either Mystimaniac or Fillette de Conte. The potential of your power is such that you could unite the differing factions of Kalos, divided under the banners of Xerneas and Yveltal.

“Fillette de Conte... Jeanne d' Arc was a Fairy Tale Girl?” I asked. “Sounds like the basis for witches in Pokémon mythology. So, who was the Hex Maniac of that pair...?”

The penny dropped.

The elevator dinged. The doors rolled open. I stared. They started to close.

A familiar gauntleted hand reached out, easily stopping the doors. They rolled back out. Wikstrom gazed at me with eyes of concern, having suddenly appeared like my persistent shadow.

“Are you alright, madame?”

I met Wikstrom's eyes, and Poucet appeared, hovering around me.

“Wikstrom...” I swallowed. “Poucet, Wikstrom, your former master's descendant. Poucet, meet
Wikstrom, the current baron de Rais.”

*Your Honour,* Poucet answered. *I thank you for allowing me to meet Mistress.*

“... are we going in, then?” Wikstrom nodded to the elevator. “Marguerite, I did mention not to go out without me.”

“It was emergency business,” I rebutted, walking in gingerly.

Wikstrom entered after Poucet and I, and the doors closed as I jabbed a button for the third floor. “I did not remember telling you.”

“Altair bribed a nurse to tell me.”

I felt a vein throb in my temple. “That... *doctor.*”

“You trained Altair as a doctor?” Wikstrom asked.

“I am a firm believer in Pokémon being our intellectual equals, if not intellectual superiors,” I answered loftily. “That does not preclude equipping high-level skills to them.”

“How dangerous,” Wikstrom commented at last.

He followed me with silence to Sycamore's office, which was as flamboyant as I last saw it, complete with exhausted assistants and maniacally working Augustine.

I knocked on the door. “*Bonjour,* Augustine.”

“Oh, D- Marguerite!” Augustine called. “*Bonjour!* And Monseigneur de Rais too! Such a wonderful surprise! Sina, Dexio, I need you two to prepare the *special* snacks.”

Still grumbling, two virtual zombies walked out, and I closed the door behind us. “I have finished my log on the first half of the research. Now that I am at the midway point, the preliminary research should be reviewed, as should the research question.”

“What, that's it?” Augustine turned to his desktop, calling up a folder. His expression turned pensive as he revised my edited log. “You're an associate professor, and you even have a fellowship at the *École Normale Supérieure.* This research is more your cup of tea. And, why bring an Elite Four with you? Marguerite, I know that you immerse yourself in academia as a distraction, a simple way to pass the time. Your concerns here, go beyond the research project at this point.”

“...you've always been good at reading between the lines,” I admitted. “It's... aboard the Azur, Donar found out. About... me.”

“And?” Augustine shook his head. “*Chérie,* do you think so little of *moi?* You are the next professor in the world of Kalosian academia to give me support on my research. The Sycamore Institute had its breakthrough because of Maîtresse Linden's contributions. To think such an absurd thought... Donar has no proof.”

“It's not about that,” I admitted. “The boy insists on throwing himself at the slightest hint of danger to his friends, even nearly complete strangers. And... he has grown enamoured of me, I think.”

Augustine burst into loud laughter after that. “*Chérie,* you are every boy's dream, the fair Dulcinea to be helped and assisted. Autocratic you may believe yourself, but you are so masterful that even the deans must bow before you time and again! Unless this shall ruin your objectivity?”
...it might,” I admitted. “The boy grows on me, and sometimes I forget that he is not immortal.”

“Then he is doing his job.”

I looked up, my hands clenching into my chair. Augustine's expression was somewhat... unnerving. “His job? Augustine... did you set up this so that my tenure application was contingent on this... this...?!!”

“Professor Oak might not be apparent that one of our staff shall outlive us all,” Augustine serenely imparted. “I did hint, however, that the brightest Kalosian scholar in the field of anthro-Pokémon relations was looking at an imminent fall from grace following her teachings as to warrant the label of nihilist and loner in the academic field. Tenure is decided amongst the deans and professors, and Oak himself is moderate.”

“That was... that was manipulative and exactly what I would have done,” I admitted.

“Merci,” Augustine nodded. “Though my skills are much lower than your own. Now, your points?”

I detailed to Augustine most of my research, and we made the necessary tweaks. I would prefer not to bore you about the research, but suffice it to say that I gave a condensed version of the past seventy-five days of research, along with my details and thinking points to be backed by conventional research.

“So far, all factors seem to agree,” I postulated. “Unlike the cities of Kalos, the towns remain relatively undeveloped and characteristically rural. The factors that primarily drive Pokémon training – peer pressure, competitiveness, tradition, desire to explore – and the infrastructure that allows so are agreed. Pokémon training is truly a key driver of economy, social welfare and political power, although as of recent years that power became concentrated in the Cent-Feuilles and away from the Maison d’Arc, which was the cause of the Revolution. And we come back to Central Kalos...”

“Still, I expect you know of the situation surrounding Lumiose,” Augustine reminded me. “After all, no social analysis of Kalos can be complete without mentioning the Raiponce-Millepertuis agreement.”

“Ah,” I agreed. Somewhere in my heart, I could feel my heart sinking.

“And, what about the Morelle girl?” Augustine asked, pouring an excellent tisane of Leppa Berries from a decanter set beside his desk. “‘L’adonis goutte-de-sang ne sera pas autorisé à tenir la tempête longtemps seul.’”

“Without the Zapdos corpse... les maisons de Raiponce et Millepertuis agiront?” I turned slightly. “Why is the Platane heir telling me this?”

Augustine twitched, and his expression turned uncharacteristically fierce. “I am not, and will not, ever be part of the Cent-Feuilles. And, even if I were, I have the choice of throwing it away. The same cannot be said for you, princess.”

“The Fleur-de-Lis is dead,” I reminded him.

“But as the heiress of the Three Great Families, only the fact of not relinquishing the Champion title blocks you from the Jardin Throne,” Augustine noted.

“That throne is no longer needed,” I groused. “Democracy reigns across the world now.”

“You know, more than anyone else...” Augustine smiled bitterly. “... where the reins of power across
the region lies. And as the one most correctly placed, you bear the power to stand at the top.”

“...” I clicked my tongue. “...troublesome. The top is lonely, you know. And, Augustine. You seem to have forgotten those at the bottom, looking upon everything so distantly as you like. What about your students?”

“Your matter concerns only one of my students, and by this time he's more your student than mine,” Augustine noted. “Should I register with the Pokémon League that he's now your student?”

“...no,” I rose to leave. “As head of the Mandragora, no one will oppose me if I take on two students. Especially since the Morelle are a cadet branch of the Mandragora to begin with.”

“At this juncture...!” Chairs clattered as Wikstrom and Augustine rose. “But then-!”

“Anywhere else, my decision might be contested, and Léa Morelle ended before that,” I agreed, wandering to Augustine's office's window to look over Lumiose, the City of Light. “But, have you forgotten who is here? The house which has stood forever, who maintains its position by working in the shadows, and in doing so placed itself as the overseer of the Cent-Feuilles. If it's Clemont Citron, then... here, in the City of the Eternal Light, she might have a chance. I am... sure of it.”

I walked out of the Sycamore Institute to see the protester curling in on himself. Darkrai was placidly watching the rest of the crowd join him in the clash of logic.

Altair crossed his arms.

Well?

“Our target lies in the two factions that rule the Tripartite,” I told him as we walked out to the streets of Lumiose. “We're going to call for help.”

The two factions...? You mean...

“Yes,” I looked to the clear skies of Illumis; Lumiose, the City of Light, and the centre of the region. “Valeria, Olympia... it's your début.”

“You... want to become her apprentice?”

Serena, Shauna, Léa and I were in Café Soleil, sharing three different cakes, and Serena was attracting attention.

“Shh!” I dragged Serena down. “Léa... are you sure? I thought you hated her!”

“I did,” Léa bitterly admitted. “But then, when she was shot... I could feel something like me.”

“Something like... you?” Shauna asked.

“Pokémon can recognise each other instinctively,” Léa shivered. “At that time, when she revived... I was afraid, but also... admiring. I just... knew. Why...”

“Scary...” Serena murmured to herself. “But, Leader Amaro offered you a place at the Coumarine Gym, right? And the Morelle house is there too...”

“I don't think I'll go back,” Léa confessed shyly, petting her new Gourgeist on the head. “Monsieur Ramos is extremely kind, and... I owe him a lot, but I've decided. I'm going to study Ghost-type Pokémon... I'm going to become a Ghost-type Trainer. With this little one, I'm going to compare and study my powers.”
“Say, I just had a thought,” Shauna commented. “Special powers, and a familiar... Léa looks like a witch! She just needs a pointy hat for Halloween!”

“How is that funny...?” I snorted. “Serena, don't you agree?”

“I agree,” Serena giggled, eyeing Léa. “It looks like a joke! But it looks like something at a Coordinator festival too.”

“A witch...” Léa mused, before making a stray flame dance around her finger. “Yeah... it does seem like that...”

“Don't!” I reached a hand out towards the flame.

“Don't touch it.” The flame died in her hand. “Will-O-Wisp is still dangerous.”

“Oh, right.” I moved my hand back.

“Speaking of which,” Shauna realised. “Have you guys fought Clemont yet?”

“Yes,” Serena answered. “It was... interesting. Complete loss.”

“You guys were all here?”

“Noël!” I greeted. “Erm, Léa, this is Noël Duval.”

“So you're Mademoiselle Morelle,” Noël gave a mocking nod. “Noël Duval, at your service.”

“Thank you for your help,” Léa answered.

“It was nothing,” Noël shook his head. “I am glad to have helped. But... you shouldn't flash that power about so often, mademoiselle. Otherwise the real witches will come get you.”

“What?” Serena blinked.

“Well, you know how some families specialise in training a certain Pokémon type?” Noël asked. “And that Ghost- and Fairy-type Trainers are some of the strangest, rarest Trainers?”

“Huh? Yeah...” I nodded.

“So, sometime during the Century War,” Noël elaborated, “the Ghost-type and Fairy-type Trainers gained power and nobility, forming new types of Trainers. Somehow, those extraordinary powers favoured females, creating the Fairy Tale Girl and the Mystimaniac, also known as the Hex Maniac. No one knows how or why. Some say that the ghosts left over from the long fight, and old grudges of ghosts lingered in the land following the wars... some say that it was Kalos itself, granting legendary healing powers to women, the ones who propagate the land... either way, these two factions of Trainers live out in the triangle area marked by the Lavarre Nature Trail, Brun Way and Mélancolie Path, and sometimes they clash. Now and then, a girl comes along with strange powers, and those female Trainers come along to adopt them, taking them away into the forests surrounding Lumiose... never to be seen again.”

The air grew heavy with his tale, and Noël sighed. “Or, it used to be like that. Right now, rumour says that the Fairy Tale Girls established themselves in Lavarre and Anistar City Gyms, and that they've even gotten control of the local gentry. They're the experts in the Pokémon types associated with magic; Fairy, Grass, Psychic, Ghost. In any other region, the existence of actual witches in story are actually based on members of these two factions.”
“So... who's leading these two factions?” Léa asked.

“Well, by the laws of nobility, the position of Gym Leader is chosen by the previous Gym Leader, who also serves as the head of an unofficial family,” Noël smiled. “These noblesse de robe, these are the families formed through unofficial adoption and training by the bond of master and disciple. The Lavarre City Gym is represented by the Maison de Raiponce, and the Anistar City Gym by the Maison de Millepertuis. These two titles lead the Fairy Tale Girls and the Hex Maniacs respectively... led by Valerie and Olympia, only the Three Grand Ducal Families have greater standing than them. Especially since, with Achillée Morelle being arrested, Mademoiselle Morelle, you will probably become their target if they found out.”

“W- What should I do?” Léa fairly trembled. “I just wanted to become a normal Trainer...”

“Well, I'd advise you to go back to Coumarine,” Noël shook his head as he peered towards the café window. “But it's too late. They know.”

I looked to where Noël was looking, and from there I saw a shadow pass through... a grinning shadow-

My hand reached immediately for my Holo Caster, clutching it before I forced myself to let go. It was broad daylight... they can't move yet...

The glass shattered in the window, burnt to a crisp, and I realised that the fires... they weren't orange, or anything, but the cool blue of Will-O-Wisp. And I realised, that the shadow had passed, though nothing was there.

The noise and cracking faded, into silence.

A fire extinguisher appeared, and people started to make calls to their insurance. The hum of panic hidden by élan and ennui echoed, and in the relaxed air of Lumiose City, I saw someone take out their Holo Caster and start filming.

“How...?” Serena gasped, questioning and shaken.

“A human...” Shauna sank back down from where she had been standing, spilling her teapot everywhere. “I saw... a monster. A... monster...”

To take one real witches... the closest thing to witches that exist in the Kalos region, and I dream of taking them on. I must be mad.

Why not?

– Marguerite Linden du Bois

Chapter End Notes

On hindsight, I am splitting this into two separate fics. There is a sequel, titled Voir Dire. Look out for it!
Critiquez, s'il vous plaît!

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