Eldritch

by TaurusVersant

Summary

There is a monster in the Alola Region.

Her name is Moon and she is eleven years old.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

No grand fanfare awaited her arrival. No omen stars plummeting from the heavens. No rapturous cries of the Tapu, elated at the playmate to have come from on far. Fate, perhaps, moved to greet her, but if it did it did so in its usual circuitous manner, as three months ago the second child of the Aether Foundation committed the same crime as the first. But none knew of that.

Not yet at least.

She observed the world with bright eyes and curious intent, Kukui, lead Pokemon Professor of the Alola Region, considered. Moon of the Kanto Region – dark-skinned, brown-eyed, a chicken-combed red hat she’d donned with unquestioned seriousness covering her black hair – followed in his foot-steps along the path to Iki Town, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the Alola Region.

As far as Kukui was considered there could be no better introduction to the home that he loved. Yes, this could only be a good thing, for Moon and the Alola Region both. He grinned, feet walking the familiar path between his lab and the home of Melemele Island’s Kahuna, and turned to face the girl.

“So!” His pleased exclamation drew her attention, but he could still see her eyes flicking from side to side, taking in the dense flower fields that bordered the path. A curious girl this one. “It’s a little later than most your age, but you’re finally receiving your first Pokemon, yeah! Excited?”

Traditionally, those who would be receiving their first Pokemon from their region's Professor did so as close to their eleventh birthday as possible. For Moon though, the timing of her and her mother's move to the Alola Region interfered, and it was decided it would be better for Moon to receive a Pokemon here than in her native Kanto. Thus the delay.

But tonight was the night and Kukui could not imagine anyone being more excited. Moon nodded, a quiet girl, her mother had told him, but very kind and caring. The report from her Pokemon School in Kanto had been similar – Moon spoke little but paid keen attention, and showed quick aptitude for studying her surroundings. She was cleared to receive her first Pokemon, and expected to do exceptionally well with it. Kukui smiled.

The evenings of Alola were vibrant things, red-gold light transforming the ocean's surface into a magmatic sea and filling the sky with that same bright fire. This was the ideal time to walk the route to Iki, in Kukui's most esteemed opinion, and he found himself more pleased than ever that it was young Moon's first introduction to the Region. Alola was truly rolling out all the stops for her. How excellent indeed.

Loud barks signalled a Pokemon's arrival, the tiny brown canine chasing a harried Yungoos out of the nearest patch of grass. Kukui laughed, his Rockruff responding to the noise by running up to him. He reached down to pet it. “The two of you will be friends for life!” He turned his attention back to Moon as he scratched just beneath the stones ringing the Pokemon’s neck, earning a happy sound in response. “Just like me and Rockruff here!”

Of the litter his Lycanroc had given birth to, only this Rockruff had been kept – the rest of the
puppies passed on to close friends or families Kukui knew would do well with them. Still, he hadn't been able to resist holding on to this little guy, and the two had already grown close. Raising Pokemon without a Trainer's Bond established could be a beautiful thing too.

But it still wasn't the same as the mantle Moon would soon be taking on. He was excited for her. He was excited for every trainer beginning their journey. It was no little thing.

No little thing at all.

“Oh Professor!”

“Can you teach my Pokemon a new move?”

“Can you oversee our battle?”

“Have you ever seen this Pokemon before!”?

Another essential part of Kukui's walks were greeting the young trainers that lived around Iki Town – those who'd inherited or grown up with Pokemon, and those rarer few who, by fate alone, had forged a Bond young. The rules by which Trainer's Bonds were established still weren't fully understood, but at the least it appeared a solid ninety percent of the populace could form one by the time they hit puberty.

That still didn't stop a scattering of those who could do so younger from cropping up though.

As much as he did love to lend his aid, today was special, in that he was taking a new trainer to receive their first Pokemon, and so Kukui couldn't invest the same time as he usually did. He'd give advice on good moves to learn next time. Another trainer offered to watch the battle for him. Yes he'd seen a Grubbin before but boy that was a big one!

Moon kept quiet and followed behind.

“Oh, are you that new trainer?”

Addressed directly, Moon stopped and stared, Kukui turning to keep things moving all the same.

“Yup that's right!” He nodded to the inquisitive youth, “make sure to give her a big Alola Welcome, okay?” The child nodded, then moved their hands in a gesture Kukui knew well and Moon was soon to learn.

“Alola!”

Moon ducked her head in response and moved on.

The gates of Iki Town were framed by a wooden arch, symbols venerating the Tapu painted across it, their meaning completely passing over Moon's head. Even still, as she stepped foot past them, she stopped for a moment.

Then continued on and no-one noted the occurrence.

Iki Town was filled with bustling people, preparing the foliage-dense locale with decorations for the oncoming festival. Kukui smiled to see it all. “The people of Iki know how to throw a party, yeah!” He swept an arm out to show the town off as he looked back to Moon, her eyes ever moving to see all that she could. “Tomorrow night we're having a festival to honour the Tapu, you and your mom both need to be there!” Moon spent only a moment with her eyes meeting Kukui’s, but she nodded when she did, before continuing to observe. A true bastion of curiosity that one, Kukui noted.
One of the best types to embark upon a Pokemon journey.

“Now then,” introduction to the town complete, Kukui considered, “where’s old Hala gotten himself off to?” The Kahuna of Melemele was always making his presence known, but right now the people of Iki were just working hard and conversing amongst themselves. Things weren't bouncing. Kukui approached one of those at work. “Ho there! Have you seen the Kahuna abouts?”

An answer in the negative briefly brought about a frown – he'd definitely not forgotten to tell Hala about this, right? – before Kukui's regular smile returned. Any problem should be made into an opportunity! He turned to Moon.

“It seems the Kahuna isn't here right now, so how about we go look for him, yeah? I'll check outside the town again, if you could head up Mahalo Trail back there? You should introduce yourself to the Tapu by giving a prayer at its altar anyway!” It wasn't like Kukui had given a great many explanations on his own, Kahunas and Tapus being words that might fly right over Moon's head, but she seemed to understand perfectly, nodding and setting off. Seemed she'd read up on Alola's culture before moving here.

Kukui smiled as he set off back to the route beyond. So much the better.

Mahalo was quiet. Dense tree coverage blocked the evening's light, its filtered form giving sight but no warmth to those who walked the path. The way from Moon's home, at the edge of Hau'oli City overlooking the sea, to Iki Town had been busy, and loud. Iki Town too had that energy of people and Pokemon keeping it alive. But Mahalo was silent. It felt respectful to keep it that way.

So she did. Right up until a loud yell split the air.

Lillie had never once pretended her situation wasn't a struggle. Caring for Nebby was a difficult thing – the Pokemon was capricious in its childishness – and it was not like she had successfully established the Bonds which allowed Pokemon and trainers to think alike. She appealed to its best nature as best she could, but that never worked as well as she'd wish. The bag slung over her shoulder was presently, unfortunately, Pokemon-less.

The Pokemon in question out before her very eyes.

“Ah Nebby!”

Cosmog by species, Nebby by the name she'd given it. A small Pokemon indeed, alight with shimmering stars in its cloud-like blue and purple form. She'd been determined to protect it. To keep it safe. Yet right now she was unable to do either. Unable to do anything but call out to the Pokemon, surrounded by aggressive Spearow circling overhead. She didn't know what to do.

Footsteps were her salvation, spinning around to make eye-contact with the girl approaching. She was someone Lillie did not recognise, but at this point she would have called out to almost anyone who appeared. “Please!” She moved, just so, to show the plank and rope bridge Nebby had wandered across, before the Pokemon had drawn the ire of the territorial birds, “Save Nebby!”

That it was natural for those of Alola to help one another when in need was foreign to each of them. Lillie's isolation in her raising had kept her from the culture of those living together. Moon was from another Region entirely, where it was far more common to maintain a degree of distance out of polite respect to the business of one another. Yet in this moment, this first meeting where their eyes met, Lillie called out for aid and Moon moved to give it.

A new bond forged.
Lillie watched as this girl, with bravery that could not be questioned, rushed past her, across the bridge towards the mass of Pokemon. She heard the voice of her saviour, calling out an order for the Spearow to disperse, yet all that did was draw their attention instead. Hounded in turn, Moon moved to try and reach Nebby, pushed down to her knees by the birds flapping about her, clawed feet threatening to tear at her skin.

Lillie was panicking. She'd called out to this girl for help, but instead only succeeded in putting her at risk too. The thought of losing both the girl and Nebby due to her own failings consumed her, and she could only stare wordless as the Spearow prepared to dive.

And then there was the light she knew, the power of Cosmog, and for a brief moment she felt hope. Nebby had saved her once. It would save this girl too.

The bridge gave way.

The low, then high, of seeing the girl at threat and then Nebby's light appear, poised Lillie to feel a new level of despair, watching this girl plummeting down, the river and rocks far below promising the worst. She yelled out, screamed, and the noise of it in her ears drowned out the other cry that went up. The voice that accompanied the yellow surge diving from above.

The flash of electricity, the stream of bright light, it silenced Lillie's cries as a new Pokemon appeared before her. One she knew well, its body black with wild orange spiking hair and huge yellow shells upon its arms, despite never having seen before.

Tapu Koko, guardian deity of Melemele Island, placed Moon – holding Nebby tight to her chest – on the ground before Lillie. She stared. The deity stared back. So close that she could touch it. A living legend.

It moved. A hand reached out towards Lillie, who recoiled, then past her. Moon, sitting on the ground, staring at this Pokemon that felt like a thunder-crack in the dead of night, saw in its hand something that shone. Reached out to it, her other arm still holding onto the Pokemon she had saved. For a moment, the two made contact.

Then, as Moon's fingers curled around the warm stone she had been handed, the Pokemon floated back, cried out with a voice that shook the treetops, and disappeared into the darkening evening sky in a blur of electrical force. Silence left in its wake.

The two girls stared.

“Oh!” Lillie was the first to react, turning around and kneeling down before Moon, “Are you hurt? You almost- I'm so sorry you were just trying to help Nebby and- ohh Nebby you almost caused so much trouble!” Moon's grip on the Pokemon only relaxed as the long blonde haired girl's fingers brushed hers, reaching out to collect the tiny being.

Little cries from the Pokemon, shamed by the tone it was being addressed in, did not mollify it to Lillie's scolding. “Oh no you don't!” She fussied about it, one hand brushing its head even as she admonished it, “You're going back in the bag! Come on, in you go!” Still on the ground, Moon watched as the alabaster-skinned girl opened the large bag she carried and guided the tiny Pokemon into it. A muted “pew...” escaped as she zipped it shut.

“Oh...” Realising the girl before her was still on the ground, Lillie extended a hand, just slightly too late as the girl in question finally pulled herself to her own feet. Her hand awkwardly left there, each stared at it momentarily, unsure of just what to do.
“Umm,” Lillie faltered on the word, considering exactly what she should say in this moment, “Please, don't tell anyone about seeing Nebby tonight. It's important to keep it a secret. Okay?” Moon considered this for a moment, but nodded all the same. Lillie relaxed seeing it. “Thank you, thank you so much.”

Wind over the treetops did not reach them, the denseness of the woods blocking out the gale, but the rustling of branches still reminded each that many Pokemon lurked about. Lillie looked out to the ravine. “I think it's for the best we return to Iki Town I don’t...” she gestured out past Moon, who turned to observe the now missing bridge sealing the path further into Mahalo Trail, “think there's anything else we can do here tonight. Would... um, would you be willing to come back with me, in case another wild Pokemon appears?”

It wasn't like this girl had anything she could do either, but Lillie still felt safer with her by her side. The nod the girl gave showed she was amenable. Lillie breathed a sigh of relief. “Let's go.”

In Iki Town Kahuna Hala had finally returned, celebration from the people at his presence a form of minor ceremony kept more in mind the closer one was to the Festival of the Tapu. Kukui greeted him, and the two looked over the trio of Pokemon that would be on offer to the two youths accepting them that night. They were well-trained, perfect starters for trainers of potential like the candidates who would be meeting them.

So neither Kukui nor Hala really thought that much about letting the three run around town, right up until each suddenly bolted in the direction of Mahalo Trail. Kukui, closer than Hala, set off after them at a run, pursuing the absconding Pokemon. What was with them? If he lost them he'd be in more trouble than ever. Racing up the path, he was unsure just what he would find.

But this still escaped his prediction.

Loud cries of Spearow echoed, determined to harass the intruders upon their territory – pride still injured by the one the Tapu had moved to save. But those lucky few to avoid Tapu Koko's interference had no salvation from the next three to arrive. A storm of cutting leaves. A stream of burning fire. A forceful jet of water. Shamed and beaten, the remnants of the flock escaped into the trees just as Kukui arrived on the scene.

Considered what was before him.

Moon and Lillie stood at the far edge of the trail, a trio of pleased Pokemon gathered before them. Lillie had a tense expression, though it relaxed as soon as she saw Kukui. “Oh, Professor!” Kukui blinked. Well this was something.

“Hey there, Lillie, everything alright?” She frowned at the question, which answered it well enough. Kukui moved up and knelt down before the starter trio. “Now just what did you three run off for, huh?”

Moon joined him, crouching before the three, and immediately they turned to face her. Kukui's raised eyebrow at the sight went uncaught by the girl before him, though Lillie a few steps back took note of it. The Professor wasn't surprised easily. Not genuinely, at least.

“Well now,” he smiled, watching Moon studying the Pokemon preening before her, “it seems these three have taken a liking to you already. Old Hala's going to get a little upset at me, but I think now's as good a time as any, yeah! Why don't you pick one of them as your first partner?”

Moon’s head moved rapidly, snapping from watching the Pokemon to staring at Kukui. When he nodded her eyes drifted back to the three, watching as the red cat and blue seal began a play-fight,
one rolling the other over, before the green owl hopped atop them only to be batted off by each. She considered.

It was a known tradition: the Pokemon specially raised as Starters provided to trainers of significant aptitude. It was something of an investment on the part of the Pokemon Professors and associates who managed the program, providing key trainers the motivation to travel and grow, and in return gain significant research data from those trainers’ adventures. Three Pokemon – a Grass-type, a Fire-type, and a Water-type – of which new trainers would choose one, and then embark upon a journey.

In most regions, the tried-and-true Gym Leader system was then put to the test by these new trainers. In Alola, things were a little different. But not so much so that the Island Challenge wouldn't make sense to a Kanto Trainer. Kukui made introductions.

“So you’ve got the Grass Quill Pokemon Rowlet, the Fire Cat Pokemon Litten, and the Sea Lion Pokemon Popplio. Go ahead and choose one, cousin!”

Moon considered. She had known she would be required to make a choice. Back in Kanto, she’d spent so long considering which of their starters she would take on. She hadn’t come to a conclusion then. And even now...

Kukui caught her words, her whispered apology to the trio that she could not take them all. That was something to smile at – Starter Pokemon were powerful, trainers who took them on usually spent a long while with that Pokemon alone simply because they could not support more than one. Forming a Bond with all three when never having raised a Pokemon before? That wasn’t a possible thing.

So he believed.

The three did seem enamoured with Moon, but ultimately it was proactiveness on one of their parts that sealed her choice, as the Rowlet jumped directly into her arms. Moon laughed at that, a hug holding the Pokemon close, as the Litten and Popplio looked disappointed. Moon apologised to them again.

“Well,” Kukui smiled at the scene, “seems she made the choice for you. Shall we head back down then? The Kahuna's waiting, after all.”

Moon and Lillie both nodded, following in step behind the Professor. Each kept a Pokemon held tight – Lillie making sure her bag remained closed despite the shuffling within it, Moon holding onto the partner a Trainer’s Bond was being forged with in that very moment. The Litten and Popplio, despite not being chosen, continued to walk beside Moon, and Kukui found it odd to look back at her.

Yes, the sight of Moon walking along with that Pokemon in her arms, two more at her side, was strange. It wasn’t the sight specifically, but rather the feeling of it. It reminded him of something. But he couldn’t place what. He shook his head and continued on.

Iki Town was bustling louder than ever as Kukui, Lillie, and Moon returned, a figure approaching them as soon as he caught sight. Kahuna Hala was old by years but young in stature and spirit, large body still well built from years of hard effort. He grinned at the sight of the Pokemon in Moon’s arms.

“Couldn't wait could you?” His laugh made clear the admonishment was in jest only, “I was wondering what made those three up and run off like that – you’re clearly a trainer with fine potential to catch their attention from so far away!”
Kukui, standing to the side, bobbed his head by way of apology. “Sorry for skipping any ceremony, Kahuna Hala.”

Hala’s laugh showed his jovial nature. He shrugged. “Whether it's newly raised or one of the ancient Tapu, who can stop a Pokemon's decisions? Those three clearly wanted this new trainer to make her choice. I think that's as fine a ceremony as can be!”

The Rowlet in Moon’s arms cooed softly, rhythmic strokes of its head given by the hand not cradling it. The Litten and Popplio, with Hala so close now, moved back towards him, though neither had a spring in their step.

“Well now what’s with you two?” Hala’s boisterous laugh mixed with his heavy hand rubbing each of their heads, the Litten giving an admonishing glare at having its fur messed up while the Popplio barked happily. Hala smiled at them. “You know there’s someone else looking forward to meeting you tonight, don’t you? You're not going to show him those sad faces are you?” This perked the two back up, and immediately they stood at attention, attempting the most show-offish poses they could. Smiles at that were abundant, Lillie giggling at the sight. Moon looked at her with a smile.

“So then,” Hala's attention turned now to the two girls, “just what were you two up to on Mahalo Trail there? I could have sworn I heard the thunder of our Tapu.”

“Oh yes!” Lillie nodded immediately, clutching her bag tighter, “Nebby got free and tried to cross the bridge at the trail, and then was attacked by Spearow! But then-” Lillie paused, turning back to look at Moon, suddenly sheepish. Moon looked at her in curiosity. “Umm, sorry, I... never actually asked your name. I'm so sorry, so many things happened all at once, but... I'm Lillie. It's nice to meet you.”

Rudeness wasn’t a thing Lillie was ever meant to display, so to ignore the name of her saviour for so long had mortified her. The response though was simply a gentle smile and a name given. Lillie smiled to hear it. “Moon!” She announced, happy with its sound, “Moon arrived just in time, and tried to save Nebby. When the Spearow attacked her, Nebby tried to help, but ended up breaking the bridge. That's when Tapu Koko arrived and saved them!”

Once again the impression of seeing Kukui genuinely surprised by something struck Lillie. He whistled. “Wow! Now that's something you don't hear ever day, isn't that right, Kahuna?”

Hala nodded, face a little sterner. He seemed to be deep in thought. “Our Guardians, the Tapu, are fickle creatures, little Moon; for our Tapu Koko to save you, it must have seen something special indeed. I think you and Rowlet will do well together. I am happy to have witnessed your beginnings as a new Pokemon Trainer.”

Moon seemed considerate of this. Of course it had to be a lot, to hear that such a significant Pokemon had acted on her behalf. Hala would not be surprised if all the experiences had left the young girl quite shaken that night.

But he was the one to be shaken instead, as Moon shifted her hands to hold Rowlet with the other, and extend her right to show the stone Tapu Koko had given her. Kukui, for the third time, felt intense surprise.

Oh they'd really stolen one of Kanto's brightest stars from right under Professor Oak's nose, hadn't they?

“A Sparkling Stone...” Hala breathed the words, Lillie snapping to attention upon hearing them. Although she had never seen one herself, she'd read enough that it made total sense to hear that that
was what it was. So Tapu Koko really had chosen Moon...

“That stone,” Hala held out a hand, Moon pausing a moment before placing it in his, “I will return it to you tomorrow night, at the Festival of the Tapu. Please honour us by attending.” Moon nodded. Hala smiled. Internally his thoughts whirled.

Just who was this young girl known as Moon? Someone special, no doubt at all in his mind. Kukui and he had spoken about the potential of having a Kanto Trainer perform the Island Challenge at this time. Even still, this was more than could be expected.

Who could say what would happen next?

“Heyyyy!”

Echoing over the treetops and through the town, a new voice sounded out. Hala turned to face it.

“Heyyyy!” Moon and Lillie looked up now, the loud and energetic cry continuing on as the youth it was emerging from finally dashed into sight, coming to a halt before them all. While the colour of his skin, eyes, and hair matched Moon's quite well, his enthusiastic smile and motion distinguished him from her so much so they looked nothing alike, bursting into movement after the moment of stillness and running over to the two.

“Hey hey Lillie! Is this the new trainer? Hey! You've got a Pokemon already! Tutu,” mid-speech the boy's head whipped around to stare at the Kahuna, “weren't we meant to get them at the same time?” Hala offered little explanation, but his energetic grandson didn't bother waiting for it anyway, turning back to Moon. “Okay well just hold on one second then!”

Still standing by Hala, the Litten and Popplio jumped in surprise as Hau suddenly crouched down before them with a smile. “Alright!” His eyes switching rapidly from one to the other, Hau considered then reached out, “I choose... you!” Human whirlwind that he was, the boy was already standing before Moon with a slightly confused but mostly happy Popplio held in his arms, a wide smile on his face. “Okay!” he bounced up and down, head nodding enthusiastically as he did so, “Let's have a Pokemon Battle!”

“Hau!” Only Hala, using the same tone on his grandson that Lillie had unsuccessfully attempted to use on Nebby before, brought the boy's pace to a stop. Almost gingerly Hau looked back at the Kahuna, Moon standing there blankly before him.

“Are you really going to challenge someone to battle without giving your name? Or receiving theirs? Come now, I know I taught you that much respect!”

Despite his words, Hala still smiled as he walked over to the group, Hau turning back to the others. “Sorry, sorry.” he ducked his head in apology, “I got really excited, I've been looking forward to this day forever!” When he looked back up again, he had that same wide smile. “Heya! I'm Hau, it's nice to meet you!”

The second Moon's name was past her lips, Hau's smile gained momentum as he jumped back. “Okay Moon! Let's have a Pokemon battle!”

Moon stared.

Behind the new arrival a small, cloud-like Pokemon of blue and purple played about.

“Ah! Nebby!”
Laughter from Kukui and Hala set the scene as Lillie rushed forward and gathered the Pokemon up, its complaining “pews” in no way deterring Lillie from returning it to the bag she kept it in. Hau laughed too. “Even Nebby wants to see our Pokemon Battle, isn't that right?” He turned back to Moon, smile clearly not going anywhere. “Let's go!”

“Alright, alright,” a heavy hand from Hala settled on Hau's shoulder, bringing the boy's energetic rampage to a halt, “hold your fire m'boy. If you're going to do this, we have a stage set up right here.” The gesture of Hala's hand drew the gathered attention of the group to the wooden platform constructed in the centre of Iki Town. “Might as well give it a testing before the festival tomorrow! What say you, young Moon, would you indulge my grandson his very first Pokemon battle? And your own, of course.”

Moon's nod came quick, the Rowlet in her arms fluttering out from them and perching on the stage herself, waiting for her trainer to come and join her. Hau fist-pumped and jumped for joy. “Yeah! We're going all out!”

Hala oversaw, taking point at the side of the stage while Hau and Moon stood opposite one another, Popplio and Rowlet before each. Hau had been raised around Pokemon all his life, watching his grandfather act as Kahuna, and showed not the slightest effect of the Trainer's Bond he and Popplio had just established. Moon seemed slightly more wavering on her feet, but she had experienced far more than just obtaining her first Pokemon. Hala was honestly surprised she'd agreed to this battle at all.

“Very well!” He raised his arms, “this will be the first battle of Moon and Rowlet, against Hau and Popplio. Each of you is a new trainer, feel your new bond with your Pokemon and stand tall for them! Are you ready?”

Moon nodded. Hau grinned.

“Ready to go, Tutu!”

Hala nodded and lowered his hands. “Begin!”

It was an awkward battle in truth, but then whose first was not? Moon and Hau both gave orders, but their responsiveness was slow. Raised together, the Rowlet and Popplio knew each other well enough to fight as they always had before, just harder, and took the show for themselves far more than their trainers.

But that was the way it always was for those new. Neither should be ashamed. Still, Hala and Kukui both took note.

Hau thought quickly, changing from one idea to the next rapidly, but overloaded his Popplio with commands. Moon committed to what she said, expecting it to be carried out before speaking again. It was a slow conflict, but ultimately the elemental match-up determined it, and Popplio barked defeat. Rowlet posed before it.

“The victory goes to Moon and Rowlet!” Hala's right hand raised, indicating the Kanto Trainer. “Well fought!”

Scooping Popplio up in his arms, Hau smiled at the Pokemon as it nudged his cheek, offering it kind words for its hard efforts. Then he approached Moon.

“Wa-ow, hey, that was awesome! Moon, right? You did great!” Hau's closeness, and excitability, was something different to the usual distance people maintained in Kanto, leading Moon to back up a
little. Hau paid it no notice. “I know I lost this time, but tomorrow I'm going all out, alright? Make sure to hold nothing back!”

The specifics of tomorrow’s festival, and her planned role in it, had yet to be explained to Moon and so she could only give a look of confusion. Kukui chuckled, and stepped up to the edge of the stage. “We can talk about tomorrow tomorrow, alright kids? Now, to celebrate your becoming Pokemon Trainers, I have a gift for each of you!”

A red device was held out to each of the children, one they would recognise with ease. A Pokedex was the other half of the gift a Professor gives to new trainers: a Pokemon they would travel with, and the electronic encyclopaedia which would record all of the Pokemon they encountered. A trainer's journey was often fraught with adventure, and from those adventures came new knowledge. Countless breakthroughs in the understanding of Pokemon and their mysteries resulted from such travels.

“With that,” Kukui beamed at the pair, “you're both fully fledged Pokemon Trainers. Congratulations!”

Hala echoed the sentiment. “Tomorrow, at the Festival of the Tapu, the two of you will begin your Island Challenge. Until that time, rest and prepare with your Pokemon. This is the start of your lives as Pokemon Trainers!”

There was weight to that announcement, the sound of ceremony behind it, the words Hala had given to hundreds of trainers before. Both Moon and Hau nodded. Kukui grinned.

“Alright then, I think it's about time I get you home, Moon. Lillie, you two should come with too, yeah. Best we don't lose you more than once today, after all!”

Lillie nodded, clutching her bag closer to her, before gasping and opening it as quickly as she could to find nothing inside. Moon, turning her head, watched the Pokemon play about nearby. Lillie, catching Moon's gaze, followed it as well.

“Oh Nebby!”

The way home was quiet, the cries of nocturnal Pokemon there but never too close. Moon was silent, Lillie focusing on keeping Nebby in her bag. At the door to Moon's house, on the outskirts of Hau'oli City, Kukui came to a halt.

“Well, here's your stop.” To Moon he held out a hand, a ball of half red, half white. “And Rowlet there's Pokeball. I'll come by tomorrow to see how things are going, alright?”

Moon's nod was met by a farewell from Lillie, which earned a smile from her. Then into her house she went. A busy day come to a close. Kukui smiled.

Time for everyone else to be off home. Tomorrow, too, would be another busy day.

It was only later that night, lying in bed and thinking of the day's occurrences, that Kukui realised just what it was he had felt when seeing Moon with her new Pokemon. It hadn't been the feeling he'd expected – of a new trainer, a child establishing the first of their Bonds. No, it was of something
bigger, older, and far more powerful.

It was of a monster without equal, towering above him.

Chapter End Notes

The concept of Trainer's Bonds, the demanding mental connection between a Trainer and their Pokemon which limits just how much a single person can do, came to me a full five months ago. A lot's happened since then, but the concept of this story stayed with me, and now it's finally begun. I'm very pleased with that.

So begins Eldritch, a tale of a trainer who is far more than anyone assumes. What will come to pass, as dimensions blur, Ultra Beasts invade, and she finds herself facing destiny? Well, we'll find out, won't we?

For those reading, I'd like to welcome you, and hope you'll stay for the ride. A kudos helps the fic a little, sharing with others helps a lot, and I love comments a whole bunch so anything you want to say please go ahead and do so. We're in for a ride with this one.

It's gonna be good.
A series of excerpts from *A Study of the Psychosomatic Bonds between Humans and Pokemon*, by Professor Oak, Professor Juniper, and Doctor Fennel. (unofficial annotations by Professors Kukui and Burnet)

A picture is printed on the inside cover of the book. It is of Professor Oak, Professor Juniper, and Doctor Fennel. Doctor Fennel is holding a Munna in her arms. All of them are smiling. The caption reads: 'Doctor Fennel's work on Pokemon Dreams proved essential to mapping the mental patterns of both Pokemon and Trainers'.

Professor Kukui has drawn himself and his wife, Professor Burnet, into the picture. Burnet is standing just behind Juniper and Fennel, her college friends, with an arm over each of their shoulders. Kukui is standing beside Professor Oak, holding a hand and two fingers up behind the distinguished Professor's head in the form of 'bunny-ears'.

**Trainer's Bonds – Known but Never Understood**

*There is not a Pokemon Trainer alive who does not, in some manner, understand the bonds between them and their Pokemon. Even so, if asked to describe those bonds, most would struggle to express any more than the basic concept – that they share power with their trusted partners. In truth, the phenomenon known as 'Trainer's Bonds' are psychic links established between people and Pokemon which connect the two together – providing the partner Pokemon, in exchange for a toll of their Trainer's physical and mental energy, with a special awareness of the Trainer's thoughts, as well as a significantly enhanced growth rate.*

*But how have these links come to be? What is the catalyst for establishment? How does the transfer of power from human to Pokemon operate? What determines the number and power of these bonds an individual can support? These questions have never truly been answered before, and so this study began with a single question:*  

*What creates a Trainer's Bond?*

**Trainer's Bonds in History**

*Awareness of Trainer's Bonds has existed since the beginning of documented history – countless references from all cultures and ages describing the powerful connections forged between human and Pokemon partners. Originally referred to by terms such as 'partnership', 'soul-bonding' and, directly translated, 'two-hearts-as-one', these bonds are as old as the relationships between people and Pokemon itself.*
As old, but far less noted, are the limitations of these bonds – the point at which a Trainer can no longer support the number or power of the Pokemon with them. By lesson from elder to younger this information has perpetuated, age to age, generation to generation; the understanding that a new Trainer will be unable to support more than a single Pokemon, that only with age and experience will the ability to maintain more and stronger Trainer's Bonds develop. Yet in spite of this, few direct references exist throughout documented history.

Perhaps most famous of these references, wherein the author muses on the sharing of power between Pokemon and human partners, are a series of journals written during the Warring States Period, in which the author provided a clear, if somewhat hyperbolic, set of observations of those at the head of each faction, and the unnaturally powerful Pokemon that fought alongside them.

Consider the excerpt from one of the latter of these journals below, and how it describes the need of the Lord in question to surrender one of his Trainer's Bonds in order to maintain one with a far more powerful Pokemon (discussion of the likely veracity of this account and the Pokemon in question is best saved for another paper).

A moustachioed figure has been sketched between the end of this paragraph and the block of text from the journal mentioned, with a three-headed draconic Pokemon drawn next to him. Professor Kukui has written in the margins 'Iconic moustache! Do you think it'd look good on me?'

In response Professor Burnet has drawn a small depiction of her face and crossed arms, with the word 'no' emblazoned above it.

'And so upon the hill looking over the thousands upon thousands aligned against him, Lord Nobunaga claimed victory by terrible surrender. His loyalest partner, she of Brutal Fury, took flight, unbound and once more alone.

In return it descended, from the heavens the Black Then Gold Dragon, and the sky and earth and all upon it burned under its light. Our Lord maintained such power for a day and a night and when the sun rose again the battlefield itself was unmade.

Yet when the Lord collapsed and the Dragon returned to the skies above, his true partner did not return. It would be three moons before the Lord and she crossed paths once more.'

Professor Kukui has doodled a large, serpentine dragon Pokemon underneath this excerpt.

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Brainwaves and Dreams – from Psychic Scans to Delving the Subconscious

It is well understood that a Pokemon Trainer of significant skill has the ability to identify other Trainers of note. For a long time this was believed to be an instinct honed by experience, the specific mechanical reasoning left unexplored. Today it is understood that what a Trainer senses is the powerful Bonds between another Trainer and their Pokemon, the number and power of those Bonds indicating the number and power of Pokemon that Trainer has with them. The degrees of sense an individual has varies by that individual – with distance, precision, and minimum amount of power detectable differing on a case by case basis. However it has been observed that Trainers with strong Bonds to Pokemon of the Psychic typing display far stronger sensory abilities than those without. (Like how that police officer in Hau'oli with the Oranguru can tell a Trainer's skills really well!)

Printed next is a picture of a number of people and Pokemon, Professor Oak amongst them, taken in front of a large building. The caption below it reads:
The initial stages of research into Trainer's Bonds were conducted in collaboration with the Saffron City Pokemon Gym in the Kanto Region, which has over the decades remained a pre-eminent destination for Psychic-type Trainers the world over.

In consultation with the Gym Leader of Saffron City, attention was moved quickly from Trainer's Bonds themselves to what she believed were their source – unique 'patterns' she claimed people and Pokemon alike to have. Bonds proved useful for identifying a Trainer's current potential but, she claimed, those patterns were the key to understanding them.

With efforts from her and her partner Alakazam, a number of these mental patterns were produced, drawn by the Pokemon while scanning the individual before it. The patterns render as jagged, monocolour geometrical messes, yet the Gym Leader insisted they were accurate portrayals. The first sketches are printed below.

A set of three drawings, labelled 'Bulbasaur', 'Charmander', and 'Squirtle', follow the paragraph above. Each appears to be a mess of straight and curving lines of black on white, with little to be understood of them. Professor Kukui has sketched each of Alola's Starter Pokemon above the patterns of their Kanto equivalents.

It was at this point, pursuing these 'mental patterns', that contact was established with the Dream Laboratory of the Unova Region. Doctor Fennel, introduced by Professor Juniper, displayed similar understanding of mental patterns to the Saffron City Gym Leader, and had been identifying ways to produce accurate scans of the patterns from her work with Pokemon dreams.

A back-and-forth communication between Kanto and Unova resulted in numerous trips from those involved, and with the assistance of the Saffron City Gym Leader and her partner Pokemon, the first Dream Scan was successfully performed.

A new set of three far more detailed patterns have been printed, labelled in order, 'Oak', 'Juniper', 'Fennel'. A piece of paper is folded in half between the pages at this point, with two more patterns printed on it, labelled 'Kukui' and 'Burnet'.

With the advent of the Dream Scan, which could produce digital representation of human and Pokemon mental patterns, a series of discoveries were made in rapid succession about the way these patterns relate to the bonds between people and Pokemon. While there is still more yet to identify, including the nature of how patterns are determined, this is still considered one of the greatest breakthroughs in understanding the relationship between humans and Pokemon to date.

At the bottom of this page Professor Burnet has sketched a small caricature of Doctor Fennel with abnormally large eyes filled with sparkles. Professor Kukui wrote 'A Dream Come True!' next to the figure, which Professor Burnet followed with a simple 'boo'.

Pokemon Typing Patterns and Trainer Biases

This section is headed by a set of three images, this time labelled 'Grass', 'Fire', and 'Water'. The images are a large volume of mental patterns superimposed over one another, yet they all bear enough similarity that an aggregate image results. Professor Kukui has helpfully labelled the diagram “so cool!”
Despite the shock of those who first observed the similarity between patterns of the same Pokemon type, the Saffron City Gym Leader remained frustratingly unsurprised by this. The concept that Pokemon of the same type have similar patterns did not seem out of the ordinary to her, and indeed she was quick to point out that her own mental pattern bore a similarity of its own to the aggregate for the Psychic type.

Typing Biases for Trainers have long been known of: many Trainers display a proclivity to raising Pokemon of specific types – are capable of maintaining bonds with more and stronger Pokemon of that type than others. It is now believed that these biases are created by similarity between a Trainer and the archetype of a Pokemon type's mental pattern. The result is that, for example, a Trainer with a mental pattern similar enough to the Fire-type of Pokemon would be better able to support Trainer's Bonds with Fire-type Pokemon. (The Fairy-bias being an actual real thing might explain Captain Mina's entire situation with the Tapu then)

Over the next series of pages, archetype patterns for every Pokemon type, consisting of a number of superimposed patterns, have been printed. At the end is a chart with the following statement:

A survey conducted at the Unova Pokemon League Tournament recorded the mental patterns of all willing Trainers, comparing them to Pokemon archetypes. Through this, we can see a rough estimate of the number of Trainers that match each type, and thus the likeliness of finding a Trainer with that specific bias. (is anyone at all surprised that Dragon is the rarest?)

A footnote, at the end of the chapter reads:

The ability for all Pokemon to establish psychic connections with their Trainers is a significant topic: indicating that on some level all Pokemon possess some form of psychic ability, another of the rare few commonalities across all species. (Psychic bonds, Toxic, ... what else?) (They dream the same) (Oh yeah!)

Ongoing Mysteries of Trainer's Bonds

While the study of mental patterns has led to greater understanding of Trainer's Bonds, the core limits of those Bonds remain poorly understood.

The limitations of an individual's Trainer's Bonds vary by that individual, with some people only able to maintain a single, low-power Pokemon, while others can support six high powered partners. Research indicates these limits exist on a bell-curve, with the majority of trainers able to support three or four well-trained Pokemon by adulthood.

However the reasons for these limitations are yet to be understood, no common thread in the mental patterns observed. Neither understood is the growth rate of a Trainer – while time and experience allows many to support more and more powerful Pokemon, the Trainer's mental patterns show no change to reflect this.

Similarly the reason for the six Pokemon limit remains unknown – no Trainer in recorded history ever having displayed the ability to consistently maintain more; those few who have attempted to do so quickly severing the seventh Bond due to described 'severe mental and physical strain'.

The Pokemon Storage System, which acts as a digital stasis for Pokemon stored within it, also prevents Bonds from being maintained, allowing Trainers who deposit Pokemon within to successful sever their Trainer's Bonds, often done so when a Pokemon's growth has exceeded the Trainer's
ability to maintain that Bond. However the need to sever and re-establish Bonds when changing Pokemon, when combined with the automatic release program designed to prevent the inhumane and illegal act of placing a Pokemon in indefinite stasis, has led many Trainers to keep at most one or two extra Pokemon, while many more will simply eschew the system altogether.

Research into maintaining a muted version of Trainer's Bonds through the PSS, which do not take a demand to re-establish, is on-going.

A new paper rests next to the open study, sitting upon a desk in Professor Kukui's lab. It is presently blank, bar for the title written across it.

Observations of the Limitless Phenomenon, by Professor Kukui

Chapter End Notes

This was a difficult chapter for me to write - rewritten multiple times over the past week. It's information dense, I wanted to avoid going on an endless rant about mechanical minutiae, so I did my best to make sure that everything in it has value. There's some cool stuff I came up with writing this that wouldn't have made sense to be written in here, but I've written it down in my notes, so we'll hopefully see it again.

There is also some very cool stuff in here itself, in coming up with this chapter I've thought of some very cool ideas I'm quite pleased with.

Thanks for reading this chapter, with the setting now thoroughly established, it's full steam ahead, I'm fairly sure the next chapter will be far easier for me to write than this one. Getting the tough stuff done early! That's the way to do it.

If you enjoyed this, please consider leaving a comment with your thoughts, and sharing this fic with friends you think would also enjoy it - word of mouth is the best way to get around. Please look forward to what comes next, we're just getting started.
Festival of the Tapu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The best term one could use to describe Moon’s mother was ‘lighter’. In complexion and hair to begin with, but far more noticeably personality, she was a woman who expressed endless love and energy for the world around her.

Newest to discover this was Moon’s Rowlet who, as soon as Moon passed the threshold into her house, was swept up along with Moon herself in a powerful hug from the older woman. Every youth’s first Pokemon was a reason to celebrate, and for Jewellery, mother of Moon, this was one of the proudest moments of her life. Her own daughter, a fully-fledged Pokemon Trainer! She couldn’t be happier.

And though not tonight, late as it was, tomorrow would be a day for celebration. She would see to it. Thus when tomorrow came, another beautiful day under the light of Alola's sun, Jewellery, Jewel to friends, scooped up her Meowth – third and final member of their family to make the pilgrimage from Kanto to Alola – instructed her daughter to ignore the numerous unpacked boxes still filling the house, and announced that today would be a day out on the town! A celebration, just for their little family, one bigger today than it had been the day before. Rowlet, already having been doted on by the woman since the morning began, preened itself to be the centre of such attention. Moon smiled at the sight.

Hau’oli City, largest of Alola, numbers first of three major cities – the population centre of Melemele Island just as the cities Heahea and Malie would be for the next two islands to come. The noise, the bustle, the constant movement of people and Pokemon, it was similar enough to the larger cities of Kanto to remind Moon of them, but different enough to make those memories little more than memories. The move to Alola had been, all things considered, a rapid thing, the separation paying for every step of the way. In quiet nights her mother had spoken to Moon with honesty to prepare her for what came next, but there was still something surreal to this city that wasn't quite like the ones she knew.

She stayed by her mother's side, Rowlet held tight in her arms.

“Ah a salon!”

The roads of Hau'oli City were interesting – lanes for vehicles kept separate from lanes for Pokemon: Tauros, Stoutland, and even the occasional Machamp being seen bearing human passengers along. Moon’s mother had called a taxi to take the two from the outskirts of Hau'oli, their home with its view out over the sea, into the city centre to enjoy the day as they saw fit. Along the way she’d made mention of wanting to try out Ride Pokemon herself. She and Moon watched them from the windows of the car as it went.

The cluster of shops in the centre of Hau'oli had already captured Jewellery's delight but, as she stopped herself to remember, this day was a celebration of her daughter. With a smile she looked down to Moon, seeing her holding Rowlet close to her chest, and drew her attention.

“Would you like to go in? I'm sure they'd be willing to give your Rowlet a makeover too.”

Given the room to think, Moon nodded and Jewellery smiled. The older woman knew she'd have
plenty of time to explore Hau'oli at her own pace, but also that Moon would soon be embarking upon her own journey. Perhaps, as much as this was a celebration of Moon's first Pokemon, this was also the last chance in a while for her mother to genuinely spend time with her. After all, no-one completes a Pokemon journey the same as they begin it.

That was an unquestionable truth of the world.

“Welcome welcome!”

Greeted by the staff of the salon, Moon and her mother, along with Rowlet and Meowth, were quickly fussed over, welcomed, and quizzed on being unknown faces. “From Kanto!” With delight the woman behind the counter smiled, “I have a cousin in Kanto, she lives in Celadon City did you live- no? But you went there often how wonderful!”

As Moon’s mother energetically discussed Kanto and Alola, another member of the staff approached Moon. “Alola,” she gave a wave of her hands, a gesture Moon had seen before, paired with that same word as well. One hand still holding Rowlet, she moved the other to mimic it. The woman grinned at her. “That's a traditional greeting of the Alola Region! Use it with a smile!”

“Two beauty treatments and two Pokemon grooming sessions, thank you very much!” Moon's mother double-checked her daughter's reaction, but Moon seemed fine with it, and so she smiled and completed the payment. A good way to begin their city day.

The Pokemon were quickly fawned over. A Rowlet was rare enough, being one of the special starter Pokemon that only Trainers of note would have. Meowth, being a Kanto variant, received its own fair share of attention, and smugly enjoyed it after having its owner prioritise the new Rowlet ever since she came home. Unaware of the cat Pokemon's jealousy, Rowlet preened under the attention, each leaning into the brushing and care.

Moon and her mother both enjoyed the sight.

“Would you like something done with your hair? A new colour or style?”

“Oh!” Jewellery suddenly turned to Moon, eyes wide at the realisation, “yes!” Her nod earned a quizzical look from her daughter, but Jewellery was not to be dissuaded. Not until she'd made her case at least. “When taking a Pokemon journey, it's important to start with a change! Something new to keep in mind that everything is new! When I took my own, I'd tied my hair back in a ponytail, see?” To illustrate, Jewellery moved her hands to pull back her hair, showing the look off to her daughter. “Moon, would you like to as well?”

Moon ran a hand through her hair. Alola was far warmer than Kanto, she'd already felt the heat in her dark hair since arriving, and so the thought of doing something had come up. Still, this...

Her consideration lasted until she saw the look in her mother's eyes, excitement and hope in seeing her daughter follow some of her own footsteps. Moon nodded. Jewellery beamed. The hairstylist standing behind them smiled and set to work.

An interview played over the radio.

*We're here with Hau'oli City Radio, speaking to Alola's very own Professor Kukui. Good morning Professor! How are you today?*

*Doing great, yeah! Today's another fine day in Alola for everyone, people and Pokemon alike!*

*That it is, Professor! A busy day too, especially for you. Over the last few months, you've been*
spearheading the development of a Pokemon League in Alola! Can you tell us how that's going?

Well thanks for asking, yeah! Progress is smooth up on Mount Lanakila, constructing a League where the light of Alola first falls! We've been working with the Kahuna to make sure our Guardian Deities approve, and they seem thrilled with it! I think they're as excited as I am to see the best of Alola's best go head to head, yeah!

Excitement about the upcoming League is rife amongst the population of Alola, with many people claiming it will be a new age for those who undertake the Island Challenge. But at the same time there is some resistance, especially from older generations of Alola, claiming this modernisation is stripping away the Island Challenge's soul. How do you respond to those claims, Professor?

The most important thing for me is not to change the spirit of the Island Challenge, which is why we've been working so hard with the Kahuna and Tapu to make a Pokemon League that keeps all of Alola's traditions alive. That's why we're building it on Mount Lanakila, and why the Kahuna will be acting as the Elite Four of Alola. This way we can keep all of the traditions of the Island Challenge, while still adapting to the Pokemon League format and producing a Champion who'll be acknowledged the world over!

Exciting times. Well, Professor, thank you for your time, and we wish you the best with your endeavours.

One last thing!

Yes?

To any Trainers out there starting or on their Island Challenges, don't forget to give it your all, and show off your best moves at the Alola Pokemon League! We're looking forward to seeing you there!

Songs and stories passed by on the radio as Moon and her mother were cared for by the salon stylists, while Meowth and Rowlet were lavished with attention and basked in it. Indeed, when the treatments were over and the pair of humans prepared to leave, it took some coaxing to get their Pokemon partners to come along.

Jewellery looked at her daughter, hair tied back, convincing her Rowlet to settle on her arm, and felt within her a powerful sting of emotion. Pride and joy, her daughter, a beautiful and incredible person who would be a Pokemon Trainer with great love in her heart. But also a little sadness. Pokemon journeys always ended in change. The Moon that would soon leave her house would not be the one to return. This was the way so many people changed, the beginning of leaving the purity of childhood behind.

She'd find her home far too lonely without her daughter in it.

Maybe it was time to get another Meowth.

Following a morning's relaxation and care within the salon, it was time for brunch, and Jewellery made sure to choose a place that would provide her daughter's favourites – fruit so fresh and juicy it could only be grown in Alola, the sweetness of honey tarts, and milk poured with creamy froth. To Rowlet Moon fed slices of the fruit as well, the Grass Quill Pokemon cooing happily as Moon looked on it with a smile and fondness Jewellery had rarely seen before. Oh her daughter had a love for Pokemon that was powerful indeed.

Such pride she felt. Such joy.

The slightest tinge of sadness.
Extending a hand she patted her daughter's, Moon looking at her quizzically. Jewellery nodded. “Your Rowlet's eating well, she's going to grow big and strong, just like you have! Make sure to look after her, alright?” Moon nodded, expression showing thought. She thought deeply, and spoke rarely. But Jewellery saw understanding.

She knew her daughter would do well. So proud.

Having eaten, it was time to shop! Moon would need a new bag for carrying all she collected on her journey, a proper Pokemon Trainer's satchel, as well as whatever she felt she needed to begin. No expense was too much, and Jewellery insisted her daughter choose whatsoever she desired.

The bag was cute, a watermelon design to it with a green undercarriage and red/black pattern on its side. For clothing, Moon found a new flower-print top, similar to her own, but with stronger red flowers upon it, and wore it happily once purchased. Similarly a pair of sandals caught her eye, and she seemed to enjoy the freedom of them over the sneakers she'd worn before. Her chicken-comb hat she insisted on keeping though, despite some slight coaxing on Jewellery's part that perhaps some of the other headwear on sale was worth consideration.

She should have known it was a fruitless attempt. Her daughter loved that hat.

Clothes for a journey collected, next up was supplies! There was a Pokemon Center close to the outskirts of Hau'oli they lived within, but with the two in the city centre they decided to visit the one nearby. It was bustling, both Trainers and those with family Pokemon interacting while their Pokemon were cared for. Moon kept close to Jewellery, who forded her way through the crowd to the PokeMart. She flashed the cashier a smile.

“Okay Moon,” she turned to look down at her daughter, “whatever you'd like to buy!”

“Is your daughter a new Trainer, ma'am?” The cashier extended a brochure, which Jewellery passed down to Moon to peruse, while extolling how her daughter had become a new Trainer just the night before, and even already had a Pokemon battle! Prompted by the cashier to continue, Moon tried to focus on studying just what was available for new trainers to buy while her mother sung great praises of her.

After a while she did make her choice, a basic collection of healing items acquired and stocked – ideal starting supplies for any new Trainer. Then the last of her choices caught the worker's attention.

“While we do offer Pokeballs to all Trainers, are you sure you want to purchase them now? Your daughter will not be able to maintain many Pokemon and will run the risk of overextending herself if she catches more.”

For a brief moment Jewellery considered. With only Meowth with her, a Pokemon she'd had for years, she'd forgotten how demanding a Trainer's first Bonds could be.

But then she looked at Moon and felt something, something deeply instinctive within her, that told her Moon was prepared for anything. It wasn't even a sense she was aware of. She simply felt confidence. Turned back to the cashier with a smile.

“My daughter will be fine, thank you.”

Moon left the Pokemon Center with five fresh Pokeballs stored in the bag she carried.

Hau'oli continued to be a city of energy, people and Pokemon all about. The lanes marked for Pokemon always had one in sight, though the air above remained clear – laws strict about using Pokemon safely for transport inside the city. Jewellery held the lead, but always kept an eye on her
daughter's interest, and lured many expressions of curiosity and happiness at that curiosity's fulfillment from her. Only after a later lunch did the thought of returning home come to them, and only when the light of the day was beginning to take on orange tones, the afternoon mixing into the sun's rays, that they acted on that thought. Another taxi – Jewellery would try a Ride Pokemon another day – and the two were returned back to Hau'oli's outskirts. Back towards their home.

The outskirts were an expanding district, despite protests from the neighbouring Iki Town that Hau'oli City was encroaching upon them. The route from the outskirts to Iki had numerous houses along it, Trainers of families that could afford such residences populous in the grassy fields outside the old town. Jewellery had met a few of her neighbours so far, but there were always more to greet. She waved at another when she and Moon arrived at their house.

A new home to become part of. Leaving the past behind.

In quiet nights she prayed this was best for Moon as well.

The afternoon passed quietly, the two relaxing from the day's excitement in the city, before Moon stood, called Rowlet to her, and walked out the front door. It wasn't yet time for her journey to begin in earnest but still, Jewellery considered, her daughter was showing the first signs of her independence. She'd see her again at the festival in Iki that night, and for a moment wondered if she'd still see the same daughter she had that day.

Shaking her head, Jewellery turned her attention back to the boxes yet to be unpacked. Waiting around for things had never been her style. She'd keep herself busy until it was time to go.

Though maybe the more she left for later, the more she'd have to distract herself too.

Maybe so.

Bustling with more life and energy than ever, Iki Town and its festival were in full swing already, even with the official opening still awaiting the setting of the sun – why waste good partying time after all! Already having had their fair share of the festival food available, Hau and his Popplio sat by a bench close to the town entrance, awaiting the arrival of the other half of the Festival Battle.

Now where could she be...?

“I wonder how Moon has been since yesterday...” Lillie, having arrived in Iki with Kukui earlier that day – he had a lot to discuss with the Kahuna it seemed – had gravitated towards Hau as being the person she knew the most here, though keeping pace with him had proven difficult. He never really slowed down at all. “I hope she's feeling alright, after everything that happened...”

“She'll be fine I know it!” Hau smiled at Lillie, the Popplio sitting in his lap giving a reassuring bark. “When we fought her last night she was just thinking about Pokemon, I could tell! That's all she's been about today too, I'll bet!”

“I see...” somewhat unsure of Hau's proclamation, Lillie considered all she'd read about Trainers and Pokemon. She could somewhat understand how Hau might claim to understand Moon's thoughts, but even still...

“Oh hey! Moon!” With loudness and excitement both Hau rocketed to his feet, the dislodged Popplio recovering with a neat flip and pose upon landing. Lillie turned to the entrance too, green eyes settling upon the girl walking through its entrance, her brown eyes roaming over the entirety of the
“Festival of the Tapu. Hau ran up to greet her.

“Hey hey! How’re you doing, how’re you feeling? Been getting along well with Rowlet? Me and Popplio have been working hard all day so you’d better be prepared for us to go all out tonight, alright? It's going to be nothing like last night was, you'll see!”

Unsure of just how to handle Hau's absolute enthusiasm, Moon made eye contact with Lillie, who couldn't help but feel a moment's solidarity. That said...

“You've changed your hair?” Walking up beside Hau, Lillie made the observation, causing Hau to do a double-take to actually notice. Moon nodded at Lillie. She considered. “It's nice. Maybe... one day I...”

In the pause of Lillie's thoughts Hau began talking again. “Hey so Moon you are ready, right? I know Professor Kukui'll be here soon and then we do the festival opening when it's sundown and then we have the Festival Battle! You ready for that?”

It wasn't... particularly like anyone had explained the Festival of the Tapu to Moon. By the focus in her eyes she appeared to have pieced a good portion of it together, but Lillie still wondered just how little anyone had told the girl. She tried to fill in what she could.

“The Festival of the Tapu celebrates the Guardian Deities of Alola, the four Tapu who each live on one of Alola's four islands. It's to honour them, and so there's food and prayer taken and given in their name.” Moon nodded in response to Lillie's explanation, her eyes focused on the blonde-haired girl. Hau took over.

“And to top off the Festival, we have the Festival Battle!” He jumped, punctuating the motion further with a fist thrown to the heavens. “That'll be us, because we're starting our Island Challenge! We have a Pokemon Battle, which the Tapu love, and then celebrate some more!”

“That's the gist of it,” though the voice of Kahuna Hala had gravel to it, he spoke with warmth that reached the heart as he approached the group from the celebrating crowd, “although our festival has never been too large a thing. Just a little get-together we do here in Iki. Still, none of us fail to go all out, so you shouldn't either, alright you two?”

“Yeah!” Hau's energetic affirmation did not distract Hala from seeing the quiet determination in Moon's eyes. She was ready too, even if she said it in far fewer words. Good. He didn't quite have that one's measure yet, but she seemed to have the same intent the very best of Trainers did.

Very good indeed.

“Pokemon battling...” Lillie drew Moon's attention, her words far quieter, “I don't really like seeing them hurt, even though they love to battle all the same. I guess that's why I'll never be a Pokemon Trainer.” The shake of her bag, muffled cries of the Pokemon within, distracted Lillie from her thoughts, and she opened the zipper just so to try and shush Nebby. Moon watched her intently.

“Hey there you three!” Next to enter Iki Town, walking through its arch with his Rockruff and Moon's mother a step behind, Professor Kukui waved with a smile. “And Kahuna Hala too! I'd stopped by Moon's place to pick her up and maybe give a little intro to battling wild Pokemon, but her mother here told me she'd already gone out on her own! Well Moon, seems you've done well for yourself today, so good job! You're going to be a fine Pokemon Trainer, oh yeah!”

Jewellery swept in to ply Moon with questions about her afternoon, Lillie falling back from the far higher energy woman – she felt more like she should be Hau's mother than Moon's in Lillie's opinion.
– and watched as Moon attempted to keep pace with her mother's attention. For a moment the sight of Moon, somewhat overwhelmed but still clearly fine with her mother's presence, caused a darker feeling Lillie would never admit to having to rise within her. She looked away.

“Alright alright!” Hala's brusque voice once more sounded out, “the sun's starting to set, the light of Alola will soon be under the moon’s care. It's time to start the Festival proper, so please come join everyone in the centre of town. The Festival Battle will be just a little later. I'll announce it when.”

Realising she only had a minute or two at best to survey the outer reaches of Iki Town, Moon's mother rushed off, leaving her daughter with Hau and Lillie. Kukui laughed at the sight, sending his Rockruff off to race after her – the Pokemon already endeared to the older woman who'd petted it most affectionately as soon as she'd laid eyes upon it.

“Okay you three, let's head up,” taking point, Kukui led the way, Moon, Hau, and Lillie falling behind. Hau continued to pepper Moon with questions about how ready she was for their battle. Moon avoided them, but sometimes a little smile showed a readiness Lillie began to question whether Hau himself was prepared for.

In the centre of town Hala led the official opening of festivities.

“We are gathered here today,” he stood atop the platform in the town centre, the platform Moon and Hau had experienced their first Pokemon Battle atop the night before, “to celebrate the Tapu, Guardians of Alola, our divine protectors. In tribute to them we laugh, love, and live, and express our thanks by the lives spent under Alola's light! Tonight, as that light is passed from sun to moon, eat and be merry, give thanks to the lives we may spend thanks to the Tapu's care, and think well of Alola. A battle as offering will soon be had between two of Alola's newest stars. Thank you all, and enjoy the night!”

Applause was voracious, the crowd thrilled as always to be part of the festival. Hau, having caught his second wind as far as festival food was considered, raced off to try more of what was on offer, a far more restrained Lillie sampling what caught her eye as well.

Moon, keeping more to the edges of the crowd, noticed Professor Kukui speaking on a phone. As soon as the call closed he, with a slight frown on his face, strode through the crowd towards Hala.

Moon followed after.

“– didn't think she'd be in so soon so I-”

“You have to go now? This is the opposite of what we'd arranged.”

“I know but it's not just picking her up, it's the entire city council meeting, the interviews – they were scheduled for as soon as she got here. I need to be there for them.”

“Hmph.”

Moon, slightly eavesdropping, slightly considering the food available in the radius of the conversation, circled the pair.

“Look, it's not all bad, Hala, you announcing the two of them might even be better! They're going to be representing the new Island Challenge, so if the Kahuna of Melemele in Iki, one of the more traditional of Alola's townships, announces them, that's legitimacy too, right?”

“I'm not taking over for you, Kukui: convincing Alola to move towards this League model is your affair.”
“I know, I know, I messed up, but I’ve gotta go into Hau’oli or it’s going to be worse for us. Please? Pretty please, Kahuna, Cherubi on top?”

A long-suffering sigh, built out of decades of knowing the Professor, emanated from the Kahuna. Hala shook his head. “Alright, alright, I’ll lead the Festival Battle, but any pushback you get from Iki for not taking part in their traditions is on your head.”

“Appreciated,” Kukui gave a rapid version of the Alolan greeting, turning to dash off, Pokeball already in hand, “I’ll be back as soon as I cannnnnn.”

He didn't even wait to be out of the town's limits before releasing a huge bird from the ball, boarding its back and racing off into the sky. Moon, along with a few other of Iki's residents, watched him depart.

“Not even staying for the Festival,” a grumble from one of those nearest to her reached Moon's ears, “and he talks about keeping Alola's spirit in that League of his.”

“The Island Challenge is fine the way it is,” another of Iki's residents agreed, “we don't need his League.”

“We don't need any change!”

Moon slipped away from the conversation without notice.

It wasn't much longer before Kahuna Hala found her, instructing the young Trainer to head up to the platform for the Festival Battle. As she ascended the steps, fingers running over the Pokeballs in her bag, Moon watched Hau appear opposite her, his Popplio jumping up beside him. Moon's fingers curled around one of the balls and withdrew it.

Hala took centre-stage.

“I present to you, and to the Tapu, two of Alola's newest Trainers! They will battle tonight as offering to our Tapu, to Alola's Guardians, and Tapu Koko, Melemele's own.” A hand raised indicated Hau. “Before you stands Hau, grandson to the Kahuna, known to all of Iki.” A rush of laughter went through the crowd at this, well aware of just how thoroughly the Kahuna's grandson had made himself known over the past eleven years.

Hala raised his other hand.

“Before you stands Moon, come from lands on far to become part of Alola under its light! She is one who has met with Tapu Koko itself, been approved of by our Guardian Deity!”

This rush through the crowd wasn't laughter. It was murmuring, quick and fervent, individual voices hard to make out. But Moon heard her name, and Tapu Koko's, repeatedly. She kept her eyes focused on Hau before her.

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“This battle!” Hala raised both hands, “will be a one versus one Pokemon battle, a meeting of each of these new Trainers' partners! And the true beginning of their Island Challenge! Nowww-”

Hala's drawn out word, preparing to announce the start, was cut off by a new and louder wave of murmuring, those of Iki, who lived with Pokemon every day of their lives, familiar enough with the nature of what binds Pokemon and Trainers to be stunned by what they saw.

For as Hala announced the conditions of the battle, that it would only afford one Pokemon to each challenger, Moon had returned the Pokeball she was holding to her bag and withdrawn another.
Few missed the connotations of what that meant.

Hala shook his head, and raised his hands higher. Then dropped them. “Begin!”

Hau’s Popplio charged forward. Moon, with a flick of her wrist, unleashed Rowlet onto the stage. And each took command.

The difference, in comparison to the conflict of the night before, was heaven and earth. Each of the Trainers had found their stride with their Pokemon, and their training in the day had given new confidence to their commands. Hau understood his Popplio’s movement, the way it bounced and jumped, never still much like himself. Already the Bond between them was strong, already Popplio moved as fast as Hau could command. Such was the kind of Trainer raised in an environment such as Hau, always surrounded by Pokemon, always around a Trainer of such skill as his grandfather. Truly, his potential was astounding.

Moon’s smile gleamed like a knife.

Rowlet was a hunter, a Pokemon of swift and silent movement, scything through the air to approach its prey. The movement of Moon’s own hands, far louder than the majority of her words, was met by Rowlet’s own, following her directives and hunting the stage itself. Hau’s commands were strong. He ordered Popplio well, pushed back Rowlet, kept a strong defense.

But the hunt was Moon and her partner’s, their offence eternal, and by pressure, by teamwork, by unerring focus, victory came to their hands. A storm of leaves Popplio had not evaded lifted it into the air and Rowlet slammed down, claws pushing the sea lion Pokemon into the ground. Its bark of surrender sounded out in the night.

Hala raised a hand.

“The winner is: Moon!”

There was a moment, when Hau was picking Popplio up in his arms, the blue Pokemon nuzzling his cheek by way of apology for the battle lost, that he looked silent. But only that moment before he looked back up at Moon with a smile as wide as could be.

“Hooo-ah! Moon! That was awesome!”

And with that announcement the crowd burst into celebration, thrilled by the battle that had taken place, proof above all things that these two Trainers, these two who would be undertaking their Island Challenges, would bring pride to the name of Alola. How could they not, with skills such as these?

Yet even their cheers, loud as they were, could not compare to the cry that swept over the treetops, a crowing that was only heard perhaps once in a year by the luckiest. Hala raised his head and laughed at it, his own smile clearly showing the family resemblance he had to Hau.

“So Tapu Koko approves!” His announcement drew all eyes to him, “Hau! Moon! You have both done splendidly! Let this mark the beginning of your Island Challenge, your journey across the Alola Region! I have for you here,” withdrawn from his coat, Hala stepped to Hau, handing a charm to him, before turning to Moon, “an Island Challenge Amulet! This will signify you are on an Island Challenge, so that all will know you battle under Alola’s light!”

There was weight to the amulet, Moon considered, as she felt it settle in her hand. Swinging her bag around, she affixed the amulet to a strap. Good. Rowlet, having settled before her, cooed.
Hala watched as Moon knelt down, ran a hand over the Pokemon's head, before withdrawing a Pokeball from her bag to allow it to rest. He hadn't misseen earlier, Moon had been holding a different Pokeball before he'd announced the battle. Did she truly already have two Pokemon? But she didn't show in the least any strain at all.

Actually, wasn't that strange regardless? Hau, raised around Hala's powerful Pokemon, and a natural font of energy, was of course doing fine, but Moon didn't have that same pedigree, Hala was sure. Then how was it that forging a Trainer's Bond with Rowlet – and a powerful one too by the way they battled already – hadn't affected her? How was it that she had, apparently, a second Pokemon already?

Kukui had made a poor choice by going off to his meetings and missing this battle. Hala would grill him for that later. For now though...

“Young Moon,” the girl looked up at Hala before her, “before you take your leave I have something to return to you. Come find me after the crowd has dispersed, I will be waiting.” She nodded, quiet as ever, and Hala nodded in return. Took his leave from the stage, Moon and Hau doing the same, the crowd surging around them. They'd done so well! Such great Trainers! And! And!

“Hey hey!” Voices accosted Moon, “Was that another Pokemon you had?” “Which one?” “Show us!” “How're you so good at battling?” “Where are you from?” “How did-” “Who are-” “What is-” “You-”

“Moon!”

Shoving her way through the crowd, her never-changing smile pushing back those who might complain, Jewellery arrived before her daughter, arms extended, “You did so well! I'm so proud!” There was a presence, those closest would insist, around Jewellery that said to give her and her daughter space. So they did. And the festival continued on.

Once free of the crowd, Jewellery let Moon go to face Hau and Lillie, who'd spotted her and moved on over. Look at those three, her daughter already having found friends. Jewellery smiled and kept to the background. Good.

This was good.

“That was...” Lillie struggled for the words, her dislike of violence marred by the sight of Moon in the battle, an aura of power around her, “you were incredible, Moon.” A slightly hurt noise quickly had Lillie turn around and wave apology. “You too, Hau! You both did so well! And so did your Pokemon. I... I don't think I could ever do that.”

“Don't sell yourself short, Lillie!” Hau shook his head, “If you love Pokemon you can do anything, that's what my gramps told me! Isn't that right, Moon?” Moon's eyes moved from Hau's to Lillie's, from the confident to the wavering. She nodded.

“Now let's go get food! Come on, you haven't had anything til you've had Iki Town Malasadas! Come on!” Practically dragging the two girls, Hau led them through the crowd.

So the night pressed on.

No-one noticed the specific moment Professor Kukui returned, just that at some point he was amongst the crowd again, talking up a storm. While more tradition focused factions of Iki disapproved of the Professor's plans, his charisma allowed him to charm most everyone he spoke to, and even now Kukui succeeded in selling people upon his League idea. But those were the easy
The hard ones would not go as smoothly.

With constant talk of the Festival Battle around him, Kukui soon heard the accusation that Moon had a second Pokemon, his eyebrows threatening to achieve lift-off at the thought. Hala couldn't confirm it, and Moon was busy with Hau and Lillie for the night, the trio attempting to coax Nebby down from a tall tree, unsure how the tiny Pokemon had even made its way up there.

He'd follow up on it tomorrow. Tonight was a night to party. And party they did.

Only when the festival began to wind down, the crowd breaking apart, the children reaching that point of true tiredness, did Hala catch a moment with Moon. She was wavering, which he found more relaxing than he should. It was good to know she was capable of being tired.

“This belongs to you,” he held out the object he had forged since meeting Moon the night before. “It is a Z-Ring, made from the Sparkling Stone which Tapu Koko gave you. Z-Rings are the means to draw power from Z-Crystals, which you will obtain upon your Island Challenge. Professor Kukui will be sure to tell you more tomorrow.”

Moon took the white bracelet, considered it, then clipped it around her left wrist where it stayed tight. A few movements of her arm showed herself testing its weight, but she didn't complain when she lowered it. Hala nodded at the sight.

“Tapu Koko,” he began, well aware Moon's focus was fading, “made an important choice in giving you that Stone. We may not know its true intentions, but still we must all rise to meet its expectations. I wish you well, little Moon, in your Island Challenge. I have every faith you will rise to the occasion.”

Moon was quiet, but for a moment her eyes met Hala's and he remembered every Trainer to ever pass the Island Challenge, to overcome the four Kahuna atop the peak of Mount Lanakila. Bastions of incredible strength and power. For her to remind him of them all... he nodded with a smile. “I'm sure.”

And that was it for the festival, Jewellery and Kukui moving to collect Moon and Lillie, the latter having finally convinced Nebby to stay in her bag. Even in the dead of night there were Pokemon active, but Kukui's Rockruff kept them at bay with loud barks, leaving room for the others to walk safely. Lillie and Moon, each tired, stayed close by one another.

“One day,” the only time she spoke, Lillie said this, “I hope to meet Tapu Koko again. To thank it for saving Nebby, and you. I truly hope I can.”

To meet Tapu Koko again... to that, Moon agreed.

The four broke into pairs at Moon's house, she and her mother entering while Kukui and Lillie continued on to the lab by the beach. Inside Moon was quick to embrace her bed, exhausted by this longest of days. Jewellery would do the same soon after, though sleep would come to her a little slower. Too much energy at seeing her daughter shining upon the stage that night. Far too much.

For a moment Jewellery looked in on Moon as she slept, smiled at the sight of her in the dark, Rowlet held close. This was good.

Moon would do well indeed.

Perhaps it was because she was tired after the long day. Perhaps she hadn't given weighty
consideration to the rumours of Moon’s second Pokemon. Perhaps the dark and the blanket were just enough that it didn't stick out to Jewellery at all. But she went to sleep that night thinking of how cute Moon was, sleeping with her Rowlet held close.

She hadn't noticed at all the five other Pokemon curled up around her.

Chapter End Notes

At some point before starting this chapter I spent an excess of time hemming and hawing about whether to give names to canon characters that don't have names. Did people without surnames need them? Did people without first names? I was leaning towards no right up until the second paragraph where I named Moon’s mother so...

As we go along, I'd like to remind you to keep an eye out for the similarities yet differences we have here compared to the games. I'll draw little bits and pieces from the anime and manga (Though I'm woefully behind on that), but the SUMO and USUM games are the main driving reference material behind this. Yet the differences, well, you'll see.

To those reading, thank you for your presence, I'm having a great time writing this and hopefully making a great time for you all as a result! Please look forward to the next chapter, and those to come after. We're just getting warmed up.
With the excitement of the night before, Lillie could not help but wonder whether Moon or her mother would even be awake at this hour. For her there had been no real choice – the Pokemon of the beachside laboratory waking and roughhousing as soon as dawn's light reached their eyes. Having taken in the Litten remaining from the three Pokemon offered to Hau and Moon, Professor Kukui seemed completely unfazed by the constant conflict between it and his Rockruff. They were just play-fighting, he had told Lillie. That sure didn't stop them from tearing up half the lab each day, she replied.

Kukui laughed, patted the Pokemon's heads, and agreed.

By the time the two of them had fed both themselves and the Pokemon of the lab, the sun was still only just beginning to stretch up the sands to the paths beyond, the winding way into Hau'oli City's outskirts. Moon and her mother lived close to the sea, one of the closest homes to the Pokemon Laboratory on the beach below, but it was still a few minutes walk until Kukui was knocking on their door. In that time, Lillie remained convinced they would be waking Moon and her mother up.

That belief lasted precisely up until the moment Jewellery opened the front door.

“Oh Professor, good morn-AH!” Halfway through her greeting Jewellery lunged to the side, arms outstretched to catch the Pokemon buzzing by her head. The inwards swing of the door in that moment showed a scene, a trio of Pokemon eating as if their life depended on it from a set of bowls, a Meowth standing guard over them, Jewellery trying to coax the Ledyba down from the curtains, and Moon herself entering the room, Rowlet perched on her shoulder, a black and cream Rattata clutched in her arms.

Kukui and Lillie stared.

“Oh Moon, could you-”

Jewellery's request was answered quickly, the Ledyba – ignoring her – immediately responding to Moon's words and descending down to greet her. She guided it and the Rattata both to join the other three – a Pikipek, Yungoos, and Caterpie, Kukui quickly observed – before the Rowlet fluttered off her shoulders to eat too. Six hungry mouths to feed. It was quite a time.

Jewellery turned back to the entrance with a slightly harried smile. “Good morning Professor Kukui, Lillie!”

“G'morning Jewel, Moon!” Kukui took the reins of the conversation, Lillie still caught in somewhat of a thrall at seeing the mass of gathered Pokemon, “I see you've got a busy house to look after too, huh?”

Many people would describe Kukui as being reckless, or not thinking things through when acting, but he was not a fool. Those Pokemon, Moon was the one they looked to, Moon was the one they obeyed. This wasn't Jewellery having stocked her house with local Pokemon to care for when her daughter left on her journey.

Those were Moon's Pokemon.
A second? What a joke.

She had six.

Kukui stepped inside.

“Here I was thinking maybe it was a little early, but I see it's not just my lab that had a busy start today! This sure is a difference from yesterday, huh?”

“Oh yes,” Jewellery nodded, the sheer shock of discovering, roughly half an hour earlier, that her daughter had six Pokemon having already been suppressed by the raw power that was 'mom mode'. Hungry mouths in her house got fed! That was a Jewellery Rulery! She was the only one who ever laughed when she said that. “Luckily they all listen to Moon, isn't that right?”

Moon affirmed, even meeting Kukui and Lillie's eyes from where she stood, but she remained there, watching over her Pokemon. They were... energetic, and not quite liable to seek out their trainer when there were new and interesting things about. The ability to keep six at once calm and in control was... something to be worked on with time.

She'd had all but Rowlet for less than a day.

“Well glad to catch you,” Kukui continued to talk, hoping to find stable ground somewhere in this conversation. He'd need to have a talk, several long talks, with a number of people, but right now he was here for something specific. Best not get side-tracked. “Was hoping to have a little chat. Lillie, would you help Moon look after her Pokemon please?”

Though she had remained at the threshold of the house up to this point, once Jewellery waved her in Lillie nodded and quickly moved to Moon's side. The presence of food, despite already having been fed that morning thank you, caused a brief struggle that ended with Nebby escaping her bag and attempting to push its way in amongst the others to eat. Moon gave a few words and they made room for the Nebula Pokemon.

Lillie couldn't even imagine where to start.

The beginning, she supposed.

“Six Pokemon?”

The veranda of Jewellery's house caught the wind of Alola at all hours, whether it was the breeze over the sea bringing the smell of salt from the shore, or gusts from the forest and fields to the north carrying leaf and loam scent down from above. At any time Jewellery could stand here, feel the wind flowing around her, and feel at peace.

Alola had been a good decision for her. She prayed it was for her daughter too. Opening her eyes, she considered the Professor before her.

“You were a Trainer too, yeah?” His question had an obvious answer, but Jewellery gave her nod all the same. She'd had her own Pokemon journey. She understood. Kukui continued. “Is this- do you have any sort of history that would account for-?”

“I don't.” Nothing. Not her. Not her parents. Not any story from her family. Nor Moon's father, that she knew of at least. “Professor-” “Kukui, please.” “…Kukui, I think I'm still in shock too. I don't
know what this means. Do - do you?”

“Not a thing,” Kukui turned his head, looking at the closed door behind him, sure that between Lillie and six Pokemon Moon would have no time to hear a word of this. “Jewel there isn't a record of this anywhere. When this gets out I - who knows what will happen. You're probably going to have to field a lot of attention.”

Jewel smiled the sort of smile Kukui saw on Trainer's faces when they were about to claim crushing victory over their foes. “I know a thing or two about dancing with reporters, Professor, I'll be fine.” As quickly though that smile faded away. “Moon, though. I know we can't hide this but... she's so young.”

“If I thought delaying her Island Challenge would help I'd say so but...”

Kukui didn't even need to complete the thought. Jewellery knew. “She won't accept that.”

“I saw that the moment she and Rowlet met.”

The wind blew by, still chill in the early morning of Alola despite the tropical warmth of the region. Neither Kukui nor Jewel gave it thought.

“The Island Challenge,” Kukui began again after a moment, “much like any other Pokemon journey it usually lasts a couple of years. Some Trainers grow faster than others and surpass the Trials we give them quickly, while others give up altogether. Generally after about five years everyone on a Challenge has either completed it or decided they won't be able to. A few weeks to months of adventuring, then spending time at home, then repeat. The usual.”


“Moon though... I have to wonder if it'll even take one year. I didn't see her Pokemon Battle last night but-”

“She was strong.” Those three words from Jewellery said enough. Kukui breathed out a sigh.

“I'm picturing Moon in a year with six Pokemon that can pass the Island Challenge and I don't know what that means. Just that it spooks me something fierce, Jewel. I'll talk to the Kahuna, and Captains, and we'll figure something out. Just know you've got all of Alola looking out for you and her on this. That's what we do here, we help each other out, yeah?”

That was a difference to Kanto. In Kanto you minded your own business and those around you minded theirs and everyone was polite. Distant, but polite. It was quieter, in a way.

Jewellery much preferred it here.

“I heard your interview on the radio yesterday.”

Kukui seemed surprised by that, but gave a smile after a moment all the same. He seemed a little sheepish. “Yeah I had to do more last night – Hala told me off something fierce for missing the festival for them. He's going to give me even worse when I tell him about this, I can tell.”

The deflection didn't work. “You're hoping for Moon and Hau to be ambassadors for the new Island Challenge.” The words made him jump. Yeah, okay, the family resemblance between Moon and Jewel wasn't just surface level. Kukui smiled sheepishly. Read so clearly, huh?

You'd think he'd be far better at deceit.
“Alola needs this,” this was his honest belief, though plenty would tell him he was deciding on his own just what Alola needed, “the chance to have a Champion that can stand on the world stage. The entire world, every region, is linked together by Pokemon and the Pokemon League. Alola needs to be part of that too. That's what I believe. It needs this.”

Jewellery, from a distant land, considered how little she could judge this. She didn't know Alola's culture the way those who would fight against, or for, this League did. She couldn't hold an opinion. Not on Kukui's work. But on his methods...

“You'll be pushing those two onto that world stage,” she remained focused, and reminded Kukui once more of a fierce trainer hounding their foe. Jewellery might have said her family had no grand legends Moon had inherited, but he got the feeling he could see one right before him. He didn't mention it. “A Kahuna's grandson and a trainer from another region taking the Challenge together? And leading up to the opening of the League? Isn't that a bit much, Professor? They're still children.”

Kukui looked hurt that Jewellery hadn't referred to him by name. He got it though. He did. But all the same... “I'm not going to lie or pretend,” he spoke with honesty, to assuage the doubts of Moon's mother. He needed to. “But it won't be their journeys that are watched, not the way you think. When the Pokemon League opens, everyone there is going to be seen by the world. It's just that, those two, they'll represent that new age. And I'll tell them that, I will! I won't hide anything. But right now, their Island Challenges, they won't be any different to anyone else's. I promise, Jewel. Cross my heart. I promise.”

Hala had given Kukui far sterner words than the look Jewellery gave him. That had been a long conversation, Kukui almost convinced that he was getting in over his head as the Kahuna showed just what he thought of someone, anyone, having a plan for his grandson.

But then Hala sighed and, when Kukui had been sure his grand idea was set to fail, relented. Strongly made clear the understanding that any trouble Kukui brought on Hau would end up on his head alone, but also that as long as he was upfront, honest, and did right by the children, Hala would approve.

Even though Jewellery exuded far less of the danger Hala had, Kukui found himself feeling equally as nervous. Maybe he was just still rattled from the discovery of the limit, or lack thereof, of Moon's abilities. Maybe that.

Jewel sighed.

“With the world watching her either way, Moon's going to have to deal with the attention in one form or another. Honestly, you managing her Island Challenge for this might take some of the attention off of her.”

Kukui's grin was childish in its excitement. “So you mean-”

“I'm sure the Kahuna said the same,” Jewellery made sure to meet the Professor's eyes, “but do not do wrong by those kids.”

Oh. There was that same sense of danger.

Inside of the house Lillie was watching with rapt attention as Moon spoke to her Pokemon, discussing with them in a manner that felt like watching two people converse. Moon was talkative with them, far more than on her own, and made sure each understood they were working together.
Some of the wording she used reminded Lillie of books she'd read – borrowed from the nearby Pokemon School – and gave the impression Moon was using her own studies here.

Kukui had made mention that the trainer from Kanto had maintained excellent grades.

“Are you... tired?” Her question was met with a shake of Moon's head, which somehow didn't seem surprising, despite the fact all of this was surprising. That these Pokemon were reacting to Moon's words, following her intent, that was a clear sign of a Trainer's Bond. Six Trainer's Bonds. The kind of thing only a small fraction of Trainers could maintain, although those who did would have Pokemon far more powerful than these.

But even still, the entire situation was... Moon was far beyond a statistical aberration, she was an impossibility. But for the fact Lillie could see with her own two eyes this girl, of similar age to her own, and the six Pokemon around her. It was a lot.

It was extremely a lot.

The door to the veranda opened and the two adults walked in.

“Okay then!” Kukui smiled brightly, clapping his hands, “Moon! Would you be willing to come down to the lab by the beach with Lillie and me? We've got someone for you to meet, and also I need to explain how the Island Challenge works! Your mom's given the go-ahead, so when you're ready we can get going, yeah!”

Jewellery joined Moon and Lillie – who shuffled back quickly from the older woman despite herself – and ran a hand over Rowlet's head, who cooed appreciatively at her. In comparison to the other five, Rowlet was a polite and accepting young girl. The rest, well, wild Pokemon were like that, after all.

“I'll see you when you get back?” Jewellery's request was met with a nod from her daughter. Most trainers starting their journey kept close to home, trained and grew together with their partners before striking out for further towns, further challenges. Moon though, Jewellery knew in her heart that her daughter would only be here for a few days more. She felt it keenly, watching her daughter join Lillie and Kukui to head down to the Professor's lab, even knowing Moon would soon enough be back. Her Meowth found its way into her arms as she sat in the quiet house, so stark a difference to the busy morning she had never expected.

Change came far too quickly, no matter what.

No matter how unprepared you were for it.

Moon had yet to travel down to the beachside beyond the outskirts of Hau'oli, and so had yet to see the laboratory of Professor Kukui. Much like anyone else, the boarded up holes, windows, and tarp-covered roof drew from her pause. Lillie shook her head to see it. Kukui grinned.

“That's my lab, yeah! Me and my Pokemon go all out every day, testing out moves and learning more about them! I don't think I've told you yet, Moon, but I'm a specialist in Pokemon Moves, yeah! That's why Alola, with its Z-Moves, is the best place for me!”

Z-Moves... the term provoked an immediate reaction from Moon, the raise of her left hand, the examination of the bangle around it. Kukui didn't miss the motion at all.
“So that Z-Ring you've got there, the way it works is you combine it with Z-Crystals that let you use super powerful Pokemon moves, like nothing you've ever seen before!” And that got her attention. Kukui smiled at the sight of her eyes locked upon him. “In Alola we don't have Gyms, we have Trials, special challenges on each Island overseen by strong trainers called Captains. You go from Trial to Trial, and as you overcome them, you'll collect Z-Crystals. After you complete all of an Island's Trials, you face its Kahuna in a Grand Trial, then move on to the next of our four islands. That's how it works, woo!”

Moon nodded. Kukui wasn't sure how much she'd read about Alola's Island Challenge, but it didn't hurt to lay it all out. She seemed very interested. Good.

That determination was necessary, after all.

In spite of how Kukui had left it – well, Lillie specifically – the front door of his lab was both unlocked and open. Kukui smiled at the sight of that too. Good. She was here.

“Heeeey!” He announced himself entering his own home, a slightly confused Lillie and unaware Moon following behind, “Good morning!”

The woman, standing in the middle of the lab, turned to face the trio. There was just enough of a moment of considering her, her long and pale blue hair which forked into the shape of wings, her cool blue eyes giving consideration to the group, and the thin metallic club she was leaning on the ground, before Lillie gasped and pushed right past Kukui with stars in his eyes.

He smiled at his assistant's surprise.

“You're Kahili!” Lillie's exclamation was met by a nod from the woman, curbing the young girl's enthusiasm by no degree at all. “Oh my goodness the famous Pokemon Trainer and golfer, I can't believe it!” Moon, with no awareness of the woman at all, looked from her, to Lillie, to Kukui with curiosity alone. Kukui gave the two women a berth so Lillie could be excited in peace. “My family we-” for a moment her voice caught, before she shook her head and kept her eyes on the legendary trainer, “we're all really big fans of yours.”

For the first time Kahili's expression changed to a smile, which Lillie immediately found relief in. The older woman nodded to her. “It's wonderful to meet a fan, Kukui told me he had an assistant who would be excited to meet me.” This caused a reaction, Lillie's cheeks reddening as she stared a dagger at Kukui, who'd given absolutely no mention of even knowing Kahili, let alone being about to receive her in his lab. Kukui disappeared down the staircase at the rear of the lab while his voice called back up to them.

“I invited Kahili to help me with the Pokemon League!” Moon's focus now lasered onto Kahili, who was observing her too. Kahili frowned. Something about this girl... “Since she's one of Alola's more famous trainers, she's helping with the marketing! If she approves then everyone'll get behind it, yeah!”

“I'm not that powerful,” Kahili didn't use the volume for her rebuff to reach Kukui, but Lillie and Moon both heard it, “but I do believe Alola needs a League. So I'm doing what I can for that. That's all any of us can do.”

“Oh!” Lillie clasped her hands, nodding emphatically, “yes, I'm sure with your help the Professor will have no problems convincing everyone to create the Alolan League! I hope it goes well!”

“Alright!” Kukui's voice came with him back up the stairs, a Pokeball now in hand, “Moon, I've got someone to introduce you to! Could I see your Pokedex for a moment?”
Confused but amenable, Moon extended the device, Kukui holding the Pokeball up to it. “I've arranged for a special Pokemon to be sent to me: it's called a Rotom. Rotom live in electronic devices, and use those devices to change their forms. That Pokedex is custom-built for a Rotom to inhabit: it'll help you out and gather even more information than usual from your Pokemon journey!”

Lillie and Kahili both stood aside, watching as Kukui clicked the Pokeball. A beam of red-light resolved into a shape, a small orange creature wreathed in electric blue, which spent a moment floating free before diving right into the Pokedex Moon held. There was recoil, the girl falling back before the device slipped out of her hand, and all present watched as the red electronic encyclopaedia shook in the air. Seconds passed, the device free-floating, before its screen came alight. A sequence of tones indicated boot-up.

And a voice emerged.

“Rotom-dex, at your service, zzt! Trainer ID set, registration: Moon!”

Moon stared. Kahili lightly applauded, club tucked under her arm, the constant development of Pokemon sciences always impressive. Kukui nodded with a smile at the sight. Lillie just thought about whether she'd be able to ask for Kahili's signature.

“Pokedex scanned, zzt!” The Rotom-dex began again after a moment, considering its new habitat, “Pokemon encountered: ten! Pokemon caught: six! Zzt!”

Kahili dropped her golf club.

“Excuse me?”

The Rotom-dex made a noise of surprise as Kahili's hands wrapped around it, fingers rapidly navigating the Pokedex's menu. Her eyes, roving over the screen, only widened second by second. Kukui coughed.

It took a moment for Kahili to release the device, which floated over to Moon who reached up to take hold of it. Kahili looked in confusion from Moon to Kukui. She seemed unsteady on her feet.

“Six?”

Kukui nodded, his silence mostly to avoid making too big of a deal about this in front of Moon, though Kahili's reaction had probably already completely thrown out that attempt at subtlety. It wasn't like the girl, who'd graduated her Pokemon School course with high grades, shouldn't understand just how out of the ordinary she was. Attempting to pretend she wasn't was probably insulting to her. Kukui shrugged.

“It was a surprise to me too, believe me.”

Kahili found a chair and sat down in it hard.

“A-lo-la! The salty breeze sang to me and brought me here to you!”

Immediately replacing the energy drained from the room by Kahili's shock, Hau appeared through the door, smile ever wide, waving to everyone gathered inside. “Hey Professor! Hey Lillie! Hey Moon!” Kahili, sitting down out of immediate sight of the doorway, went unnoticed as Hau's eyes took in the lab he was entering for the first time.

“Oh hey is that a loft? Awesome!”

Lillie was fast, Moon observed, watching her move to stop Hau before he could take another step.
She shook her head rapidly. “No it's not! That's... where I'm staying while the Professor is taking care of me. It's private!”

Hau, cut off from that avenue of interest by Lillie's insistence, finally noticed the fourth occupant of the room. “Oh hey! Alola!” He waved to her, who looked at him with an expression that was still trying to come down from the concept of a new Trainer with six Pokemon. It wasn't easy. “I'm Hau, nice to meet you, Ms...”

“Hau!” Almost more offended by Hau's ignorance than his attempt to invade her room, Lillie put her hands on her hips, “That's Kahili, a famous Alolan Pokemon trainer and golfer!”

“Oh cool!” Hau focused in on the only part of that that interested him, “That means you've got a ton of really strong Pokemon, right, Ms. Kahili?” She did nod to that, which appeared to satisfy the boy enough to bounce on his feet and throw his fist to the air. “So cool!” His energy, leaking out across the room, brought smiles. Moon stood beside him as Kukui addressed them.

“Ohay!” The Professor nodded, “The two of you are officially on your Island Challenges now, woo! The first Trial is run by Melemele's only Captain, Ilima, who you'll be meeting later today. He's stopping by the Pokemon School just inside Hau'oli City, so you're both going to introduce yourselves to him! And Moon,” Kukui turned his focus completely on her, “you need to visit the Pokemon School anyway, just to get your Kanto graduation finalised here in Alola. Shouldn't be a problem.” Moon nodded in return. Kukui smiled.

Alright then you two, make sure to head to the Pokemon School this afternoon, I'll meet you there! Until then, the rest of the morning is yours! Lillie, would you like to go hang out with them?” Lillie jumped, slightly surprised at Kukui's question, before glancing over at the still recovering Kahili. A part of her had very strongly wanted to interview the famous trainer as best she could but... she looked at the other two and nodded.

“Yes, Professor Kukui!”

“Excellent!” The Professor clapped his hands, “I'll see you three out then. Have fun now!”

The breeze outside the lab rolled off the sea, blew back the hair of the group as they stepped into it. Out into the light under Alola's sun.

And suddenly darkness.

Lillie's cry and grab for someone ended as she found Moon's arm, holding onto it unaware. Hau yelled something about an eclipse, while Moon remained ever-quiet. Kukui wondered just what this might be.

Then it passed, it was bright again, and Lillie let go of Moon's arm with stuttered apologies. Agreeing with Hau that this must have been an eclipse, Kukui knew it was not. But just what it was... he wasn't sure.

Still, he saw the three off, and returned to his lab with a smile. Whatever strange things might be happening, seeing those three together was good. It was good.

Kahili, arms crossed, barred his entry. Ah, right, this conversation.

“Six, Kukui?”

“Six.”
And, far in the sky above unseen by all, left by the passing of darkness across light, a small purple form floated lazily along.

The dark fled a little longer.

Chapter End Notes

There were two major decisions I had to make this chapter - time and company.

In the game itself, you can overcome all challenges and conquer the Pokemon League in a matter of hours, a few for a speedrunner, a couple more for someone simply determined to go fast. What is the real length of time a Pokemon Journey should take? Culturally, how does it operate, over what period? As soon as you try to enforce any sort of reality on the Pokemon world it begins to groan under the strain, but I needed this. You would have noticed already I write the world and the paths between places as being longer than they are in the games. Hau'oli City is much bigger than the one we see. It has to be. Everything is bigger. That's simply what was needed.

The actual length of time this story will cover, I'm not sure of that yet. When time passes it'll pass, and I'll make mention in the story itself as it passes. Moon's growth rate is astronomical, but that doesn't prevent the passage of time. Nothing does.

As for company, the Rotom-dex is a mouthy little fellow, isn't it? Tbh constantly being pestered by it in the games kinda grated on me, but I still made the decision that it was a part of this story. It's not going to act as a voice for Moon though, nor will its presence be a major factor. Unless I decide it is as I go. I'm flexible. But I doubt it. Still it's here, and that's something we'll all have to come to accept.

I mean I wouldn't have had that very good reveal to Kahili without it, would I?

Kahili's here, that's new. The social and cultural change in Alola of opening the Pokemon League is super interesting to me, and I'm glad it's a part of this story alongside the main character and her titular adventure. How it mixes, and what results from it, we'll see, but it's going to be fun. I like it. I hope you do too.

There's no rule for chapter update rate. I write when I feel like writing and post when I feel I'm ready. I'm not going to set a posting day and time, I'm just going to do whenever I want. Ideally I'll have one roughly once a week, but maybe life happens at some point? I'm not going to worry about it, and just do my thing. That's how I roll.

Thanks to you, all my readers, for checking out Eldritch. If you enjoyed, please consider leaving a kudos to boost the fic, bookmarking for updates, a comment (which I love and adore please never feel bad about leaving comments I feed on them for writing power), and maybe even recommending to friends you think will also enjoy! Look forward to the next chapter, as the momentum builds, and more people discover that in the Alola Region...

There's something unexpected.
This is Hau'oli City Radio, coming to you at all hours of the day! Tonight we have a special interview with Alola's very own Professor Kukui, as well as one of Alola's most famous trainers; returning from the Kalos Region: Ms. Kahili Hano herself!

“Happy to be here, woo!”

“Thank you for having us.”

Now Ms. Hano, could you tell us a little about what brought about this return? You took part in the Kalos Pokemon League recently, and in interviews after that claimed you would continue to hone your skills abroad. What brings you back to the Alola Region?

“It was by Professor Kukui's request, actually. He contacted me after the Kalos League ended and invited me to aid in helping start a Pokemon League here in Alola. You could say we share a vision.”

Is that so? Professor Kukui, construction of the Pokemon League has continued atop Ula'ula's Mount Lanakila unabated, despite some push-back from communities across Alola. Is Ms. Hano your attempt to resist those complaints?

“Now I wouldn't put it quite like that, not at all! It's true there's been some difficulty crafting a League that everyone approves of, but the fact we intend to do that hasn't changed one bit! Kahili here is a Trainer forged by Alola's traditions; it's not meant to be her saying 'do this' because she has the clout, it's to show that someone like her, who really embodies the Alolan spirit, sees that spirit being carried on in the League! It's the most important thing there is, to keep the Island Challenge tradition alive, even while embracing the Pokemon League system! That's why we're keeping Trials over constructing Gyms, and the Kahuna of Alola will serve as our Elite Four. Just like we've been in talks with the Kahuna, and by extension Tapu, Kahili's another voice helping make sure we don't sacrifice any of Alola's spirit with progress! That's it, yeah!”

Interesting, interesting. Ms. Hano, your thoughts?

“When I took part in the Kalos League, the very first thought I had was that I wanted to see the same happen back home. To see the Pokemon Trainers of Alola gather up, test themselves, and celebrate the strength honed by their Island Challenges. As Professor Kukui has said, the Island Challenge itself won't change, just that overcoming it will earn a place in the Pokemon League of Alola, the same way the Gym Challenge in other Regions would. And...”

And?

“I want to see the very best of Alola stand on the world stage. With how many Regions are adopting the Pokemon League model, with how many Champions are now appearing, it's only a matter of time until the World League begins.”

Oh my!

“Hey now, Kahili, I think I stand for everyone when I say the thought of a World League is the most exciting thing possible, but that's still just something people are wishing for right now. Let's focus on
the Alola League, and an Alolan Champion, for the sake of Alola, yeah?"

“I’m just looking ahead, Professor.”

Well now, with that shocking declaration, I’d say there’ll be many people excited to hear about the plans for the Alolan Pokemon League. To all listeners, Professor Kukui and Ms. Hano will be in Hau'oli City for the next week, and there are Town Halls planned to discuss the League and any concerns with it. Professor, could you give us the times for those?

“Right, yes, of course. The first of four will be tomorrow night at six at the City Council hall, with another every second night after!”

Fantastic. Professor Kukui, Ms. Hano, thank you for joining us.

“Thanks for having us!”

“It has been a pleasure.”

With that, let's get back to the late-night tunes of Alola, keeping those evenings fresh and beats chill. Coming up later: he’s the king of the ring and one of Alola's strongest trainers, but beyond that a man of mystery – just who is: The Masked Royal?

The morning passed into afternoon easily for Moon, Lillie, and Hau. Known almost as well throughout the outskirts of Hau'oli as he was in Iki Town itself, Hau insisted on taking Moon around and introducing her to all his friends and their families, Lillie following along in a constant state of flux between slight nervousness at talking to so many people and genuine awe that Hau had no trouble doing so himself.

Moon... was quiet, but she was almost always quiet. Lillie watched her, listened to her when she spoke, but far more often Moon spoke in gestures than words. When Hau brought out his Popplio to show off to some of the local kids Moon had her Rowlet join the Sea Lion Pokemon, but beyond that she kept her Pokeballs inside of the bag she carried. Lillie wished her own bag was as good at keeping Pokemon contained.

Number of times the trio had been required to chase a gallivanting Nebby down: three.

Doing her own greeting tour around the neighbourhood, Moon's mother had spotted Lillie at the base of the tree Hau and Moon were climbing and insisted the three allow her to feed them lunch when they were done playing, which Hau excitedly thanked her for with a voice that reached down from the canopy above. It was good, Jewellery decided, seeing those three together. Moon looked happy. It was good.

The sheer act of keeping pace with Hau's enthusiasm had left Lillie hungry, which said something about the amount of energy the Kahuna's grandson had to have been running, jumping, climbing, playing, and yelling for the past few hours. Jewellery welcomed Moon's two friends into her house readily, serving some traditional Kanto cooking for the three. Hau'oli's markets were quite impressive – Jewellery hadn't had any trouble procuring all the ingredients she desired. This city would be good to her. She knew it. Moon too. For as long as she was here.

Hau let his Popplio out, and Moon her Rowlet, so they could feed as well, with Lillie – thanks to Moon's reassurance – allowing Nebby to join them. Moon kept her other Pokemon stored away, but
as they hadn't been out of their Pokeballs since that morning, it wasn't like they'd be hungry yet either.

Still, Lillie couldn't help but suspect that after Kahili's reaction to her team, Moon was keeping the number of Pokemon she possessed to herself. Lillie wondered how Hau would take that eventual reveal.

With lunch finished Jewellery saw her daughter and daughter's two new friends off, the trio now bound for the Pokemon School just inside the outer limits of Hau'oli City proper. There was a Pokemon Center along the way, though unnecessary given Popplio and Rowlet had eaten and rested just earlier, and so the three walked past it, then further on to the gates of the school. There were a few Trainer's Schools in Alola, all the islands besides Poni having at least one, but the Hau'oli City school was the largest and most famous. Several notable trainers of the Alola Region hailed from here.

They'd be meeting one such just a little later on.

Just inside the gates, standing on opposite ends of a training field, two Pokemon Trainers were in the midst of battle, and that was more than enough to draw Hau and Moon's attention, Lillie's attempts to imply they should wait for Professor Kukui ignored. She sighed and followed after, getting the feeling neither would ever choose sense over witnessing a battle.

That was one of the things about Pokemon Trainers she just couldn't understand. Another reason she wasn't cut out for this life. She watched alongside the other two until attention turned their way.

“Oh hey, Hau!” Children from Iki Town studied here too, the Kahuna's grandson well known to them. While the majority of students were below the age of eleven, some Trainers took extended courses at local schools, refining themselves for their Pokemon Journeys. It was two of those who were battling now, but that battle came to a stop when they followed the sound of the greeting to its target. And saw the one standing with him.

Moon watched as the two Trainers called back their Pokemon, moved rapidly to each other's side and began whispering together. One pulled out her phone and sent a quick text, less than a minute passing before two more Trainers of similar age emerged from the school. The tallest one approached Moon and Hau with arms crossed. Lillie had a bad feeling about it.

“Well well,” he gave such stereotypical arrogance that it was obviously copied from a morning cartoon, “if it isn't the two newest Trial-goers. We heard about your battle at the festival, very impressive, very impressive indeed.” The girl who had been part of the battle before nodded as she approached.

“That's the one,” she indicated Moon, whose brown eyes fixated upon her with a silent stare. “She has a second Pokemon.”

There were four in total, two boys, two girls, one of each having been battling a moment prior, the remaining two having emerged from the school after being contacted. The tallest continued to nod. “That's the rumour, isn't it?” Hau glanced at Moon. Lillie couldn't read his expression. “Thing is, that's kinda wild, isn't it?” The leader of the group uncrossed his hands, “I was thinking, I'd love to see if that's true. So hey, Trial-goer, how about a Pokemon battle? A Double Battle, specifically. Think you're up for facing two of the Hau'oli Pokemon School's Elite Four?”

In battle, Trainer's Bonds take more than at rest. Extended Pokemon Battles could be won by exhaustion of a Trainer before their Pokemon, unable to support the power of their team for that period of time. Double Battles were twice that – the challenge being to maintain and direct two
Pokemon simultaneously. In official capacities, Double Battles were heavily monitored, run by institutions only for Trainers of significant skill – those nearing the end of their Pokemon Journeys, for example. For the vast majority, Double Battles were done with allies, two Trainers versus two, and served as a preview of the kind of tactical thinking and response time necessary for doing such alone.

Triple Battles existed outside official capacity, and were unregulated lawless things. Few accepted such risky challenges.

The fact Moon, after being challenged in this way, nodded and withdrew a pair of Pokeballs from her bag, immediately accelerated the pace of the rumour mill. The two Trainers who had been battling before took point at one end of the field, Moon standing across from them. The remaining two stood as overseers.

Lillie watched the speed of Hau's foot tapping against the ground reach critical speed before he rushed forward to join his friend.

“Hey now!” His voice was loud, reaching across the field, “I'm here too! If it's a Double Battle, let's do it fair, two against two, okay?”

If the look the two preparing to battle Moon gave each other was disappointment, neither Hau nor Moon could tell. Hau raised a hand with a Pokeball in it, Moon fussing with her bag before doing the same to mirror him. A cheering crowd of students surrounded the field, excited by the new battle taking place, as the leader of the Hau'oli Pokemon School's 'Elite Four' dictated the rules of this two versus two Pokemon Double Battle.

The release of their Pokemon was simultaneous, Moon's Rowlet and Hau's Popploio against their opponents' Spinarak and Meowth. The sight of the Alolan variant of the Scratch Cat Pokemon caught Moon's attention, and she queried her Rotom-dex, which happily searched up the data it had on hand.

The sight of Moon directing the floating and talking Pokedex quickly mixed into the building rumours about her.

Then the battle began and it was a greater struggle than either Moon or Hau had predicted. It shouldn't be a surprise – these young Trainers might have spoken with confidence, but they also had far more experience than the two new Trial-goers. Their commands were more precise, their understanding of their Pokemon's limitations more defined. It allowed a level of prediction, and direction, that proved far more effective than Moon or Hau's.

Which is why they took their eventual defeat so much the harder.

It wasn't a clean win, but that was a sign of a well-fought battle on all sides. Rowlet and Popploio, having been raised together, knew well how to fight as one, and allowed Moon and Hau room to direct the pair. Given that, it was a battle won more by the Pokemon than their Trainers, but the partnerships between Pokemon – especially in double battles – were just as important as those between allied Trainers.

That said, when the battle did come to an end with Moon and Hau announced victors, both of their Pokemon were thoroughly exhausted. Hau picked Popploio up with a smile and a kind word for his partner. Moon did the same.

The 'Elite Four' quickly huddled for another meeting.
“Well then,” the tallest one, their leader, took position with the other fresh Trainer, “you've successfully beaten two of our Elite Four. But you should know, when a battle with the Elite Four begins, there's no leaving until you've beaten all of them or lost. It's time for the next fight, you two!”

“Hey!” Hau gave a look of surprise, “We gotta stop here, my Popplio’s too tired to keep going! Aren't you being too pushy anyway? Take it easy alread-”

Moon’s action cut Hau’s words off, but even if he'd kept speaking no-one would have heard him over the uproar that followed. For as the young girl took a step forward she swept out a hand, released two Pokeballs even while holding Rowlet with the other, and brought her Pikipek and Yungoos to the field.

The rumour mill quickly caught ablaze, rumour smoke visible from miles away. Hoo boy.

The rough confidence of the Trainers opposing Moon quickly changed into outright shock, the sight of two more Pokemon from the rumoured Trainer completely changing the tone of this hazing session. They'd intended to tease, to pose as villains and mess with the brand new Trainer who was rumoured to somehow have two Pokemon. That was a funny thought. There was no way she did.

Now she had three. And was staring the two down like she was completely ready to battle despite the extended and, what should have been, exhausting battle she’d just taken part in. Wide eyes stared at the pair of Pokemon as whispers raced about, Lillie in the crowd already hearing people saying Moon’s name, unsure of where they’d heard it. Other members of the crowd from when Moon had battled Hau the night before, she supposed.

Then there was a new voice, reaching over the crowd, and a woman waded her way through the children. Quickly they stood at attention.

“Alright, alright, that's enough of that for today.” The teacher came to a stop before Moon, but turned her attention upon the Trainers across the field first. Addressed them directly. “It's important for Trainers to battle but that doesn't mean you get to be rude. Come here and apologise.”

As the 'Elite Four' gathered and gave words of penitence for challenging Moon so roughly, Lillie looked around and caught sight of Professor Kukui standing behind the group. Luckily it wasn’t difficult for her to make her way over to him. He nodded at her with a smile.

“Hey there, Lillie, I should have guessed those two wouldn't be able to avoid getting in a fight or two with some of the Trainers here. This school’s Trainers are a strong bunch though, huh?”

She couldn't really evaluate. For as much as she'd read – and she had read a lot – Lillie lacked the raw understanding of Pokemon and Trainer strength that only came through being a Trainer. She glanced past Kukui and saw no-one. Frowned.

“Is Kahili not here?”

“She's catching up with her family on Akala,” Kukui kept his eyes on Moon as the teacher spoke to her, “she'll be back tomorrow for more meetings around Hau'oli. You'll get the chance to talk to her then, since you're my assistant and all. Sounds good, yeah?”

The slight teasing from Kukui at Lillie’s interest in getting to talk to the famous trainer went ignored, his young assistant turning her attention back to the mass of people just in time to see Moon following the teacher into the school. She frowned.

“Will Moon be alright?”
Kukui didn't enjoy admitting he didn't know.

“There's a parable we use in this school,” Emily, the raven-haired teacher, spoke as she led Moon through the school, the office where they'd complete the transfer of Moon's Kanto School graduation to its Alolan sister on the second floor. “It's about two Pokemon Trainers – one who keeps six Magikarp, and the other a single Gyarados. Have you heard of it?”

Moon had, the tale used in Kanto too. The teacher nodded at her response. “Many Trainers with experience could keep six Pokemon, but those six would be the type found around this city, and with just a little growth would become too much to maintain. A Trainer that did such a thing would never beat a Trainer with a single partner they had grown alongside and given all the power they could.”

At the door to her office Emily stopped and considered Moon. Wondered. “I'm not sure that's even possible to apply to you right now. But keep it in mind.” Moon's nod showed she would. Emily couldn't ask for more than that. Well, one thing more.

The completion of the application was done quickly – confirmation that Moon was present and registered as a Trainer and Trial-goer in the Alola region taken and used to sign off on her graduation. She was now an official Pokemon Trainer of Alola, with all the benefits and requirements that would come with that. Good.

But there was one more thing, and teacher and Trainer took a different path after leaving the office. Went up, instead of down. Out on the school-grounds, fields had been drawn for Trainers to have their Pokemon battles. But others could be found about as well.

The one on the roof was for more private conflicts. Rarely needed but... well, how could she resist?

“Moon,” the teacher took position, Moon doing the same without even questioning this was happening, “this is a test to make sure you're handling those Pokemon you've caught. I would be a most irresponsible teacher to let a graduate of this school go overloaded by her Bonds, would I not?”

With Moon's Rowlet still recovering, Emily expected to see the two Pokemon Moon had brought out before. Check that after battling with them Moon was still doing well. Her Meowth was significantly stronger than those of her students, there were no means by which Moon would best her. So she let the grey-coated Pokemon free of its Pokeball and instructed Moon to give it her all.

Even she hadn't predicted what would come next.

Moon opened with her Yungoos, directed it against the Meowth, and frowned when the difference in power became apparent. Changed her strategy, focused instead on attrition, dodging, and little hits. It showed flexible thinking, which was proof enough Moon would be an incredible trainer, but it still wasn't enough. When the Meowth pinned Yungoos down, it had nothing left to do. Moon called it back and accepted its defeat.

Next came Caterpie.

Immediately a number inside Emily's head incremented from three to four. Her mouth hung a little. What?

Moon's strategy with her Caterpie was instantly recognisable, and Emily smiled to see it despite herself. The use of environmental traps, sticky patches of silk, it mirrored the winning Trainer of last year's Kanto Pokemon League, showing Moon had not only watched the tournament but studied it.
That sort of attitude, it was scary.

It was the second scariest thing about her.

Environmental control helped, but Emily's Meowth still took victory, pinning the bug Pokémon as well. Moon called it back. Brought her Pikaipik out. Good, Emily breathed a sigh of relief, four was where it ended.

When the Pikaipik was knocked to the ground and Moon simply raised another Pokéball to continue on, the teacher felt as if the world was dropping out beneath her.

It was a Ledyba, another local to the area. Besides the Rowlet – which was Moon's starter Pokémon, all of the others were locals. Moon had been given the Rowlet two nights ago, Emily knew that. In that span of time she'd caught four more Pokémon? That was ridiculous.

So to know that number was five instead, when Meowth – tired now after this long battle against far more numbers than Emily had expected – knocked the Ledyba down and received a Rattata tackle to the gut, was a truly shocking realisation indeed. Even knowing her shock affected her Pokémon, had weakened her Meowth as the battle continued, Emily still couldn't believe it when the Scratch Cat Pokémon was knocked over and didn't get back up. Moon called out praise to the black furred Rattata that had won her battle. Emily shook her head.

Unbelievable.

Returned her Meowth and released a Magnemite to continue.

She never said she'd only use one.

That was the end of the battle though: Moon spent only a moment seeing the second Pokémon from the teacher before calling her Rattata back – a sign of surrender. But that was the wisest possible decision in this situation and Emily found that shocking too.

An eleven year old girl, a Pokémon Trainer for not even three days in total, with six Pokémon, strong and healthy Bonds between them – Moon didn't seem tired at all – who copied strategies from League Tournaments and knew when to call a battle complete. That wasn't just out of the ordinary.

That wasn't just a shock.

That was impossible. Or it should be.

Emily shook her head.

The sound of clapping echoed over the rooftop.

"Bravo, bravo," the soft voice of their observer carried to the ears of both, his steps light and easy. Moon studied the man approaching, swept pink hair and dark skin, but did not recognise him. By contrast, Emily...

"Oh, Captain Ilima!"

"And here I was looking forward to testing the two new Trainers on their Island Challenges," Ilima was smiling, continuing to walk to stand between the two, "I'll have to wait for a later chance to battle young Moon here: she should rest after that, after all."

Hearing Ilima's name Moon approached him, who turned to her with a smile. "The Professor and your friends told me about the battle you had earlier – I got the feeling Ms. Emily here wouldn't be
able to resist challenging you. I would say my prediction earns full marks, wouldn't you?”

Well aware that being called a battle nut by Ilima was the height of hypocrisy, Emily smiled through it. “I had to make sure my graduating student was well equipped to go forward, after all. I'd be a terrible teacher if I left her untested, would I not, Captain Ilima?”

Ilima smiled at her, well aware she'd indulged for her own curiosity. He didn't blame her though.

If she hadn't he would have.

“Well then, why don't we head back down, I need to properly greet the two Trial-goers. Ms. Emily, Moon, if you would?”

Kukui was showing off to the children of the school, his Rockruff and Litten in a Double Battle with the remaining two members of the 'Elite Four'. It was essentially one-sided, the Professor actively playing with the pair who, while doing their best, couldn't stand up to him. When he saw Ilima approaching with Moon in tow, he gave a quick order and the two Pokemon he was facing were knocked out then and there. Battle won.

He still made sure to congratulate the two Trainers on their strong Pokemon though, and advise them on ways to improve. His goal was to fill Alola with incredible Trainers, after all.

“Hello hello,” once Moon and Hau were standing side-by-side, Ilima took point before them, “Captain Ilima here. I'm often found around Hau'oli City, but when a Trial-goer is ready, they can meet me at Verdant Cavern, north of the City, to take on my challenge. The two of you are both bright young stars, so I'm looking forward to seeing how you do. Make sure to train hard in the City, and prepare as best you can for my Trial. The Trial of Captain Ilima.”

As one of the more famous and recent Trainers to graduate this school, Ilima was soon enough swarmed by students, the School's 'Elite Four' proclaiming him their Champion and insisting he get revenge on Kukui. Ilima laughed that off, remarking that if he and Kukui had a Pokemon Battle they'd need a much larger field, so they wouldn't risk destroying the school.

Everyone but Kukui and Emily, who knew that wasn't a joke, laughed loudly.

“Professor,” when Ilima did greet Kukui, he did so with the look in his eyes that showed he was ready for a battle, “please continue doing your best with the Pokemon League. I intend to take part, after all.”

“Right!” Kukui nodded, “I wouldn't expect any less! But until then, make sure to look after all the Trial-goers taking their Island Challenges. We want a full crowd for the opening!”

Ilima looked, Kukui turning with him, to see Moon and Hau surrounded by a crowd of school-children. Lillie, who was keeping outside of the crowd as best she could, watched over them.

“You weren't wrong. Six Pokemon.”

“Yeah, six Pokemon.”

Neither had any idea what to make of that. But they'd both keep doing what they could, as Captain and Professor each. That was all they could do.

And when the time came for Ilima to depart, Kukui gathered up Moon, Lillie, and Hau to leave as well, the School's 'Elite Four' suddenly sad to see their new rivals leave. But they'd be back another day, Kukui told them, and that seemed to win the group over. Kukui wondered if they realised the
next time Moon returned, their battle would end far further in her favour. He could already tell.

She was going to go further than anyone believed.

“Young Trial-goers,” just prior to taking his leave, Ilima addressed Moon and Hau one more time, “I sincerely look forward to your challenge. Until we meet again, continue to grow with your Pokemon. I will wish you the best.”

With that, the Captain was gone, the tint of afternoon light working its way over the treetops and buildings of the city and surroundings. Kukui stood by as the three young ones spoke.

“Hey Moon!” Hau, having recovered enough from the intense battle earlier, was once more as bouncy as ever, “Let's go exploring Hau'oli City tomorrow! I'll show you all my favourite places! Okay?”

Moon's nod was enough for Hau, who turned to Lillie next. “You too, Lillie. You've gotta come with us too, alright?”

Though she hadn't expected this, when Professor Kukui nodded his approval, Lillie smiled and agreed as well. Tomorrow morning the three would meet here and continue on into the city.

The next steps of their Pokemon Journeys taken.

And the eyes of the world continuing to turn their way.

Chapter End Notes

It's becoming a habit that of the notes of what I want my next chapter to be, I reach about halfway and I'm at 4k+ words and have a clean ending point. When I started last chapter I intended it's ending point to be how this chapter ended. And I am positive the next I write will be the ending point I wanted for this one.

But that's okay because there's so much good stuff still ahead. The engine is revving and acceleration is near. We're about to /go/

This chapter is an important chapter for the momentum and transition, as rumours of Moon continue to build. The number of people aware she has six Pokemon are both small and reserved - keeping that knowledge to themselves. The number that knows she has three and intends on talking about that, well, that's a little bit larger now isn't it?

Something fun I like to do for these chapters is narrate them aloud, which lets me catch points of wording I get stuck on and rewrite them for better flow. It's a little thing, but I'm hopeful it boosts the overall quality of the reading experience. The last time I did this for was my last plot-based fic (as opposed to the character introspections I have done for BNHA and Persona 5), was A Falling Star Won't Grant Your Wish - a Gravity Rush/Nier Automata AU. It was a fun story, but very niche. I'm glad to be flexing my story muscles with a little more readership this time.

Speaking of, as always my thanks to all readers! I've been seeing more comments, more bookmarks, and more numbers, and that's thrilling to know this little story I'm crafting is reaching and entertaining more people! I hope you continue to enjoy as I continue to
update, the Eldritch storm isn't ending any time soon.

In fact, it's only getting better.

I can promise you that.
Life in Hau'oli City

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Despite being the one who planned the meeting between the three, Hau was the last to arrive, running up to Moon and Lillie at full speed before coming to a stop, panting heavily. Moon and Lillie both considered the sight.

“Are you alright?” Lillie's concern was met with a grin from Hau, though he was still breathing hard. He waved 'Alola' to greet the pair, which Moon responded to, Lillie following a moment after. Hau shook his head.

“All good!” His volume was the same as ever, pushing back any concerns at the sight of him with sweat beaded across his forehead. “Sorry for being late, I lost track of time. Are we good to go?”

Moon and Lillie's nod only enhanced Hau's smile, who quickly moved to take the lead. He pointed forward with all the drama he could muster. Moon smiled at the sight. “Okay! Hau'oli City exploration team, embark!”

With smiles Lillie and Moon followed after as Hau rushed on ahead.

When Moon visited Hau'oli City with her mother, two days and what felt like forever ago, she had ridden a taxi into the city centre, skipping the middle circle entirely. The day before she'd entered its very beginning, where the Pokemon School took on children from both Hau'oli's centre, outskirts, and even Iki Town beyond. But today was the day to get the entirety of the city under her feet, and with keen interest she observed all she could see.

Took it all in.

Streets lined with houses, smaller shopping blocks, and the constant sound of Pokemon and vehicles upon the road occupied her attention, walking with Hau and Lillie along the roadside, listening as Hau described all the best places to get food in the city, as Lillie mentioned aspects of its history she'd read in books. The smell of the sea and sound of the waves layered over everything else, increasing as the three made their way down the streets, until a row of houses passed them by and a view over the vast expanse of blue came to their eyes, light glinting over the water, Wingull soaring above its surface, their keen eyes searching for prey. No matter how many times he saw it, Hau loved the sight of the sea every time. Lillie, with admiration in her heart, felt herself relax before it.

Moon stared, silent, taking it all in.

Seconds in silence ticked on by.

“Woohoo!” Hau's sudden yell broke the moment of reverie, Moon and Lillie's eyes turning to him even as he rushed on forward, “Beach time!”

And with an exclamation like that, who could help but follow?

Stairs led down from the roadside to Hau'oli Beach, a huge number of people occupying the sandy shores of the city's largest. Lifeguards set up in towers and on patrol kept an eye over those who dove into the sea, while plenty more people were content to sunbathe in the morning's light, sharing the moment with friends, family, and their Pokemon, who could often be considered both. Hau's energetic movement drew eyes to him, but only for a moment before those nearby returned to their
own business.

One more child excited to be on the beach wasn't anything more than another part of what it meant to live here.

No-one would complain.

Moon rarely saw the sea back in Kanto – she'd lived far in-land from the coast, and even in occasional visits to Vermilion City had rarely enjoyed it's far less lively beach-front. The feeling of the sand beneath her feet, shifting under her sandals, was notable to her, and she found herself stepping more slowly, minding her balance as the clean white sand gave way. Lillie watched the girl measuring her steps and smiled at the sight, but before she could join she felt her bag jolt, Nebby intent on investigating the sound and presence of all the people about. Moon turned around just in time to see Lillie ascending the beach staircase, whispering furiously into the bag she carried. But didn't have the chance to follow after.

“Hey Moon!” Hau had found his way back to her, bouncing on the sand with such ease it amazed. Despite how often his feet left the ground, when he landed Hau had no trouble recovering, keeping his balance without concern. It spoke of years upon years of his life spent by the sea, feet upon the sands of Alola's shores. Moon couldn't begin to keep up. “Come on!” Hau took easy steps, stopping and waiting for Moon to follow every few paces. “There are people swimming with their Pokemon!”

There were, many Water-type Pokemon to be seen out amongst the waves. Hau quickly sent out his Popplio to join them, telling the inquiring Pokemon he'd swim with it later but it should still swim for now. Moon considered her Pokemon, but understood none were suitable to swimming. She kept her Pokeballs in her bag.

“Slow~”

The cry of a Slowpoke, a Pokemon as native to Kanto as it was to Alola, drew Moon's attention, who turned to find the Pokemon having waddled up to her. Crouching down she ran a hand around its head, which it leaned happily into at the attention, Hau watching over Moon's shoulder with a smile. He reached down to pet the Pokemon too.

“You're popular with them, huh?” His question was rhetorical, but Moon responded with a nod all the same. She'd always liked Pokemon. And they'd always seemed to like her.

It had never been a question she'd become a Trainer. Never a doubt in her mind.

Refreshed by having dived into the waves off the shore, Hau's Popplio returned just in time to muscle in on the petting action, almost pushing aside the poor Slowpoke to get at Hau's hand. He laughed and jokingly scolded the Pokemon, who knew it well enough to do little more than preen when its trainer gave it the proper attention. Moon continued to pet the Slowpoke until a woman emerged from the crowd, thanked Moon and Hau for looking after her Pokemon – a Slowpoke shouldn't be able to get that far away no matter how long she'd been sunbathing! – and picked up the pink and happily lazy Pokemon. Moon waved it off. Hau returned Popplio to its ball.

And the two stood back up.

“So hey, where's Lillie?” Hau's question was answered by Moon's point back to the stairs leading up from the beach-front, the two making their way over the sand – Hau again so much the faster – until they were ascending its stone steps. At the top could be found Lillie, sitting upon a bench with her bag over her knees, a hand caressing its side just so. She smiled as Hau and Moon approached.
“Nebby was intent on getting out to see all the going-ons,” she explained, “I had to get it away from everyone to help calm it down.” Moon nodded at this, while Hau shrugged. His grandfather had explained that Nebby was an important Pokemon Lillie had to keep safe, but Hau still didn't get why she couldn't just let it out now and again. Oh well. He pointed west, further into the city.

“Let's keep going!”

So they did.

Just down from the stairways to the beach, a Ride Pokemon Rental was set-up, perfect for helping people go to and from the beach-front. The three watched as Ride Pokemon, Tauros mostly, veered from the lanes specifically made for them and into the station, others with riders on their backs emerging and following those same lanes back into the city. A phenomenon that didn't exist in Kanto, Ride Pokemon entranced Moon, who took the lead to lead the others into the station. Hau and Lillie followed after.

“Welcome, welcome, can I help yo- oh!” The attendant who'd approached the three stopped as soon as he saw the Island Challenge Amulets affixed to Moon's bag and Hau's waist, “Ah, young Trial-goers, how wonderful. Are you here to take a Ride Pokemon?”

“Oh yeah!” Hau turned to Moon, who had been looking at the attendant with curiosity at the question, “So when you're on your Island Challenge, you can rent Ride Pokemon for free!” Wide eyes turned to him, which he smiled at the sight of. Moon was always like this with Pokemon. It was good. “Yeah yeah! So if you ever need one, you can get one! Just like that!”

“Almost 'just like that',” the attendant smiled at the energy of the children, always pleased to tell those on their Island Challenge about Ride Pokemon, “there's still a safety course you need to complete before you can take Ride Pokemon out alone. But I'm sure you young Pokemon Trainers will have no trouble with that.”

“Aww man,” having forgotten that stipulation, Hau let his energy lower just a moment, before perking back up, “Then Moon, how about we both do the course later, okay?” When Moon nodded, Hau beamed. That would be great. He turned around. “Do you want to too, Lillie?”

“I'm-” Lillie stepped away from a Tauros passing her by, the larger Pokemon just a little intimidating to the young girl, “I'm fine, thank you Hau. I'm not on an Island Challenge, after all.”

“Well if you ever change your mind, little miss,” the attendant made their pitch all the same, “This is the best place to do it, so close to the sea! But if you can't make it here, there are Ride Pokemon Stations all over Hau'oli City, so you can pick up and drop off the transport Pokemon no matter where you are!”

“R-right!” Lillie nodded response, Hau and Moon busy watching some of the Tauros in stalls being cleaned by other staff. Hau was talking excitedly to Moon.

“So every city in Alola has Ride Pokemon, and then there are some that you can take outside of the cities to explore the full Island. I hear you can get personal Ride Pokemon too but that's expensive so only a few people can afford that. We'll probably just be using these rentals to get around!”

Moon reached out and petted a Tauros, who'd wandered up to the stall she and Hau were looking into. Hau noted once again how easily Pokemon came to Moon.

She really was something else.

Once back on the road, having made plans to come back another day to take their Ride Pokemon
Safety Course, Moon and Hau with Lillie in tow continued on, the roads curving gently upwards as they went. A bus station up ahead awaited them, the route it followed well able to take the three further into the city. They set up there and waited, the next bus only a few minutes away.

The entire city, alive and thrumming with people, Pokemon, and movement, filled Moon with an energy Kanto never had.

It was good here.

It was very good.

“The Island Challenge...” sitting at the bus station with her bag over her legs once more, Lillie considered the Ride Pokemon offer, “it’s really important to Alola, isn’t it?”

“Yeah!” Hau nodded with enthusiasm, standing outside the awning of the station under the Alolan sun. “You can do loads of things on the Island Challenge – like rent Ride Pokemon for free, or use any public transport, stay in Pokemon Centers overnight, and enter special preserves all over the place! Verdant Cavern, y’know the place Captain Ilima told us the Trial’s at, it's a special Pokemon preserve! Only the Captain and people on their Island Challenges can enter it!”

“I've read about that!” Happy enough with a topic she was familiar with, Lillie chimed in to discuss. “When Rattata were first introduced to Alola they threatened to overrun Hau’oli City, until a deal was made between the Kahuna and a pack of Yungoos and Gumshoos to clear them out. The Kahuna in payment gave the Pokemon Verdant Cavern as a home, and made sure that it was safe from people from then on, right?”

“Something like that,” Hau, who hadn’t studied the actual history of Alola nearly as well as Lillie had, waved wildly to catch the attention of the approaching bus. “Aside from the Captain, Kahuna, and people on their Island Challenge, Tapu Koko likes to hang out there too! I think it fights the Pokemon to keep them strong!”

Hau and Moon had no issue boarding the bus, their Island Challenge Amulets enough to secure passage. Lillie did present money – no bus card on hand – and was seated shortly after. Hau promised her he'd cover lunch, which she attempted to insist he didn't have to, but failed to convince him otherwise. Moon oversaw the two with a smile at the sight.

The bus rolled on into the city, passing by cars and Pokemon alike. Moon watched as Ride Pokemon continued in their lanes, riders carried back and forth across the city. She liked that. Couldn't wait to try it herself.

“Okay!” Once back on their feet, disembarked and ready to explore Hau'oli's central shopping district, Hau immediately took off. “I’ve gotta visit the Pokemon Center and do some shopping, I'll catch you two later! We’ll go for food when I get back okay?” Having agreed, Moon and Lillie watched as Hau raced off, never slowing for even a moment. Lillie laughed seeing Moon watching him go.

“Hau... never slows down, does he?” When Moon turned her attention back to Lillie she shook her head, but her smile was there too. Hau’s energy was both friendly and infectious, the type that made a person the best to be around. She was enjoying herself today.

This was really very good.

“Do...”, Lillie wavered for a moment, but Moon's gaze upon her helped her power through her thoughts, “do you pick your own clothes, Moon?” Moon did, her mother encouraging her to pursue
her own interests from a young age. The answer seemed to make Lillie sigh. Moon looked at her in curiosity. She shook her head. “I was thinking about visiting a clothing shop, would you like to come with me? Oh, if that's okay, I don't know if you've already been...”

Moon had, with her mother, changing her outfit just so. Sneakers exchanged for sandals. The new watermelon coloured bag she had slung over her shoulder. Today an orange shirt with red flowers and white shorts. The warmth of Alola was something new and comforting, but still enough for Moon that she kept her arms and legs bare to remain cool. Her black hair remained tied back in a pony-tail, as her mother had suggested, and her red, chicken-combed hat continued to sit squarely on her head. It was the only thing she had not changed.

Lillie had found herself looking at the hat often, as... striking... as it was, but had yet to find the confidence to ask about it. She pushed the wide brim of her own hat up just a little, keeping the sun off of her face. Moon nodded to her. Okay then.

“Thank you.”

Moon had free reign to explore the shop, Lillie immediately celebrated as a milestone customer the moment she walked in. She kept an eye out for the girl, who was attempting to diffuse the attention on her, but mostly inspected the shop. Not much different to the last time. She returned to Lillie’s side just as the white-clad girl escaped the slightly overbearing attendant. Moon gave Lillie a grin.

“I don’t see why they have to make such a big deal out of it,” Lillie shook her head, well aware of the teasing expression directed her way, “I just wished to look at the clothes.” In Lillie's hand was clutched a box, which she held out to Moon while avoiding her eyes. Moon took it in curiosity. “They gave me this kit but I already have one, if you'd like it...” Opening the kit, inspecting its contents, Moon nodded, closing it and placing it in her bag. Lillie smiled at her thanks. “Now we both have one,” she tilted her head, looking around, “so we can match. A little.”

It was difficult to describe Moon and Lillie as matching in much at all – Lillie was slightly taller, with pale skin in contrast to Moon's dark, bright green eyes compared to deep brown, and a pure white dress against the vibrant colours Moon wore. There was little similarity at all to be found.

But in a secret way, in having these cases each, they matched, and Lillie found herself enjoying that thought. Let it distract her and make the point of entering this store, to see if she wanted to buy any of these clothes, difficult to focus on. In the end nothing called out to her, and Lillie left without buying a thing. Sighed as Moon followed behind.

“Hey! Lillie! Moon!”

Having finished his own business, Hau found the two once more, racing back to them, smile as wide as ever, “I bet you two are hungry, huh? Let's go get some food! The Malasada Shop nearby, close to the Marina, has the best Malasada around! We've gotta go! Come on let's go let's go let's go!”

As overwhelming as ever, Hau nonetheless provided enough direction for Lillie to focus on, and she nodded in response. It would be good to get food. Moon nodded too. Pointing to set the direction, Hau set off, the two girls following behind. Onwards to good food shared with good friends.

Onwards to fill hungry stomachs.

Onwards, past the loud sounds of people and partying.

...Oh?

Hau came to a stop, staring at the wide metal gate opened before him, framed by a hedge equally as
tall as the gate towering over their heads. Down a path from the open gate was a huge mansion, with fountains and gardens lining the way. And people just all over the place.

Without another thought Hau walked in through the gate.

“Oh Hau!” Following after, Lillie, then Moon, entered as well, quickly surrounded by the crowd of people making up the party. Lillie's attempt to keep Hau from intruding failed as she lost track of him, turning around to find Moon had disappeared from sight as well, leaving her alone. She clutched her bag tight and attempted to find her friends amongst the crowd. Where were they...

Moon had held back when overhearing a discussion, a woman telling others standing in a circle about the rumour her child was spreading. Apparently there had been a trainer, just a young girl, at the Pokemon School with three Pokemon. Such a thing! Hohohoho, those children must be mistaken, that sort of thing, that wasn't possible, right?

Another made mention that there was a rumour from Iki Town that a new Trainer had shown two Pokemon. Moon, who most definitely had only shown one, kept an ear open, listening in as the group discussed. A younger man piped up his thoughts.

“Well if there's some great new Trainer around, I hope she helps throw Team Skull out of Hau'oli! Did you hear that even more of their type have been seen down by the Marina?”

“Ugh, terrible,” the woman speaking first shook her head, “Those no-good thugs could stand to learn a lesson from my daughter, who's working so hard as a Pokemon Trainer. All they do is harass people and try to steal Pokemon, they're the worst!”

Mutters of agreement circled the group as Moon broke away, casting her eyes out for Hau or Lillie, realising she'd lost each. Surrounded by adults, Moon stepped carefully, barely paid attention to by their conversations. She didn't know where the others were. There were too many people. She turned to make her way to the edge of the crowd, to gain some solace from the numbers, but couldn't pick a direction. Stood stock still as the party moved around her.

Frozen in time.

“Oh? Hello there.” The soft voice of Ilima, Captain of Melemele Island, instantly brought relief as Moon turned to the one person she knew, even slightly, as he emerged from the crowd. A light smile on his face, a Yungoos curled over his shoulders and giving the evil eye to anything and everything that moved, the pink-haired man addressed Moon. “While this house party is open to the public, I must admit to being surprised to see you here, Moon. What brings you to my home today?”

It didn't take long for Ilima, after Moon's explanation, to disappear into the crowd and return with Hau and Lillie, somehow easily able to locate them amongst the masses, and group the three together again. Lillie looked as relieved as Moon felt to be back with the others. Hau had a pastry in his hand and the remains of another around his mouth.

“Well now,” Ilima looked around, before giving the three a conspiratorial smile, “since some young Trial-goers have come to see the Captain, I should make time to speak with you. Why don't we head off? The Marina is delightful at this time of day as the breeze comes in off the water.”

Ilima's retreat from the party was stopped at the gate, an older man approaching him. Moon didn't miss the sigh that came from the Captain when called out to.

“Ilima!” The man approached him with a frown, “Where are you off to, my boy? This is a party for your recent accomplishments! It would do no good to have the very guest of honour leave in the
“I'm sorry, father,” Ilima bowed his head, “However I must fulfil my duties as Captain, and lend my aid to all Trainers and Trial-goers who come to me. I will return as soon as I can.”

The older man frowned, looking past Ilima at the trio. “Can't you come back later?” He huffed, “It's very important for my son to be part of.”

“I will return,” Ilima stressed the word, stepping back into his father's gaze, “as soon as I can, father. Please excuse us.” Wasting not a second more, Ilima quickly turned and ushered Moon and the others out the gates of the house, following after them with measured pace. His father, watching his son depart his very own party, turned and entered the crowd again to keep the socialisers and rung-climbers at bay.

He was probably the only one likely to miss his son after all.

He didn't like that one bit.

“Apologies,” Ilima, as soon as he was outside the party's grips, wore a much happier smile, “such large dos barely suit me. I prefer to be out in the city, working with its people and Pokemon. Forgive me for using you to make my escape.”

“Uhm,” Lillie took on speaking duties, Hau occupying himself with the other pastry he'd been holding, “It's fine, thank you for helping us. We got caught up in the crowd before...” for a moment, Lillie shot Hau a very pointed look which he did his best to avoid catching – and failed – “before we had a chance.”

“Such social gatherings are like that,” Ilima agreed, “I find those large crowds stifling. A few people, and a few more Pokemon, is far more my speed. So, young Trial-goers, how are you this day?”

“Good!” Hau managed around the remains of the pastry, Ilima giving no mention to it in the young boy's hand and mouth. “We've been checking out the city, showing it off to Moon!”

“Ah yes,” Ilima nodded, turning his gaze to Moon, “You are new to the Alola Region, correct?” Moon nodded, Ilima smiling. “I spent a few years away in the Kalos Region, however I find my heart will always be at home here. I am honoured to be one of Alola's Captains.”

“Oh!” Hau, having finished the pastry, turned to Ilima with a smile, “We were heading for the Malasada Shop by the Marina! Did you want to join us, Captain?”

“Well now,” Ilima smiled at the extended offer from the youth, “Perhaps I will take you up on that. I have always said that shop made the best Malasada in Alola.”

“Yeah!” Hau's excited agreement brought smiles to the faces of the group as they continued on, down the roads to the water's edge. Ilima pointed out buildings of note, the City Hall – Professor Kukui and Ms. Kahili had a meeting about the Pokemon League there the night before, and would have another tomorrow – as well as the Police Station, which the Captain and Kahuna worked with to help keep Melemele safe.

Soon enough the group reached the district by the Marina, the Malasada Shop within already having a line out the door. Hau and Lillie dutifully joined the queue. Ilima looked thoughtful.

“Pardon me,” he addressed the pair, a wave of his hand indicating Moon, “but if I could borrow young miss Moon from you for a spell, I would appreciate it. We will return soon enough to join you, have no fear.”
“Oh, okay!” Hau nodded, “We'll keep a place in line for you!” Lillie waved to Moon, who waved back, before turning to follow Ilima further into the Marina district.

The sight of her walking side-by-side with the Captain struck Lillie strongly. She shook her head to try and regain her focus. Looked up to see Hau smiling at her. Frowned at him. He laughed.

“She's really something, isn't she?” Hau folded his hands behind his head, his pose suggesting he was leaning backwards against the air. “I gotta work extra extra hard to keep up with her!”

“She's...” Lillie found herself lost for the word. Incredible wasn't right. Overwhelming was only true for those Moon stood against, not those she stood by. Absorbing? Eye-catching? Reassuring? She didn't know. Just let the word hang.

“Still hard to believe,” Hau kept talking, saving Lillie from the pause she'd created, “Six Pokemon though, how cool is that, right?”

Lillie frowned. Hang on. “H-how do you know she has six?” Moon had been rumoured to have two the night of the Festival. She'd displayed three on the grounds of the Pokemon School. But Hau had neither visited Moon's house when she had her six Pokemon out, nor been in Professor Kukui's lab when Moon's Rotom-dex announced it. He shouldn't know. Hau grinned.

“I can tell,” he gave a wink to Lillie, barely answering the question at all, “she just feels like she has six Pokemon, y'know?”

She didn't.

“Anyway I'm gonna go all out to not fall behind!” Hau reassured himself by saying it, pausing before giving Lillie another of his newly patented winks. “Me and my two Pokemon, yeah?”

Lillie's stare of shock was exactly the reaction Hau had wanted. It had been so worth it spending all that time this morning making that catch.

Gosh he was tired.

The smell of saltwater was thick by the Marina, but it was different to that of Hau'oli's beach. There it had been sand and people and Pokemon, warmth of the sun reflecting off the waves and flavouring the taste in the air. Here it was cooler, the numerous buildings overshadowing the area. The breeze that rolled off the water and up the streets was brisk, and washed over Moon and Ilima's faces as they walked.

Different, but good as well. Moon enjoyed it.

“I must admit,” Ilima spoke as he walked, enough space between the pair and others that his words reached Moon alone, “Even having seen it I find it difficult to believe. Three nights ago you forged your first Trainer's Bond and here you stand beside me, six established and healthy. It would seem there is still far more to this world, and Pokemon, that I have to learn. That we all do.”

Moon said nothing of it. She had her schooling. She understood. She was aware of the difference between her and what was expected. That... was as far as it went.
“What I would like to say,” as the pair stepped off of the roadside, stood on the pier overlooking the boats gathered in Hau'oli’s harbour, “is that I would like you to be able to come to me when in need, Moon. I understand you may be experiencing great stress, or concern, and I wish to help you in any way that I can. Please do not hesitate to ask for me, night or day. I will always be there for the Trainers of Alola. Do not forget this.”

Moon's consideration of those words, the response she was preparing to give, went unvoiced as a new sound echoed over the pier and across the water. It was harsh, blasting music, the staticky sounds coming from the boombox carried by one of the approaching figures drowning out most of the actual tune. Ilima sighed at the sight of the group. They set up before him, identical black shirts, silver pendants glinting in the sunlight, and took a pose. One in particular took the lead. Pointed a hand.

And announced.

“Yo yo yo, if it ain't the big C himself, Ilima in da house!” The announcement was met with a fist pump from the group to the air, who continued to move their hands after in their own rhythmic pattern. Moon stared at them.

“Ya busy, Cap, chatting up all the Trainers, being too dang coooooool for us, huh, that it?” The leader of the group turned around to the others. “Hey Ilima thinks he's too cool for Team Skull, how you taking that ya boneheads?”

A loud cry in the negative echoed from the group, continuing their movements. Ilima shook his head.

“Well C it's like this,” once more the pack leader turned back to Ilima, “You've been giving us some real black eyes lately, and we're not gonna take it no more! It's time for Team Skull to take over, and our first step's gonna be putting you in the trash! So get ready cause we're coming at'cha!”

The entire group, a rough dozen by the looks of it, revealed Pokeballs in hand, preparing to crush the upstart Captain. Moon, still staring at them, raised her hands, attempting to mimic the movements they were performing. Ilima reached out and stilled one of her arms.

“Moon,” there was steel in his tone now, his other hand rubbing the neck of the Yungoos around his shoulders, who unfurled itself and hopped down to face the group, “if you intend on copying the movements of another, may I recommend my own over these ruffians? Please observe.”

A wave of Pokemon, released by Team Skull, stood off against the singular Yungoos. Ilima raised his hand, the Z-Ring around his wrist catching the sun. The crystal placed within it shining bright.

“Now then,” as Ilima stretched out a leg, ran his foot over the ground before him as he set up the beginning of his pose, Moon felt it. Felt power that shook her. Her eyes focused on Ilima, saw only him as he moved, brought his arms around into a pose that caused the power around him to quake even further. To shake the world.

Then it flowed, into the Yungoos as its foes bore down upon it, and it shone brightly, so brightly as to rival the stars. Ilima voiced the command. Moon didn't hear it, lost in the light as she was.

So this was the power of Z.

The force of the Z-Move was so much that Moon barely saw the attack itself, the wind-pressure pushing her back, forcing her to raise a hand to hold her hat to her head and cover her face. Only after, lowering her arm again, did she see the remains of the battle – the bested Pokemon scattered around the area, the crater in the ground before Ilima and his Yungoos, and the scattered members of
Team Skull who'd not been prepared in the least.

The boombox shorted out and left silence in its wake.

“I, well, uh,” the leader of the group was the first to return his Pokemon – a brightly coloured Grimer – to its Pokeball, “I hope you... learned a lesson, Ilima. Team Skull ain't nothin' to mess with, so don't step to us, aight?” The rest of the grunts by this point had also retrieved their Pokemon. Each in the process of stepping back. “So, uh, I'ma let you off with a warning this time, but you keep to your own fancy house yeah? Okay, well,” the majority were booking it into the backstreets of the Marina's industrial complex, “See you around! Or we won't! Yeah! Bye!”

Moon watched as the group disappeared before her eyes. That had happened. Ilima dropped to a knee.

“She was never going to forget this.

Never ever ever.

The sound of sirens came with the arrival of police, the scuffle between Ilima and the Team Skull gang reported quickly enough. Overwhelmed by having to report on the events that took place, Ilima was forced to send Moon on her way, back to her friends, the original intent of his borrowing her lost.

He really had been looking forward to properly testing her skills. He'd find the chance to battle her later. For sure.

One of the officers standing guard at the scene waved Moon to head off, as Ilima had insisted she was fine to go on. Then paused, as the large simian Pokemon with him reached up a hand, pointing at her with insistence.

“Hey, hang on...” this wasn't right, his senses were usually sharp to how Pokemon Trainers added up. But he had to be wrong right now.

Didn't he?

Moon kept walking and he didn't stop her. He'd convince himself by the end of the day it had just been a bad read in the aftermath of Ilima's Z-Move.

And realise the truth only later on.

By miraculous timing, Moon returned to Hau and Lillie just as they were being waved into the Malasada Restaurant, explaining that Ilima would be unable to join them. Together the three ate, discussed the events with Ilima as Moon recounted them, and considered what was next to come. Hau'oli City had much to offer still for new Trainers just beginning their Pokemon Journeys. It would be good to stay here for a while and grow.
So they would.

Lillie, whose journey was of a different form, spoke of Professor Kukui and Kahili's tour around the Alola Region, working to smooth out concerns about the new Pokemon League. She'd be travelling with Kukui as his assistant, but as Kukui would be following the path of the Island Challenge, she felt confident saying she'd see Hau and Moon many times along the way. Each approved to hear that.

It would be good for the three of them to stay together as best they could.

Each agreed to that.

The day continued on. Hau showed more of the city to Moon and Lillie, and when the evening came they caught a bus back to its eastern side, Hau actually falling asleep on the trip. Moon watched the orange light of Alola take over the city, tinting the waves and colouring the air, and found it beautiful. Thought of the light Ilima had called up when unleashing his Z-Move, beautiful as well.

That night she spoke of the day to her mother with more enthusiasm and energy than Jewellery had heard from her daughter in months, perhaps years. And Jewellery smiled and knew her daughter's Journey would be the best thing possible for her. Wished her well from the depths of her heart.

Knew soon she would be gone.

To return on the other side.

Darkness fell. The three slept. And night gave way to another day of their lives.

A collection of observations made around Hau'oli City in the week following the Marina Incident.

Young Trainers battling wild Pokemon found in gardens and parks kept across the city. A Trainer throwing a Pokeball, celebrating the successful capture by embracing a Rowlet. She's young for a second, but it's possible, people suppose. She must be talented. Would do well. They continued on.

A blonde girl seen with Professor Kukui and Kahili Hano, assisting them as they continued their meetings and discussions across the city. Once seen alone, set up in the Hau'oli Library surrounded by books, narrating to her closed bag. Talking likely helped her focus. That was what observers believed.

The grandson of Melemele Island's Kahuna setting a new record in a Malasada eating competition hosted by the Marina Shop. He attributed his victory to the hunger he worked up training with his Pokemon. Kahuna Hala was unsurprised to hear this result.

An increase in the presence of Team Skull throughout Hau'oli City, clashing almost every day with both Captain Ilima and the police.

A young Trainer visiting a Pokemon Center, making use of the Storage PC available to all. Oh, onlookers realised, she must be trying to juggle single Pokemon. It's a shame no-one convinced her that the effort of breaking and re-establishing Bonds was too exhausting to keep up for long. It's a shame she'd soon learn and have to release the Pokemon she couldn't maintain. A shame.

The Kahuna's grandson and another Trainer completing the Ride Pokemon Safety Course without trouble, the Pokemon going above and beyond to follow their directives. They're both Trainers with
incredible potential, people said. They could be seen travelling along the Pokemon lanes of Hau'oli in the days following, clad in riding gear. A good sight of the youth of Alola following its traditions. A good sight indeed.

A fresh Pokemon Trainer visiting the Pokemon School to battle with their students. The rumours going around the city, of a new Trainer with multiple Pokemon, surged as the suggested number increased yet again. Was it strange, that she had a Metapod? Bug Pokemon evolved quickly. But that quickly? The school's 'Elite Four' found their defeat far more unnerving than humiliating.

A fight, between a blonde teenager and the majority of Team Skull, ending with the boy's crushing victory. Direct witnesses claimed he gave orders to Team Skull in the battle's wake. Reduced presence of Team Skull throughout Hau'oli in the days to follow.

A Trainer people were sure they saw yesterday, but today she had a different Pokemon with her. So it had to be a different Trainer, right? Of course. She had to be.

The newest arrival to the Alola Region, Jewellery from Kanto, getting to know the neighbourhood she lived in. Her daughter was spending nights away now, staying at a Pokemon Center in Hau'oli, intent on getting used to being away from home. Many parents who had seen their own children off on Pokemon Journeys nodded in understanding.

A strange purple Pokemon floating above the city streets, spinning on traffic lights, and lifting food from stalls in the markets. All attempts to corner or catch have failed.

The continuing rumour of the Trainer who had begun her Island Challenge only days ago, yet had six Pokemon with her already. Reporters who asked of that rumour to Professor Kukui, Kahili Hano, Kahuna Hala, or Captain Ilima being redirected to focus on discussing the upcoming Pokemon League.

An upsurge in reminders, by radio, by television, and by word of mouth, that it is a moral obligation to both respect and care for the children of Alola, and that those on their Island Challenges should be assisted by all who see them in need.

Three children spending time together, now and again

And on the seventh day since her arrival, with six Pokemon by her side – though few were aware that was truth – the Trainer Moon was seen leaving Hau'oli City by its northwest gate. Destination: Verdant Cavern.

Chapter End Notes

This is definitely my favourite chapter yet - bringing Hau'oli City to life as I got to do in this chapter felt so good. I did my best to channel a vibrant and alive city in this chapter, and I hope it reached you, and you saw something much larger and fuller than what the games have shown us. Somewhere filled with people and Pokemon living under Alola's light. It's good.

Leaving Hau'oli City is the point at which I'd consider the end of the extended tutorial in the sumo games. So too is Moon's tutorial over. Her Island Challenge will now be on.

Exploring and developing the friendship between Moon, Hau, and Lillie, is something I
intend to keep doing, as it's very important to this fic, so believe me when I say we'll see the trio together again and again. It'd be wrong of me to do otherwise. I can promise you that.

So with that said, thank you for reading this chapter! Consider leaving a kudos if you haven't, a bookmark to be notified of updates, and recommending this fic to friends you think will enjoy it! It's my wish to be able to reach all of the people who would enjoy reading Eldritch, and I can only do that with your help! Stay tuned for the next chapter, as Moon heads out into Route 2, the distant Verdant Cavern and the Z-Crystal within it calling her name.

I'll see you then.
Trial by Tapu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The north-west gate of Hau'oli City marked the official end of the city in that direction, just as its eastern gate – situated beyond the Trainer's School, marked another. The technicality of the city's end on its eastern side was hotly debated, as the Hau'oli Outskirts, filled with houses stretching along the path to Iki Town, was considered the city by Iki's residents themselves.

A constant concern amongst Iki was that the largest city of Alola was attempting to swallow up their small and storied township, the Kahuna's presence one of the few things holding it back. The truth of that matter was difficult to ascertain – without a singular villain to blame, instead a result of natural human expansion. Still, the residents of Iki vocally did not like it.

Moon had escaped a simmering pot of tension centred on the area her mother had moved to by beginning her Pokemon Journey.

The west side of Melemele Island was a completely different story. A designated national park, the huge tract of land wound its way from the coast up through the hills, alongside the mountain-range that cut all the way to the island's north. Rich with Pokemon, travelled by people respecting nature's claim to the land, this region proved to be Melemele's most popular ecosystem – with tourists and residents alike taking the time to walk its paths.

To continue her Island Challenge, Moon was tasked to make her pilgrimage to Verdant Cavern, a restricted zone within the park. There, Captain Ilima would greet her, and instruct her in the method to take his Trial.

With the number of people always visiting and travelling the park, this Trial made an ideal first for any new Trial-goer, young children seen on the trails understood to be making their own Journeys. Moon found many people along the way bid her 'alola', and returned the greeting in turn. Sometimes this turned into a Pokemon battle, other young Trainers keen to test themselves, some elders willing to offer experience and advice.

Restraint was a thing few in Alola were happy to see children learn – it was a sign of feeling restricted, constrained by the world around them. If a child bound themselves to better fit their environment, it was considered a failing of that environment, and so the youths were encouraged to be true to themselves. It was the Alolan way.

But no-one even noticed Moon's restraint, for to believe she was restraining herself was an impossible thing. Two Pokemon, consistently. They were different Pokemon, yes, but no-one knew that. Each battle ended with two Pokemon, whether it was Moon's victory or defeat. She measured herself. She kept a pace.

And slowed down some of the rumours she'd begun hearing swirling about her.

No-one noticed. How could they? There was no way she had more Pokemon, after all.

Not far beyond Hau'oli's exit the road forked, the right path leading to a cemetery built in the shadows of mountains towering above. It was important for places of rest to be bathed in darkness, for the light of Alola was life and life did not belong shining on graves. The construction of the cemetery was well-planned, the direct light of the sun never upon it. People visited with respectful
peace in their hearts, and the spirits at rest remained. Drawn to that environment, ghost Pokemon made their constant presence known, but they failed to rile up the sleeping ancients. After all, it was as natural for ghost Pokemon to ruckus among graves as it was for those graves to remain at peace. They were accepted. Part of the world as much as anything else. And so they lived in their own peace too. The north-western stretch was a quiet place, you see?

But today there was noise that was unnatural. A new visitor to the cemetery of Melemele lacking any understanding of the decorum all people and Pokemon felt. Even in shadow the light of Alola was still everywhere to its eyes, and so it played in that light it had long felt the absence of, its purple form zipping from grave to grave, aggravating people and Pokemon both. Something had to be done. That was the word that spread that morning.

That was the word that reached Moon's ears.

She stopped her walk and turned, pointing east. She'd investigate.

Moon was a naturally quiet person, so her footsteps as she entered the cemetery were all that announced her. Some people saw her and acknowledged there was another here, but none approached, too busy in conversations about the rambunctious Pokemon that no-one could catch or stop. Moon overheard just enough to keep moving forward.

It didn't take long, walking amongst row after row of graves, to see it, its purple form with vibrant pink highlights circling overhead. A high-pitched voice, a sound like giggling, reached her ears as Moon attempted to follow it with her eyes, its speed fast enough to lose her before appearing again elsewhere. It had yet to notice her specifically.

"Zzt!" The Rotom-dex made its presence known at Moon's request, attempting to scan the Pokemon. However its constant movements prevented the scan, leaving a frown upon Moon's face. She raised a Pokeball.

And gave a command.

Witnesses to the battle described it as short but sharp. The Rowlet of the young Trainer who had appeared was fast – perhaps abnormally fast even for the naturally quick Grass Quill Pokemon. Quickly it gained the attention of the purple Pokemon, lured it down to ground level where the Trainer commanded attacks.

It was upon being attacked that the strange Pokemon retaliated, unleashing a wave of poison that overwhelming the leaf surge from the Rowlet before bathing it in the toxic liquid. That was the end of the conflict, the Pokemon zipping upwards higher and higher until out of sight, apparently satisfied enough with the battle to leave.

Other Trainers around offered the young girl healing items for her singular Pokemon, missing the second Pokeball she'd had in hand preparing to continue the battle. In the wake of the fight, only a few heard the strange floating Pokedex the girl kept with her announce that there was no recorded data of the Pokemon encountered.

A week and change later this event came back to the minds of those witness and mixed into a greater understanding. And built the legend of Moon further. But none knew that now. None knew her now. Not yet.

The path to Verdant Cavern continued. A Ride Pokemon station had been set up at the exit to Hau'oli that rented Pokemon for travelling through the park, but Moon had chosen to go on foot, to
spend more time with her Pokemon in training. There was a weakness in her incredible ability, and that was that to maintain many Pokemon at once required many times more the work. And yet not once did she slow. Never did she stop.

No tiredness did she show.

Lillie had told Moon the day before that she would be further west of the park, with Professor Kukui and Kahili in the small towns by the coast. Built just beyond the boundaries of the reserve, they were disconnected by roads from Hau'oli, relying instead on travel by sea. Those towns, much like Iki, were keepers of Alola's traditions, and had expressed concern at the changes to the Island Challenge Kukui's Pokemon League would bring.

So following (roughly) the path of the Island Challenge, Kukui went from place to place to explain himself and prove that Alola's spirit would remain strong. That was his intent.

Moon stopped at the rise of a hill in the path, looking down over the trees and the sea beyond, seeing a cluster of buildings and boats by its shore. Perhaps Lillie was down there. Perhaps Moon was looking at her right now, simply unable to see because of the distance between them. Perhaps Lillie was looking back at her.

Moon let herself smile and continued on.

Further along the path, further along the day, Moon came to a new crossroads, a Pokemon awaiting her. For anyone who would help, by its logic, but this girl, yes, her. Her! The red and white bird rushed up to her, Moon's Rotom-dex naming it 'Delibird' just in time for Moon to greet it before it had hold of her bag, tugging as hard as it could, pulling her in a new direction. Moon told it she would follow. It let go of the bag and led the way.

Berry Trees are a virulent strain in Alola, the rich soils, clean air, and life-giving light causing them to grow with wild abandon. Where in other regions they must be cultivated, here they grow freely wherever they find purchase, often spread by Flying and Bug-type Pokemon across the land.

Yet even some try to control them and, with special dispensation, the Berry Plantation of Alola was established here, inside the National Park of Melemele Island. The flock of Delibird trained by its owner flew across the Alola Region, collecting Berries from trees, and distributed them to collection bins, assisting with funding as the owner of the Plantation experimented with strains that would overgrow existing crops while spreading far less intensely.

The attempt to control the spreading trees before they overran native Alolan foliage was in full effect.

No-one in Team Skull understood this even a little, and even if they did they wouldn't care. What mattered right now was a) lots of Pokemon up for grabs and b) lots of berries equally ready for the picking. That was the logic of the two Grunts who had broken away from the marching orders given to them by the Enforcer to go raid the plantation instead. Might as well make some buck, yo! And maybe get in the boss's good books? Maybe get that Enforcer off their back? Yeah that'd be cool too. Right on.

Moon walked into the plantation, guided by the Delibird seeking aid, to find two of Team Skull's members, Pokemon out, harassing the owner of the grove. One had a Drowzee, the other a Zubat, and the local Delibird population had already suffered a beating, the Pokemon not suited for battling.

Unaware of the approaching Trainer, the two continued to move their arms, the signature dance of Team Skull on show at all times. The one with the Drowzee took charge of speaking.
“So hey bro, ain't it about time you give up the goods, yo? Your Pokemon got whacked and smashed all over the place so shouldn't you just get outta our face? Berry me dude, we got places to be, so make with the fruits and you'll be rid of me, got it?” The other Grunt nodded with approval at his brother-in-arm's sick rhymes. The plantation owner rolled his eyes.

“As if I need give in to the demands of you whelps,” he crossed his arms, clearly unimpressed. “Begone from here, you have upset my Pokemon and my day's work.”

“Yo you hear that?” Wide-eyed, the first Grunt turned to the second, “Pops here thinks he can just give us lip and keep going? We ain't about that life, yo, we're Team Skull and we take what we want. So last chance before we do the taking no questions asked, how bout giving us those berries, huh?”

Seeing Moon approaching, the man shook his head to discourage her from interfering. He would deal with these punks himself. Yet the gaze of his eyes directed the attention of the pair, who turned to see Moon standing before them. They frowned but it was hard to tell beneath the bandannas covering their mouths.

“Hey yo,” the talkative one pointed, “ain't you that Trainer that was with the Cap? Come to laugh at us, huh? Y'think you're all that, walking around with those big name Trainers? Well he ain't here now so you ain't nothing. Walk on, kid.”

The other nodded, and pointed with both hands. “Take your dumb hat and leave.”

Moon's eyes flashed as she stepped forward, Pokeball already in hand.

In the wake of the battle, watching the Team Skull Grunts fleeing his plantation at full speed, followed by Moon's focused steps as she made sure they stayed gone, the owner felt as if he'd just witnessed something no-one ever should.

Don't insult the hat.

Travel, battle, and new Pokemon acquisition between the notable visits to the cemetery and plantation, left evening rolling in as Moon found herself at the Melemele Park Motel, a midway point for many travellers taking a relaxed pace exploring the National Park. Unlike Pokemon Centers, the Motel did not provide free coverage to Trainers on their Island Challenge, but Moon's battle with other Trainers that day had shored her funds up enough to afford the night, especially with the reduced cost for children on offer.

It wasn't an odd thing for children to stay at the Motel, after all. It wasn't odd for them to wander much of Alola. That was the way things were. It was natural here.

Moon slept well that night.

The next morning both Moon and her team, rested and recovered, having eaten and prepared, set out once more. Another Ride Station eschewed, Moon continued on foot, feeling the need to train far more than make it to Verdant Cavern in a hurry. It was by midday that she arrived in the vicinity of the first Trial of the Island Challenge, her presence greeted by an excited yell.

Hau raced up to see her.

“Hey Moon!” He waved as he ran forward, Moon waving back, a clap of their open palms celebrating reunion. Hau swung around her. “I didn't think I'd get here before you, didn't you ride?”

The shake of her head drew a whistle, the young boy clearly impressed. “Well it's a great walk so I
think that was good anyway, so hey, here we are, huh? I haven’t seen the Captain yet, so how about we grab lunch? Get our Pokemon healed up,” pointing, Hau showed the Pokemon Center constructed nearby, “and maybe if we get time have a battle to see how we’re doing? It's been a while since the last, after all.”

Moon nodded to that and the two progressed, entered the Pokemon Center – far emptier than any other they’d been in before. Its construction was based upon proximity to Verdant Cavern, and the need of Trainers on their Island Challenges to be brought to full health before facing it. Only a few other people were inside, travelling Trainers mostly, those who did not take the easier routes that avoided this restricted site. The healing of Hau's Pokemon went unnoticed by Moon, who was adjusting her team at the PC provided. She didn't even hear Hau address her Pokedex.

“Hey Rotom!” Hau's request drew the Pokemon-inhabited device's notice, who floated up with a 'zzt' of attention. “How's Moon's collection going?”

“Pokemon encountered: thirty! Pokemon caught: twelve! Zzt!”

The echoing electronic voice drew eyes from all around, Hau ignoring them to nudge Moon with his shoulder, who jolted out of her thoughts from observing the Pokemon Storage System. “You doing okay with that number?” His question was one of honest concern, though he smiled at Moon's nod. “The auto-release timer is two weeks, right? They're really strict about it, so most people don't even have one stored away. Twelve must be hard.”

It was the twelfth day since Moon had obtained her Rowlet. Whether or not she'd be affected by the number of Pokemon she kept, there hadn't yet been the time to reveal it. But she seemed confident and expressed that to Hau. He smiled to hear it. She really was incredible.

“Oh okay well get your team healed up and let's have something to eat!”

The nurse at the Pokemon Center gave Moon a long look as the young girl – she had to be just starting her Pokemon Journey – offered up a set of six Pokeballs for healing. The few other Trainers in the Center had approached, keeping a distance yet watching all the same. Yeah, seems like this kid really did have six Pokemon. That was wild, right? They agreed that amongst themselves as Hau and Moon visited the cafe, organising food for themselves and their Pokemon. And ate together with their team.

There was a moment, as each was releasing their Pokemon to feed, that Hau paused, before giving Moon a sheepish smile. She looked at him in curiosity. He held up a second Pokeball, his Popplio already playing about with Rowlet.

“I was hoping to surprise you with this one,” with a click and a beam of red light, a Pokemon of yellow and black appeared with the rest. Moon's wide smile, thrilled at the sight of the Tiny Mouse Pokemon Pichu, was worth it in the end, Hau decided. Not everything needed to be a surprise in battle. He considered the other Pokemon around him as Moon picked up and petted the electric rodent.

Rowlet, of course. A Metapod that was shaking enough to tell anyone familiar with Bug Pokemon it was near to its next evolution. A grey-furred Meowth, the Pokemon one Moon had made sure to introduce to her mother's as soon as she caught it. Pikipek still, beak constantly fetching new food from the bowl provided. An Abra – a rare catch Hau had not managed to make himself, despite trying his best. And what at first appeared to be a second Pikipek, but when pushed aside by the first revealed itself as a small, black and red fox Pokemon. Hau had heard of Zorua but never managed to see one up close. He whistled and petted the Pokemon's surprisingly soft fur. It allowed it.
“That’s one craaaazy team,” Hau’s relaxed tone, even in the presence of Moon’s team, earned a different kind of smile from her, one of relief. To have a peer mattered far more than she showed.

This was good.

“H-hey-” the voice of one of the few Trainers in the Pokemon Center, who had continued to hover around Moon and Hau's periphery, came to an immediate stop as a hand settled strongly on his shoulder. Turning his head, he found the smile of Captain Ilima something that did not relieve in the least. The Trainer beat a hasty retreat.

“Greetings, Captain Ilima here,” Ilima’s introduction drew Moon and Hau's attention, who both looked up to him, “and I see two young Trial-goers ready to take on my Trial. Unfortunately a Trial can only be attempted by a single person at a time, and based on progress may become unavailable for a period of time after. Are you two able to come to a decision upon who will make the first attempt?”

Even before Moon turned to look back at Hau he was making a series of movements with his raised hand, switching between an open palm, closed fist, and two outstretched fingers. The glint in his eye was playful, but determined. Moon smiled at it and raised her own hand.

Paper to Hau’s scissors. He let out a whoop and jumped to his feet as Ilima politely applauded, Moon staring at her open palm and wondering just how she’d lost.

“Well then,” Ilima’s voice, soft as ever to those he guided, “young Hau, if you are ready?”

“Yeah!” Hau returned Popplio and Pichu to their Pokeballs, before setting after the Captain.

“Moon!” He turned to her even as he walked backwards, “I’ll see you after I beat my Trial! Wish me luck!”

She did. He smiled. And Hau exited the building. Ilima, pausing by a Trainer, leaned in to them and whispered something in their ear. Whatever it was, when they glanced from Ilima to Moon then back, their face was very pale as they nodded agreement with the command.

No-one was about to mess with the Trainer under Captain Ilima's guard.

So the day continued. Hau spent two hours in Verdant Cavern as Moon trained around the area before emerging victorious, Z-Crystal held above his head catching the afternoon sun. Moon arrived just in time to hear Ilima explaining that the Kahuna would be the one to give Hau a Z-Ring, wrapping her own hand around the one she had already.

Another sign of difference.

“Hey Moon!” Hau once more turned to her with a smile on his face, delight twinkling in his eyes, “I did it!” He had. She congratulated him. He glowed under her words. “Okay!” Still riding his high, Hau pointed at the Pokemon Center, “Me and my team are gonna get healed up again and then get going! I can make it to Wai’oli Town before nightfall for sure!”

“There’s no need to rush,” Ilima's attempt to calm Hau failed to stop his spirits, the boy retorting that he wanted to make it back to Iki as soon as he could. That enthusiasm, Ilima couldn't help but approve. “Then just be sure to follow the paths. The road to Wai’oli is far harder than the one you've travelled so far, even if it is far shorter too.”

Moon's query drew both Captain and compatriot's attention. Hau's smile was only slightly baleful. “My apologies,” Ilima bowed his head, “but after its defeat the Totem Pokemon of my Trial must rest. You will need to wait until tomorrow morning to face it.”
Hau raised his hands to the sky. “I kicked its butt!” Ilima coughed.

“Yes, well, as such it requires rest. Take the afternoon to enjoy the paths around the area, train with your Pokemon, and prepare. Tomorrow you will face my Trial and the Totem Pokemon. Ready yourself.”

Not knowing precisely what a Totem Pokemon was, Moon nodded all the same. Saw Hau off once he hit the road, promising she’d catch up. He’d hold her to that, he said. He’d better.

Ilima watched over Moon’s training as the afternoon continued on. Besides her Rowlet, none of her Pokemon were comparable to Hau’s pair, who he’d focused on training as best he could. But her logic, her thought processes, those were immaculate, and the way she managed the powers she did command showed potential that was, well, if she weren’t in possession of six Pokemon without showing any signs of weariness, that potential would knock Ilima speechless. As it was it was simply the cherry on top of a most delightful cake.

He wanted to battle her so much.

But Moon's Trial was the next morning and it would not do to put his full force against her, not even with a Pokemon Center right behind them. So Ilima once again showed restraint. It wasn't the right time yet. Not yet.

But soon. He promised himself that.

He deserved such a reward for the patience he'd shown so far, right?

Afternoon passed to evening then night. They ate in the Pokemon Center. Ilima's dagger stare ensuring that curious Trainers about did not have the chance to approach Moon. And each slept.

For Moon there was excitement, something keeping her awake far past the time she'd slipped into bed. Tomorrow's Trial, at its end she'd gain a Z-Crystal. She'd be able to use a Z-Move, just like the one Ilima had.

The power she'd felt, the light she'd seen, she felt such a powerful drive towards it. Like it was calling to her.

She couldn't wait.

Then sleep came and dawn followed it. The morning began and Moon and her team ate, the Pokemon coursing with the energy their Trainer was exuding. A Trainer's mental state was as important as their Pokemon's physical to be the best; the Bonds between them and their Pokemon strengthened by their condition. Moon was at her best that morning, and Ilima could almost swear she was glowing as she bounded up to him with a smile. Was it time to begin? Was the Trial ready? He'd just entered the Pokemon Center, had he been checking on the Totem, whatever that was?

It was, it was, he had been. Ilima smiled and directed Moon, who almost raced out the door, stopping only to collect her Pokemon.

He was looking forward to how this went.

“Now then,” stopping Moon just before the entrance to Verdant Cavern, Ilima adopted his full Captain's persona. Time to be his best. “Verdant Cavern is a sacred place in Alola, cared for by the Totem Pokemon. That is the reason only the Kahuna, Captain, and Trainers on their Island Challenges are permitted entry. Please show this land respect in taking its Trial.”
That reached Moon, who stilled just a little. Was still pent up with energy, just controlling it a little better. Ilima smiled. “Within Verdant Cavern, there is an extremely powerful Pokemon known as a Totem Pokemon. You will encounter a Totem Pokemon in each of Alola’s seven Trials, and each you must overcome. By besting it you will be able to take a Z-Crystal from the den it guards, so be sure to give it your all. Young Trainer Moon, be aware, once you begin this challenge, you must either complete it or retreat from it entirely. Are you prepared?”

She was. Ilima hadn’t even needed to ask.

“Then let the Trial of Captain Ilima... begin!”

It was a courtesy to let Trainers be within their Trials unless requested otherwise. Hau had asked Ilima to oversee him, to tell him how he was doing with raising his Pokemon. Having been trained by the Kahuna, Ilima had the unique ability to compare others to him, and Hau needed to know. Ilima was honest in that Hau was doing well, but the Kahuna was still an incomparable power.

It hadn’t surprised the young boy to hear that at all.

Moon didn’t ask for attention. As soon as she could she raced into the Cavern, her Pokemon already at her side. Guarding the way to the Totem would be a number of its subordinates, younger but still powerful Pokemon in their own right. Ilima watched as Moon disappeared into the leafy twists and turns of the Cavern, giving her the space to enjoy herself.

He’d have the chance to measure the fullness of her power later. Maybe even experience the first of her Z-Moves. That would be worth it. He contented himself in thinking that.

Blinked in surprise as two Team Skull Grunts – who most definitely were not meant to be here – ran past him yelling fearfully about ‘what was she doing here?’. Ilima found that quite an enjoyable sight.

The earth-shaking roar of the Totem Pokemon, the Gumshoos that was boss of this Verdant Cavern, set Ilima's feet moving. If he paced himself he'd arrive just as the battle was heating up. Oh he couldn't resist, how could he? He had to see Moon battle.

He couldn't miss it for the world.

Then there was the boom of thunder. Then there was the loud cry that bounced from wall to wall and filled the cavern. Ilima's wide eyes, shock coursing through his system, lasted only a moment before he broke into a sprint at full speed.

No. Way.

Captain Ilima of Melemele Island had received a rare blessing in witnessing the Island Deity, Tapu Koko, thrice before this date. The first time had been in his training under Hala, the Pokemon arriving to battle the Kahuna for its own amusement. Hala had nominated Ilima to be tested, and laughed at the boy's crushing defeat. An important thing to learn, he'd clapped Ilima on the shoulder. Ilima wondered if he'd ever be able to fight that Pokemon again.

The second had been at the Festival of the Tapu the year before this. He and Hala had performed a demonstrative battle, and as they'd concluded Tapu Koko had circled the stage at a speed that whipped up a whirlwind before disappearing with a full table’s worth of fruit.

The third had been three months ago. Ilima had seen a great flash of lightning over the sea despite the cloudless night, and raced out of his house to see it. Tapu Koko was down by Hau'oli’s beach, Professors Kukui and Burnet standing before it. There was a girl with them, who Ilima learned the name of – Lillie – later on. But nothing more.
Moon from the Kanto Region had moved to the Alolan Region two weeks ago. Shortly after her arrival, she had not only met Tapu Koko, but had been saved by it, gifted a shiny stone by it, touched by it. Kukui had told Ilima this, when explaining Moon to him. He’d been stunned.

In quieter hours past this day and its events, considering all that he had seen, Ilima would allow himself one moment’s jealousy at Moon, at the incredible person that she was. Two weeks and already she had experienced things unimaginable. Things he would give anything for.

He shook his head and let it go.

Now... now there were no words. The sight of the Guardian Deity in the den of the Totem Pokemon – the Gumshoos chased away by its power – floating before Moon, its electricity crackling over every surface. The Z-Aura surrounding Moon's Rowlet, who was slamming into the Deity's extended claw, giving everything it could.

The sensation of looking at Moon, mimicking the Z-Pose he had shown her, and how she looked like... something else. Ilima couldn't understand it. This was all beyond understanding.

His experience, and great reaction time, was what saved the day.

For Tapu Koko with a powerful swing of its arm bested the sixth and final Pokemon of Moon's team, threw Rowlet out of its Z-Move at full force. Moon dived, intercepted the Pokemon to catch it, only to find the force in Tapu Koko's throw carrying her too. She flew backwards, Pokemon grasped tight in her arms.

Ilima jumped in her path and caught her.

There was a brief moment, the time it took Tapu Koko to emit a piercing cry and disappear through the Cavern's roof in a blaze of electric thunder, where Ilima lost himself, before coming to, lying on his back with Moon clutched against his chest. Despite the hammering of his heart he could feel hers beating even harder, the repeated gasping breaths she was making the first time he'd ever seen such from her.

He wondered, if he had been in her position, if he'd even still be conscious.

The retreat from the Cavern was a blur. A strong coffee, strong coffee, was the point at which Ilima felt himself again, sitting in the Pokemon Center, watching Moon awaiting her Pokemon's healing. She had the Z-Crystal, but by her own words Tapu Koko had chased off the Totem Pokemon before she’d even had a chance to fight it, forced the Crystal into her hands and challenged her to battle.

Had she completed the Trial? Ilima didn't know. Tapu Koko seemed to think so, to have given her the Crystal. Did that mean he should approve her? Probably. Who was he to go against the Tapu?

For a brief moment Ilima felt very small indeed.

When her Pokemon were healed, when Moon stood to collect them, Ilima considered that. She was standing. She'd used a Z-Move, her first Z-Move, in a battle against Tapu Koko, in a field of electrical force, and was presently thanking the Pokemon Center's nurse without a single sign of breathlessness.

There would be much to talk about with Kukui and the Kahuna.

But for now, as Ilima felt the coffee bringing him back from the state of shock he'd been driven to before, planning out the wording on his speech informing Moon she had completed her Trial, all eyes turned to the entrance of the Pokemon Center.
To the man who had just burst through it, white coat flaring over bared chest.

Professor Kukui, spotting Moon and Ilima, rushed to them.

“Lillie's missing.”

Chapter End Notes

There were two notable things that flavoured the pace and style of this chapter. Firstly there was a lot of movement - Moon travelling along the route from Hau'oli to Verdant Cavern. As I've said before, I'm expanding Alola's scale to make it more, so I had to balance the movement to make the scale felt, while still keeping a brisk pace over places where not much happened. Moon travelled, was side-tracked once or twice, before making it to the site of her Trial.

Secondly is that Moon spent the first half of this chapter on her own.

You may have noticed, but a majority of the time we view Moon through the lenses of those around her. It provides a degree of abstraction from her, just as her never having direct dialogue does, and allows some of her otherness to communicate to you as readers. Hau and Ilima took that on when they arrived, but for a while we had Moon alone. And so we learned a little more about her. That's how it is.

Wai'oli Town is obviously new. It's situated on the north-side of Melemele, further down from the high roads we take in the games along Route 3. I'm using both naming styles within Alola as well as references from Hawaii itself to expand the region, and that involves new locations. Not ones we will focus on, but those that fill out the world. Just as there were small villages on the western coast of Melemele, there's a larger town on its north side. And we'll see more elsewhere as we go. That's part of expanding this world. It's only natural.

Last chapter was very well received which I'm absolutely thrilled with, as always I'm so thankful for my readers, you all are a significant part of the drive that lets me create Eldritch the way that I am. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and are looking forward to what comes next.

Things, I promise, will continue to happen without stopping. That's my guarantee.
The Totem Gumshoos was huge, a Pokemon of size far beyond the norm. Its power, its Z-Aura, flowed around it, giving the same sensation as that which had wrapped Ilima as he performed his Z-Move on the docks of Hau'oli City what felt to Moon like so many days ago.

Steps behind it, under its guard, was a pedestal with a single white crystal resting atop it. Even with this Pokemon before her, Moon couldn't help her eyes being drawn to it.

Soon.

Then the Totem roared and no-one heard it, for its cry was silenced by the crack of thunder and call of a voice with far more power than it would ever have. Electricity flowed down the walls of Verdant Cavern, sparking and jumping across the floor, as Tapu Koko descended from on high. Part-fear, part-command, the Gumshoos turned and raced into the depths of the tunnels, bounding on all fours as fast as it could move.

Leaving only two behind.

Moon stared, the sight of Tapu Koko still so much. If the Z-Aura Ilima and the Totem used was something alluring, the raw intensity of a Tapu was blinding. It was different, and far more powerful. Moon held her ground solely because the dancing sparks, the shivering air, kept her from moving. She stared.

The Guardian of Alola stared back.

Then raised its hand.

It was faster than could be seen, the way Tapu Koko moved. The pedestal was a few steps behind it, but to Moon's eyes the Pokemon did not shift from where it floated at all. Yet in one swipe it had taken the Z-Crystal from the pedestal's top, and in another thrown it directly at Moon's face. Her raised hand, a reaction prompted by the incoming object, caught the crystal, her fingers curling around it. A jolt of electricity sparked through her hand.

She stretched out her palm and considered the gem.

Once again Tapu Koko's cry shook the Cavern, shook Moon, but this time she heard its intent. The last time was a command for the Gumshoos: begone from this battle. Now it was for her. Fight. Fingers pushed the Z-Crystal against her Z-Ring, finding it fit perfectly into the indentation made for it. Her wrist shook, something powerful now wrapped around it. Tapu Koko was raising a hand. Electricity was building.

She'd been commanded.

There was nothing else she could do.

One by one Moon unleashed each of her Pokemon, one by one the Tapu of Melemele brushed them aside. Each command, each search for an angle, was meaningless, mere waves of the Deity's hands enough to focus the electricity that surrounded it and drain the consciousness from her team. In a matter of seconds Moon had been reduced from six Pokemon to one. Rowlet fluttered before her.
The Tapu's intent focused upon her. She knew what it desired.

What else could she do?

Moon moved. She'd memorised the pose as soon as she'd seen it, practised it in quiet moments after, when alone in the rooms she was given at Pokemon Centers to spend the night. The Z-Move, she knew it. And as she moved she felt it.

The Z-Aura surging around her.

Cold wind blowing on Moon's face forced open her eyes, dispelling the dreamlike memories as she looked down and saw Alola unfurling out beneath her, seated atop the back of a giant bird Pokemon. Seated behind her was Kukui, guiding the Braviary, flying the two out over the mountains of Melemele's north. Moon shivered in the air and moved to rub her arms, drawing Kukui's notice that the young girl was awake.

Hmm.

Kukui had been quick with his explanation at the Pokemon Center set just across from the Trial Site Verdant Cavern. He, Kahili, and Lillie had been staying in Wai'oli Town to the north-east, only to find that morning that Lillie had disappeared from the town entirely. A quick search with Kahili had proved fruitless, and so each had struck further abroad, Kahili heading east, Kukui west. The more time passed, the more Kukui had felt panic at Lillie's disappearance. The Pokemon with her, if it had truly brought her into danger again...

It wasn’t until he’d seen the Pokemon Center that Kukui had realised he’d gone far further west than Lillie possibly could. Began to turn his Braviary back until he paused, wondering if, just maybe, the timing was right.

Ilima knew the mountain ranges as well as anyone could: if Lillie were lost within them, he would be one of the best people to send out in search. Finding him at the Center, with Moon in tow, was a stroke of luck, yet somehow unsurprising. Kukui shook his head as he moved to their sides.

There were plenty of surprises still to be had.

Moon had wanted to leave immediately. To do everything she could to find Lillie. But before Kukui could leave Ilima had hauled him aside. And told him everything.

Kukui still felt himself shiver imagining it now.

Yet Moon was seated before him, holding on tight to the Valiant Pokemon as it carried them over the mountains, and Kukui could do nothing but acknowledge that. The first time he'd ever used a Z-Move he'd been out cold within an hour and slept until the next morning. Moon, she'd slept perhaps an hour, if you could even call that sleep, hanging onto his Braviary as it carried them through the sky. And still she seemed as alert as ever. That wasn't normal.

Nothing about this was normal.

Travel for Kukui and Kahili was an easy thing – Kukui with his Braviary and Kahili with her Toucannon. Hau'oli City, which like all major cities of Alola had ordinance against using one's own Pokemon to travel outside of designated lanes, had kept the two grounded, but once outside of it there proved no issue in setting off atop their Pokemon, touring Melemele Island's numerous townships.

With their successes upon the western coast in assuaging the concerns of those who felt the Pokemon
League might sap the spirit of Alola, the two, with Lillie alongside them, had travelled to the northern town of Wai'oli, second largest of Melemele's settlements. Despite that title it was a pale shadow of Hau'oli's size, far more reminiscent of Iki than the City itself. Built into the northern coast of the island, it stretched down from the mountains to the shore, a sprawling collection of buildings and roads along the slopes. The higher paths, cut into the mountains above, were the proving grounds of the Island, playing host to Pokemon and Trainers both.

And, right now, one lost girl needing to be found.

They had a hint. Having asked everyone they saw, Kukui and Kahili had been told a girl resembling Lillie's description had been seen upon the northern paths earlier that morning. But no-one had followed her and no-one had seen the direction she'd gone. Leaving them with only the belief she was somewhere in the area.

Left them with only that to set out upon.

On the back of his flying Pokemon, even with another passenger beside himself, Kukui had no trouble crossing from coast to coast of Melemele within an hour's stretch. His Pokemon had eyesight that could pick up a Caterpie from a mile above, and so he'd been relying upon it to spot any sign of Lillie below.

The complete lack of anything to this point had been what drove him to seek Ilima's help. He didn't know where Lillie could have gone, but the panic was starting to set in. Even now, flying back, Kukui felt the tension in his back. Where could she be...

Another flying Pokemon appeared before them, another passenger on its back. The Braviary and Toucannon circled one another, a mid-air dance, close enough for the two Trainers to call out to each other.

Kahili shook her head.

"I haven't seen her," her voice, carried by the wind, drew Moon's eyes, whose gaze Kahili caught in return. Kukui had found one girl, but not the one they were searching for. Kahili looked back at him. "I've been asking, but no-one has seen anything."

"Let's switch sides!" Kukui called back, "I'll take the east of Wai'oli if you can check the west? Maybe head further down the hills towards the coast?"

Kahili nodded, her Pokemon pulling away from Kukui's as it dived to build up momentum. Kukui would guide his Braviary in an easier motion, slower and far less intense.

Not just for Moon's sake, Kukui himself couldn't keep up with the way Kahili Hano flew.

The mountain range along Melemele's eastern side did not rise as high as that on its west, but stretched far further, held far greater reach. The paths specially cut through it, which would take those from Wai'oli all the way to Iki Town, were the most populous, with people travelling along with Pokemon each and every day. This, given Kukui and Kahili had already stopped and quizzed countless people on those paths to no luck, only made things more stressful. In this huge stretch of land, where the majority of people were concentrated together, for Lillie to not have been seen must mean she was somewhere people would not normally go.

And far too much of that land was dangerous for a child like her. Kukui's frown, kept internal so at least Moon wouldn't see it, was one of deep concern.

He wasn't ready to admit they might not find her.
Moon leaned out over the side of the Braviary and pointed.

“Huh- WOAH!” Braviary flapped and leaned to the left, pulling Moon back who had begun slipping off as she’d stretched out. Kukui’s arm, wrapped around her waist, pulled her back onto the bird Pokemon, his heart jackhammering through his chest. “Moon! You gotta be careful up here! That's dangerous you could have fallen!” Moon's own heartbeat, which Kukui could feel, was enough to tell him she understood. He needed to bring her down.

It took a lot of experience flying with one's Pokemon to be truly comfortable in the skies above.

“Sorry, sorry,” he apologised as the Pokemon slowly made its way down to the ground below, “I didn't mean to yell you just scared me.” By the time Braviary had settled onto the ground, folding its wings up and running its beak through them to sort out misaligned feathers, Kukui had felt his heart calm enough to breath. That had been terrifying.

He... probably wasn't going to take anyone back up into the air in a hurry after that.

“Look, Moon” the girl had disembarked from the flying Pokemon as soon as it landed, shaking herself as if to dislodge the feeling of flight, “I'm going to head back out to search this area, but how about you take a look around too? Ask if anyone's seen Lillie. Maybe you'll have more luck than we had. Okay?”

She nodded at Kukui's words, turning and heading off down a path. Having her wandering around on her own, especially given they'd already lost one young girl, felt bad to Kukui, but having her up in the sky again like that felt worse. He had to keep searching for Lillie.

He'd just have to trust Moon would be okay.

Braviary, with a grumble and demand for a bit of attention from Kukui first, allowed him to mount it again and took off back into the skies. Time to continue their hunt.

Moon's footfalls were in a singular direction, a single location having caught her eye. Even from high above, the field ringed by mountains and filled with bright yellow colour had drawn her attention. Called to her. And so she walked in the direction she expected it to be, Rotom helping with the map installed inside of its Pokedex habitat.

To Melemele Meadow, Moon made her way.

A prime tourist attraction in seasons where the dense flower fields were at rest, in times of heat such as the present the Meadow of Melemele was too thick with pollen for all but the most determined of visitors. Clouds of yellow hung heavy in the air, disturbed and harvested by the Pokemon that made their lives here, creating a shimmering haze that hid the movement of all within. Moon, passing through an arch of stone to enter the Meadow proper, had only a moment to consider how empty of people such a beautiful location was before her eyes watered and her nose ran profusely.

Struggling with her bag, Moon released a Pokemon and then another, a pair of flying creatures – one the purple Butterfree, the other the boisterous Pikipek. The first, who thrived in such environments, whipped up a breeze, reducing the pollen's density enough for the second to join the efforts. The two to spun around Moon, creating a whirlwind that pushed back the yellow haze. Free now to move, she continued on her way.

It was hard to say her motivation. Rotom-dex questioned it, whether she expected to find Lillie here, but the answer was that she did not know. Only that she felt a call. Something in the air. Only that.

Pokemon in the Meadow, surprised by the human walking through it in a time when there should be
none, proved territorial but lacking in strength compared to her. Rotom approved the new captures, though wondered how Moon would handle even more Pokemon to care for. She didn't answer. Pushed further in. And found the wall.

To make one's way through Melemele Meadow in flowering season was not an impossible thing, but for a young trainer it was respectable. Moon stood against the wall at the far side of the Meadow, across from the entrance she had appeared from, as two of her Pokemon maintained the wall of wind shielding her from the air itself. She stepped along the wall, ran a hand along it, and wondered. She was almost sure she could hear something.

But what?

The earth beneath her gave way.

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Water runs from the peaks of Melemele’s eastern and western ranges, rivulets forming streams, streams merging into torrents. They flow along the curvature of the land, splitting and mixing, coming together in a grand pool near to the island’s centre. The pool spins, momentum gifted by the water converging from every direction, a constant tidal swirl drilling ever downwards. Carving through the earth.

The immense underground river, combination of the island’s mountainous runoff, flows down to the sea, spilling out from ruptures forced through cliffsides by the sheer pressure of its volume. For as much as these impromptu waterfalls siphon the grand total, the vast majority of the water still finds its way down to one place.

To Kala’e Bay.

Seen most often from cruises around the island, Kala’e Bay is famous for its pristine waters, that which has flowed down from Melemele’s peaks. Life thrives in it, and close to the shores are considered protected regions, forbidden from approach by sea.

Yet there is another way to these shores, these sandy stretches formed aside the grand outpouring of Alola’s greatest and most secretive river. Alongside the underground river are caves, dug out by the water and Pokemon following its route alike. Over the relentless years those caves have expanded, filling out the mountain ranges of Melemele, and become a habitat supporting countless subterranean species.

Dutifully marked out by rangers, secured with warnings about the dangers they pose, these caves still snare the unaware as more entrances open with the passage of time. The flow of water, the movements of Pokemon, create more ways to enter the network that runs, as all things do, down to the sea.

This was the environment into which Moon fell.

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Stars... alight... a sight...

The sound, so distant that perhaps she only imagined it, brought Moon back, her eyes snapping open in the darkness. A beam of faint light fell across her, all that could find its way down from the Meadow whose air was still thick with pollen. Then the concerned cries of those who had been with
Her Pokemon, her Butterfree and Pikipek, found her and fluttered about her in concern, voicing worry at the fall their Trainer had taken. Rotom arrived after, specifically asking if Moon was okay.

She was, she thought. The fall had been only slight, the earth giving way to a slope she had rolled down to the base. Her skin and clothing were both dirtied, even with the faint light available she could tell that, and the feeling of stinging scratches across her arms and legs caused her to frown. But she stood and reassured the trio who were with her. She was okay.

“Scanning environment, zzt!”

The Rotom-dex set off to explore, the light of its screen just enough for Moon to see its blue glow in the darkness. As it did she continued to reassure her Pokemon, eventually calming them enough to return to their Pokeballs.

She looked up.

The hole that had opened above was at the top of a slope: if she were determined Moon was sure she could make it back to the Meadow. Certainly these caves were not welcoming – they were dark, the air was thick with dampness, and the mixed sounds of flowing water and subterranean Pokemon were all she could hear. Pushing forward, into the earth, would be a terrible idea. There was nothing for her here.

Nothing except...

Oh... sky...

Except the sound of something. Something so distant, so muted by the water and the cries of Pokemon that it would be so easy to believe it was nothing. But she was sure she heard it. A voice? Distant, but rhythmic. Deep in the darkness beyond her.

When the Rotom-dex returned, informed Moon there was a tunnel ahead, it made a noise of surprise when she strode toward it, withdrawing another Pokeball from her bag. The little light the Rotom released would be enough, her Meowth able to use it to guide her. She should turn back. She shouldn't wander into these depths where Pokemon of the deep would lurk. She shouldn't go forward.

But yet...

The clouds... apart...

Confidence she should not have drove her onwards, step after step leading Moon away from the light. Even with the glow from Rotom-dex, even with her Meowth leading the way, still the darkness settled heavy around her, still claustrophobia bore down upon her shoulders. Still she pushed on.

For something was calling to her.

To see... light...

There were times her Meowth gave a warning to still. Others it hissed and chased after Pokemon in the dark, their fleeing cries all Moon would ever know of them. And times still the Scratch Cat Pokemon bounded forward with such speed Moon had to race to keep up with it. But still she followed it, followed the sound, and descended into the earth.
Deeper into the dark.

Moon... wave...

When the tunnel came to an end, expanded into a cavern of such size that the air sapped the warmth from her skin as soon as she stepped into it, Moon paused, the sensation almost overwhelming. Yet the sound, the distant voice, continued, echoing from a distance so far away, barely rising above the sounds of the water and the Pokemon that filled this cavernous network.

Moon rubbed at her arms, breathed a breath that misted unseen in the cold darkness, and kept walking. Further down into the depths.

Time slipped from her perception, Moon's thoughts repeating as she kept moving, step by step, from cavern to tunnel, led by the song deeper still. Rotom attempted to provide light, but even its glow couldn't do more than let her see a foot ahead. The sound of her Meowth gave confidence, but only a little. A part of her still felt she had made a mistake.

But then the song came to her once more.

Oh stars oh night, oh shining sight...

Word for word she heard it, followed shortly after by the crashing sound of waves. Her nose picked up the scent of salt water, and maybe, just maybe, things were a little brighter than before. Maybe there was light.

Moon pushed forward, footsteps faster, still so cold but so driven to continue. Then there was true light, beautiful and searing, pouring in from an exit in the rock ahead. Moon raced to it, the thickness of the water in the air now so much it felt like she was swimming as much as walking. But she pushed onwards to the light. Stumbled for it, as blinding as it was, and burst out into Alola's sun once more.

The great descent complete.

"M-Moon!"

Lillie's voice raised Moon's eyes, though the brightness of the sun meant her vision still swam. Still, she could see a form before her, garbed in white, and held out a hand to it. Felt hands clutch hers. Moon smiled.

Lillie's smile resolved into sight.

“How did you find me?”

As her eyes focused Moon saw Lillie properly, her dress stained with dirt, her face surprisingly clean. The cloth Lillie kept in her bag had seen solid use once she left the tunnels, ensuring there were no signs left of the panic she had been in. Moon's own clothing was dirtied too, her arms and legs similar alongside the scratches. Lillie, seeing them, immediately fussed over her. Moon did her best to assure the girl she was okay.

The sound of music, fingers strumming the strings of a guitar, drew her gaze, Moon spying another seated near the shore. This small beach at the base of the cave she'd exited was mostly sand, yet three were found upon it. Her, Lillie, and this other figure. He turned his head to observe the newcomer, but his hands remained occupied with playing the guitar he held.

Nebby floated above him, cheerfully bobbing in the music's embrace.
“O-oh, uh,” Lillie, spotting Moon's gaze, stepped to the side to indicate the man. “Nebby- I... this morning, before anyone had woken up, I wanted to take it for a walk, because I have to keep it cooped up so much. But then! Then Nebby... ran away from me, and when I chased it we got lost in these caves. I, I thought-”

Lillie's pause, the moment of remembering being lost in the darkness with no idea which way to go, said it all. Moon reached out to her.

“But luckily Mr. Ryuki was singing!” Lillie raised her head again, missing Moon's outstretched hand. “And I found my way down to where he was. Nebby... found him too.”

Moon looked over again at the Nebula Pokemon happily circling the man Lillie had called Ryuki. Catching her gaze, he stood up and stretched. Skin bronzed by the sun, dressed in an outfit of the most vibrant red, decorated with black and gold, Ryuki cut a distinctive figure. His hair formed a wild mane, the spiked-up section red and the overgrown fringe white. Lowering his guitar, he gave a wave to the pair. Lillie waved back.

“Yo there,” there was confidence in his walk, approaching the two, Nebby floating after him and pouting that there was no more music to enjoy, “name's Ryuki Oda, a shining star come to Alola. You little miss Lillie's friend then?”

“Yes!” Lillie nodded with a smile, “This is Moon!”

“Moon, huh,” the man studied her as Moon spent a moment thanking her Meowth for its aid, before returning it to its Pokeball, “you a new Trainer?” Moon nodded, which the man nodded back at her in reply to. Then turned and pointed. “In that case, come check this out.”

Though the beach the three stood upon was small, it was not the only one in sight – another visible just across the way from where a great river flowed out of a cave into the sea. Ryuki indicated that shore, before raising his arm, drawing Moon's eyes upwards, higher and higher, to where the cliff-face ended in a peak.

A dark shape fell from it.

Its plummet was long enough to allow shock to wash over Moon, the height so much as to be dizzying, but when the small creature hit the ground – resulting in a plume of sand being thrown up – all Ryuki did was chuckle. When the sand cleared Moon watched the small creature pull itself out of the beach and turn, trundling off without a care into the grassy fields beyond. She looked up at Ryuki with surprise clear on her face. The man laughed again.

“See Salamence nest in the cliffs up there,” Ryuki pointed upwards again, “and those eggs hatch into little bitty baby Bagon. But Bagon, bless them, they want to fly even with no wings, so they jump off the highest places they can find to try. You see the field down there, there's a whole colony of Bagon living in it. They've gotta recover from the fall before making their way back up to try again.”

Moon stared, fascinated. The wild environments of Alola, where Pokemon lived disconnected from people, entranced her. They were beautiful.

“So then,” Ryuki drew her attention one more time, offering a grin, “What'd'ya say? Think you can tame a Dragon, little lady?”

Moon’s nod came so fast the Dragon Tamer couldn't help but bark a laugh, but he acknowledged it all the same. Well, if that was the case... “Hey Serena! Come lend a hand!” His order carried out over the water, soon answered as the sea split and a shape rose up before the pair. The blue
serpentine dragon Pokémon, its head crested by small wings, leaned in to Ryuki, who raised and ran a hand over its snout, earning a snort of appreciation. He turned back to Moon.

“Serena here'll carry you over to the other side, then back again when you're ready. Dragon Pokémon are something else, little'un, so make sure you don't underestimate them, okay?” Moon nodded again. Ryuki patted the Dragonair’s head. And saw the girl out over the water.

“Uhm...” in Moon's absence, Lillie stepped up to where she had just been, as Ryuki once more sat down and plucked at his guitar's strings, Nebby expressing delight at the sound finally continuing. “Mr. Ryuki, is that... okay?”

Even as he played, Ryuki spoke. Kept his eyes forward across the water as Moon made landfall opposite. As she moved into the grass.

“There's a saying,” his tune was light-hearted, energetic and upbeat, “that strong Trainers can recognise one another. It's true, of course, we can tell. So it's something else, seeing a kid like that, and feeling like she's as tough as they come.” Fingers danced over strings, frets and chords. “Hey little miss Lillie,” Ryuki turned his gaze upwards, “Just who is that girl?”

Lillie paused. That question, it was direct, but she didn't have an answer to it. She didn't know, really. The only answer she had wasn't the answer Ryuki was looking for. But it was the only one she could give.

“She's my friend.”

Even if it wasn't the answer he was looking for, it seemed to please Ryuki enough for the smile he gave. He played a faster tune, Nebby floating around him enthralled by it.

“Came to Alola for this League they're making,” the man continued after a moment, “I can feel it calling to me, pulling on my blood. Alola's where I'll shine brightest, that's what it's telling me. That girl...” he grinned, “I'll see her on the final stage too, I can tell.”

There was very little Lillie could say in response to that. She reached up and wrapped her hands around Nebby, drawing the Pokémon close to her chest and sitting down as well. Waiting for Moon to return.

Song surrounded them for a little longer.

Then stopped.

“So that Pokémon,” Ryuki's eyes on Lillie showed interest, which Lillie immediately feared. Having Nebby being seen... what had she been thinking going on that walk this morning? Wanting to look after it, did she even know how? She didn't! She couldn't be someone who could care for Pokémon like a trainer could. She just couldn't. “It's yours, right?”

“Oh, n-no,” Lillie shook her head, “I'm caring for it but... I'm not a Pokémon Trainer. I can't... I can't look after it the way I should.”

A moment passed. Ryuki huffed out a breath and stood up.

“Y'know,” he began, “how long ago they started making Pokéballs?”

“Oh yes!” Lillie nodded, her reading having covered such. “Aside from the usage of Apricorns
originating in the Johto regions, modern Pokeballs came into public use roughly-

“Alright, alright,” Ryuki interrupted her, raising a hand, “good enough. But tell me, you know how long people and Pokemon have been working together?”

Lillie paused. Forever. Right?

“So the thing is,” Ryuki pointed at Nebby, held in her hands, “having a Pokeball’s just a formality. If you're looking after a Pokemon, if that Pokemon's looking after you, you're a team. You can't pretend you're not.” His stare was focused. Behind him, in the sea of Melemele, his Dragonair was returning with a pleased looking Moon clinging to its neck. “So just think about that, okay? Sound good?”

Lillie’s nod was one that came out slowly. She wasn't able to look after Nebby. She wasn't its partner. She knew that.

Didn't she?

“Well then!” Spinning around, Ryuki held out his arms, allowing his Dragonair to bury her face into his chest as Moon dismounted, “looks like you're pleased with yourself!” Moon nodded as Ryuki wrapped his arms around the serpentine Pokemon's head, one hand rubbing it earnestly. “So you've caught your first Dragon, congratulations, I knew you had it in you.” Moon looked in interest at Ryuki for the confidence this stranger had given her. He winked. “I could tell. So look after it, raise it well, and you'll have an incredibly powerful partner. Sound good?”

Moon nodded at that.

It sure did.

“In that case,” slinging his guitar over his shoulder, Ryuki withdrew an ornate looking Pokeball and returned his Dragonair to it, trading it for another, “How about I get you kids back up top? I can drop you at Wai'oli if you like?”

“Oh!” Lillie nodded enthusiastically, “Yes please, Mr. Ryuki. That would be wonderful!”

“Alright then,” opening the Pokeball up, Ryuki released another serpentine Dragon, this one of aqua-green scales and fluffy white fur, “hop on!”

Clutching Nebby still, Lillie accepted Moon's help to board the Pokemon before Moon herself clambered onto it. Ryuki stepped onto its head as it bowed to him, lifting him up to stand with arms crossed atop it. “Dazzle!” He gave the command, “Move out!”

And the Pokemon lifted into the skies above.

The sight of a Drampa, soaring through the sky, was notable and visible enough at a distance that as soon as Kukui and Kahili saw it they moved to approach – even if it was their Pokemon to first spot the object of their search atop it. Each flew in, intent on asking whoever the Trainer of the Dragon Pokemon was for aid, before getting close enough to see Moon, with Lillie clutching her waist, sitting on its back.

It was their experience in having flown so many times upon their partners before that prevented either from slipping off at the shock.

So the flight went, the giant Dragon making its way through the sky, flanked by a Braviary and Toucannon both. The sight of the trio of Pokemon arriving in Wai'oli drew immediate attention,
seeing Professor Kukui and the famous Kahili Hano descend from the skies above. The third
Trainer, a man dressed in red, was an unknown, but the presence of the Drampa at his side, before he
returned it to the Luxury Ball he kept it in, said enough. This man was a significant power indeed.

“Lillie! Moon!” Kukui raced over to the pair, who'd dismounted just before Ryuki returned his
Pokemon to its ball, “Lillie where did you get off to, you disappeared and we couldn't find you I was
freaking out are you okay? Is everything fine are you-”

“I'm fine!” Lillie was holding her bag to her chest, Nebby returned to it, ensuring the Pokemon
would be making no more escapes, “Nebby... got away from me this morning, and I was caught up
trying to find it. Thankfully Mr. Ryuki helped me out, and then Moon found us after!”

Kukui leaned back from Lillie, at least somewhat convinced now she was fine, though the amount of
dirt on both her and Moon would lead to questions later. He turned his eyes on this 'Mr. Ryuki'. A
Dragon specialist? Felt like it. Felt strong, if nothing else. Kukui extended a hand.

“Thank you very much for looking after Lillie. We were all worried about her so it's good to know
she was in safe hands.”

“That's no problem, Prof,” Ryuki, able to recognise Kukui, accepted the shake of his hand. “If you
wanna thank me, keep working hard on that Pokemon League of yours. After all, a bright star needs
a good height to shine from, y'know?”

Kukui blinked. Huh?

“So I'm heading off,” Ryuki turned and waved, pointing north to the road leading down to the coast,
“plenty more dragons around Alola to go see. Hey little miss Moon,” pausing for a moment, Ryuki
looked back at her, “take good care of that one, I wanna see it nice and strong at the League, okay?”

Moon nodded as Kukui and Kahili both looked between her and the Dragon Tamer. Ryuki just
waved and kept on walking.

Carried away by the breeze just like his song.

To follow the sound of the Dragons, awaiting his claim.

To follow the voice, still calling his name.

Chapter End Notes

Oh? What's this? You're a one-note character from a popular media with basically no
attention or development? Oh no no no no, shhh, oh my sweet child you are safe now. I
will build you a home stocked with all you could desire, development for days,
character interactions you have dreamed of. I will give you the world.

Ryuki follows after Kahili as being one of the two characters introduced solely by the
Pokemon League. Unlike Kahili, who's an Alolan native and Elite Four member,
Ryuki's just some dude with a powerful team. A lot of people probably didn't even
know he existed during SUMO because he only shows up as one of the ten possible title
defense challengers. Nowhere else. He has slightly more presence in USUM, but only
barely, and it certainly gave him no more character to play with.
Making designing his attitude almost all mine. Ryuki has immeasurable confidence, the belief in his own fame, and a lot of talent to back that up. How much? Well we'll see. Ryuki we will see again, I can promise you that.

The descent to Kala'e Bay took a lot of rewrites for me - the original version was of a well-travelled path, before I realised I didn't like that and made it a little more restrictive. It's a long descent down through that network of caverns, and so easy to get lost in there - both Moon and Lillie were lucky Ryuki's song echoes well. Don't just go wandering into caves, kids!

There's not a huge amount left to Melemele now - either chapter nine will be huge and the conclusion, or chapter ten will be the end of the Melemele arc. We're close now. Not much left. Then things start to get REALLY interesting.

Last chapter received such a massive wave of support that it honestly floored me, I'm so genuinely touched that so many of you have found this fic and are enjoying it to the degree that you are. I promise there are no plans for me to stop any time soon, I'm still 100% enthused to keep on going and telling this tale, and I'm nothing but equal parts thankful you are here, and hopeful you continue to enjoy. Thanks for reading, and please look forward to what comes next.

It's gonna be great.
Hau had arrived in Waiʻoli Town the night before, tired to the max. He’d barely greeted the Professor, Kahili, and Lillie, before eating a huge heaping of food and then collapsing into bed. Travelling to Verdant Cavern on Tauros-back, defeating the Totem Pokemon to complete his Trial, and then pushing on to the town in the north had run the boy dry, and he slept so soundly that night he completely missed all the excitement of the following morning.

Instead Hau had taken it easy, training with his Pokemon as he awaited Moon's arrival. She’d have completed her Trial by now, Hau was sure of it, and he couldn’t wait to share stories of their Totem battles. Then have their first Pokemon Battle since the night of the festival. Though he might not have his Z-Ring yet, Hau was still ready to go all-out no matter what. He was positive Moon would feel the same.

He was really looking forward to it.

Instead to his surprise that afternoon, waiting by the western entrance of Waiʻoli, Hau did not see Moon approach from the west but from above, she and Lillie both flown into town atop the back of a huge dragon Pokemon. The shock lasted only a few moments before Hau raced off, arriving at the landing place of the pair, along with Kukui and Kahili on their own flying Pokemon, just after the Dragon Tamer Ryuki took his leave.

Hau immediately raced into the middle of the group.

“Hey! Hey! Moon! Lillie! What was with the big dragon? Where were you? Moon how’d your Trial go? Wait how come you’re both so dirty, what happened?” The rapid-fire questions, in his usual Hau volume, only slowed down when Hau noticed how Moon was standing close enough for Lillie to lean upon her. His tone found concern. “Are you okay?”

“I'd like to know that myself,” Kukui shook his head, “but first how about we get you two somewhere you can clean up. And Moon, we should check those scratches, since you've got dirt on them as well.”

Moon nodded to this, Hau's peppering of questions answered by her and Lillie as Kukui led them all to the inn they would be staying at. Listening in as they escorted the three children – although Kukui spent a moment sending Ilima a message that Lillie had been found and all was well – Kukui and Kahili quickly picked up on the basics: that Cosmog had disappeared into the caves and Lillie had chased after it, which Kukui would have to do his extreme best to stress how dangerous a decision that had been; and how Moon had fallen into a hole in Melemele Meadow and gone into those caves as well.

The fissures leading into the cave systems of Melemele's north were usually off the beaten path – having one appear inside Melemele Meadow was extremely concerning to Kukui. He’d have to contact the Pokemon Rangers’ Association to notify them of that before the day was out.

From there the girls' stories were the same: they'd wandered the tunnels and heard a song echoing through it, following it all the way to Kalaʻe Bay itself. Hau made noises about how lucky it was they’d found their way, while Kukui and Kahili, who understood the dangers of the underground far better, struggled to keep their hearts beating against the possibilities. Those girls would run them
The afternoon continued on quietly. Once Moon and Lillie were able to clean themselves up and change into clothing that wasn't dirt-covered, Kukui ordered quite sternly no more adventures for the day. Yes, Hau, that included Pokemon Battles, Moon needs to rest. She wasn't the type to show it, but Moon not complaining about the command said it more than clearly enough. They were all to take it easy. Professor's orders. So the three sat together and talked and let their Pokemon run about and that was enough. Kukui didn't miss the new members of Moon's team.

Ilima arrived in town shortly after.

Overseeing the trio of children kept Kukui, Kahili, and the Captain busy enough, spending what time they could discussing the dangers of the underground now that it was breaching in more travelled locations. As Captain of Melemele Ilima felt a measure of responsibility to this, though Kukui and Kahili both insisted managing such a thing wasn't possible for anyone. Still, it was difficult for his mood to lift as the three of them remained all too keenly aware how close today had come to disaster. Had it not been for Dragon Tamer Ryuki, well... none of them felt like saying it.

Evening came and Moon and Lillie went to bed early. Hau stayed up longer with his Pokemon, but didn't need the supervision. Left room for Ilima, Kahili, and Kukui to settle in a room outside of earshot. To set up a screen and dial the Kahuna into the conversation.

To go over the events of the day.

“Tapu Koko challenged Moon.”

Ilima, saying it in plain words, brought silence immediately following the first round of greetings. Kahili, staring with wide eyes, and Hala, face visible through the screen he was on, both looked from Ilima to Kukui. Kukui shrugged.

“I wasn't there, but Captain Ilima and Moon both confirmed it. Tapu Koko chased off the Totem Pokemon and gave Moon the Normalium-Z so it could fight her.”

“Wait-” Kahili, fast of thought, immediately realised what was wrong here. “Are you saying that Moon used a Z-Move during her Trial?”

“Yes,” Ilima's nod drove the chill in the air deeper, “I witnessed it myself. She copied the pose I used when showing her a Z-Move in Hau’oli City, and performed a fully-powered attack against Tapu Koko. It was brushed aside easily, but nonetheless it was her first Z-Move. This morning. Before everything else.”

Kahili shook her head. Then shook it again. Held a hand to her forehead and scrunched her eyes shut. Even when Kukui had explained to her Moon had six Pokemon, insisted it was real, still the trainer had difficulty parsing it. That was one of the troubles of being at the peak, surrounded by the best of the best. You came to believe in the normal operation of limits. The impossibilities at the edges always blindsided you.

“So you're. Telling me.” Kahili was slow to say it, but the others gave her the room to speak, to work through her thoughts. “That this girl, this Moon, has six Pokemon, has been directly approached by Tapu Koko twice, performed her first Z-Move this morning in a battle against Tapu Koko, and then went on to spend the rest of the day wandering tunnels and catching a Dragon, a Dragon-type Pokemon, Kukui, and still stayed awake until night fell. That's what you're saying? That's what we're looking at?”
When she looked up at the group she really seemed like she wanted someone to tell her everything she'd seen that day had been her imagination. Kukui sighed and shook his head.

“That's the truth, Kahili.”

Defeated she sunk into her seat.

Silence held a little longer.

“You had a Dragon young too, didn't you, Kukui?” Hala's voice, coming from the screen set up for him to join the conversation, drew a nod from the Professor.

“Yeah,” Kukui smiled at the memory, “I had a Jangmo-o in the middle of my teens. Rowdy girl. When she evolved I couldn't keep up with her anymore, had to pass her on to one of the Dragon Tamers on Ula'ula.”

“How does having a Bagon at eleven compare?” Ilima had the least experience of the four in the conversation, having never caught a Dragon-type Pokemon himself. He knew they were considered legendarily difficult to raise, but without experiencing it himself couldn't truly understand the demand Moon should feel. Kukui turned to him.

“I mean, she's been a trainer for two weeks,” Kukui shrugged, “at this point is it even a surprise?”

“Yes!” Kahili, recovered enough, returned herself to the conversation. “Yes it is! You can't just say 'well this is happening' to all of this, this is so out of the ordinary that we have to question all of it! Why is she able to maintain six Bonds? Why is she able to keep a Dragon, who take significant power all on their own? Why can she perform a Z-Move and keep going like it was nothing? None of that is natural, Kukui, we can't hand-wave that away by grouping it all together and saying 'oh well that's just Moon'. We can't!”

Her outburst did push Kukui back, who seemed embarrassed at being scolded so. Hala shook his head.

“It is our responsibility to care for the Trainers of Alola, Moon included. It may be that we do not truly understand how to properly care for her, given her... situation... but nonetheless we must try. We should not treat her in a fearful manner, but neither should we ignore her clear abilities. Either extreme would be irresponsible of us.”

Hala calling Kukui irresponsible for just accepting Moon as she was, combined with Kahili's words prior, kept him quiet, but Kahili herself felt momentary shame. Hala had described treating Moon in a fearful manner. Was that what she had been doing? Probably. It was scary. Kahili shook her head. She'd be better.

She'd returned to Alola to make things better for its Trainers, after all.

“The Grand Trial is next,” Hala spoke again after a moment of silence, contemplation rife among the group as to the best way to move forward. “Both my grandson Hau and young Moon will be determined to battle me and move on to Akala's Trials, no doubt as soon as possible. I've spoken to Akala's Kahuna already, but I suppose a follow-up call given this new information is required. Ahh, these young children, keeping me ever busy. I'll never grow old as long as I live like this, isn't that right Kukui?”

Hala's boisterous laugh at the statement did bring smiles back to the group, who all agreed that even if Hala did grow old he'd never be old. He scolded the younglings for talking to him like that.
All smiles.

The night passed on to another day.

“Allright!” After an eventful breakfast – not only Moon and Hau's Pokemon eating along with Nebby, but also Ilima, Kukui and Kahili's – Hau announced himself, stood up and stretched. “Moon!” Immediately Moon looked at Hau ready, knowing what was on his mind. The same was on hers. “Let's have a Pokemon Battle!”

So the group found themselves outside, claiming a battling field in Wai'oli. Kukui took referee, while Kahili and Ilima oversaw, the second slightly disappointed it was not him battling Moon. He'd still not had the opportunity.

But soon, right?

“Allright!” Kukui raised his arms, Hau and Moon standing in position, “Are there any requests for rules for this match?”

“None!” Hau spoke quickly, cutting off anything Moon might have been about to say. “All-out free-for-all last-one-standing-wins!” Kukui looked at Hau with a smile at that, well enthused by his declaration, and repeated as such. There would be no limits on Pokemon used in this battle.

“And... begin!”

Moon led with her Meowth, facing off against Hau's Pichu. Ilima whispered to Kahili about its quick growth.

Baby Pokemon were like that – drawing more energy through their Bonds than usual for a Pokemon of their strength. In return, however, they evolved quickly, provided they were properly cared for. The stronger form would then draw less energy, making such Pokemon ideal firsts for new Trainers, providing they could take the initial demand.

Hau had kept the Pichu for ten days so far, which of course was still a small amount of time – at least two months the average for a baby Pokemon's evolution under the care of a Trainer. But it was obvious the energy he put out was far above that average, and those watching wondered if it would even be a month before the Pokemon evolved. Moon may be impossible, but Hau was something else too. They were both incredible young Trainers.

Moon's Meowth was headstrong when it came to following orders, but powerful all on its own. Moon directed it well, though still had to correct for times when the Pokemon did not follow her command. But against Hau those little moments added up, and the electricity in his Tiny Mouse Pokemon continued to sap away at the Scratch Cat.

In the end it was Meowth to fall first, the constant electrical bursts whittling down its stamina. Hau shouted encouragement to his Pokemon, which perked up at the sound, as Moon prepared her second. In a burst of red energy Rowlet manifested, fluttering above the field. The second battle.

It did not last long. Exhausted by its previous battle, Pichu proved unable to match Rowlet's significant speed, an advantage Moon's Pokemon had maintained in almost every battle so far. A jolt of electricity did hit the Grass Quill Pokemon, seeming to stun it for a moment, but it wasn't enough to stop Rowlet bowling over the electric mouse with a single direct hit. Hau grinned at Moon, retrieving one Pokemon and unleashing the next.

Popplio barked with enthusiasm as the two starters clashed again.
Rowlet's strongest advantage was its speed, a factor Hau and Poppio had trained to overcome. Combined with the lingering effects of the electricity it had been touched by before, the jets of water Poppio used to manoeuvre proved too fast for the Grass Quill Pokemon to match. It was a battle of attrition, Poppio evading and weakening Rowlet through constant tackles thanks to its new speed. Moon varied her tactics in an attempt to recover, found an advantage through Rowlet's flight, however the elemental match-up failed to outweigh the now superior speed of the Sea Lion Pokemon.

One final strong hit laid Rowlet on the ground, unable to rise again.

This defeat marked for Moon a very clear sign she had a world of improvement to go. Hau had outpaced her, and she smiled at him, raising a hand to Kukui. A good match. Hau interrupted.

“Hey Moon!” She looked at him in surprise, his tone clearly displeased. “We're not done!”

They should be. In a match of two Pokemon – and Moon knew Hau had only two – he had won. The battle should be over.

Lillie, watching the match, the conflict stressful but her determination to oversee Hau and Moon more powerful, felt herself shocked. She'd never seen Hau look mad before.

“It's an all-out free-for-all last-one-standing-wins battle!” Seeing Hau's expression, Moon felt pained. She didn't like seeing him upset. “That means we keep battling with our Pokemon until one of us has none left! That's the rules!”

But Hau had won in a fair fight, he beat her two with his, it shouldn't be more than-

“Fair is going all out!” His yell actually made Moon take a step back, seeing Hau staring her down. “If you're going to hold back then there's no point in us battling! Come on, Moon! If you don't do your best then... doesn't that mean you don't respect me?”

Kukui had heard these arguments before. Trainers who grew up as friends, who found different limits, clashing about how to interpret those limits and compare themselves. Sometimes friendships even fell apart due to the limitations some people discovered. He knew that as well as any other. He said nothing.

Moon stared. She'd fought so many battles on the road to Verdant Cavern with two Pokemon alone. Accepted victories and defeats alike. Because that, she believed, was fair.

But was it? Was it fair to them? Was it fair to her?

If being fair was not holding back then...

Hau grinned, seeing Moon raising her next Pokeball. Good. That conversation last night – the sound of his grandfather's voice in the distance drawing him to overhear – had left Hau with far more to think about than he liked. His head was still heavy with rocks to figure out. But this, this was good.

Going all out was good.

Moon's third Pokemon was a Pikipek – a Pokemon Kahili could tell was approaching its evolution already. She was a Flying-type expert, and knew how to read those Pokemon well, so with absolute confidence she noted that down. That was not the norm. Of course it wasn't.
She really needed to think over how she was going to approach this.

Moon moved her arms. Ilima, responsible for teaching her the pose, held back his breath, watching as the Z-Aura burst into life around her. It was always beautiful to see, that power, but somehow around Moon it was different. Like for a moment what he saw within the light wasn't Moon. Wasn't anything he could understand. A gaze into something else.

Something other.

Then the aura flowed and the Pikipek shone brilliantly, a phoenix wreathed in power far more than the bird it had been before. Hau ordered Popplio to maintain its speed, to dodge the attack, but a Z-Move, especially for young Trainers, was often how battles came to an end. So it was true for this fight – despite Popplio's speed it did not dodge the blow, the full-force tackle from Pikipek ramming into it and sending it flying.

Hau jumped, intercepted the Pokemon, and landed on his feet, the power behind it far less than what Tapu Koko had used to throw Rowlet back the day before.

Moon lowered her arms as Hau returned his Popplio to its ball. Kukui raised a hand.

"The winner is: Moon!"

For as much as they were friends, and it was quite clear they were, Moon and Hau's argument wasn't settled by that at all.

It was strange, to hear Trainers so young go over the discussion usually reserved for one's late teens, or even beyond. Moon continued to insist, not waver ing for a second, that Hau besting two of her Pokemon – including her strongest – with his two made him the better Trainer. Hau retorted that Moon beating him meant she was. Neither seemed willing to budge, and Lillie proved unable to convince either to give ground, unsure herself on what position she would take.

Kahili shook her head. "If they grow that fast they really will make it to the opening of the League."

"That's the plan,” Kukui smiled, earning a beleaguered stare from the Trainer. “What? Do you really think they won't?"

“I don't know how I feel about the potential of battling them there.”

“Maybe they'll beat you.”

Kahili paused in silence after Kukui's jape. Maybe they would...

“I imagine Moon would put up a notable battle to even my less beginner-friendly Pokemon,” Ilima chimed in, still with the group. He'd return with them via Iki Town, and make sure he heard the Kahuna's plans for the Grand Trials to come. He absolutely had to watch over those, after all. “Alas every time I've caught her she's been preoccupied. I've yet to get the chance to battle her myself.”

Kukui laughed at that, Ilima's intense desire to battle every strong Trainer he could well known. “Maybe you'll be stuck waiting until the Pokemon League,” he grinned. Ilima looked at him with an almost pained expression.

“Please do not joke about such things.”

Lunch eaten, in the time after the battle, gave Kahili room to study. Moon's Pikipek was close to its evolution, but her other Flying-types were to be noted as well. Rowlet was far closer than it should
be. Despite Hau's starter proving stronger, Moon's was the one already showing the initial signs of evolution – fluffed feathers, a more vigorous appetite, and slightly deeper coos. Evolution was a natural feature of Pokemon, accelerated by Trainer's Bonds providing those Pokemon with an extra source of energy. It seemed Moon was able to make a significant – even for an adult – amount of energy available for her Pokemon.

That wasn't right.

That wasn't even the only part of this that was shocking. Moon had a Butterfree – and Kahili had confirmed with the Rotom-dex Moon carried that it was evolved from a Caterpie. Bug Pokemon evolved quickly, making them another favoured starter for new Trainers, but this was still far too fast. It wasn't even the question of how Moon had given it enough experience – it was of how she had given it enough power. Trainer's Bonds were demanding. Kahili knew that as well as anyone possibly could.

And then there was the Bagon. Kahili had raised Dragon-types before, though found that maintaining them significantly lowered the number of Pokemon she could keep. They were a type that took an almost obscene amount of power, even for the smallest. Of course those demands scaled by their evolution, but a newly forged Trainer shouldn't be able to tolerate even a young dragon.

Forget struggling, Moon should be catatonic.

Yet she sat there with the others, talking about her journey, scolding the stubborn dragon for pushing others out of the way of their food, without any sign of tiredness. She'd used a Z-Move too. For a moment Kahili had almost forgotten that.

Did... did she truly have no limits?

“Well!” When lunch completed Kukui took the lead once more, drawing the attention of all present. “I think it's time we moved on to Iki Town. Kahili and I have done well with Wai'oli, and I'd like to oversee your Grand Trials as much as anyone.” Moon and Hau stood together, their argument mostly over, though neither had agreed to the other's position. “How about we rent some Ride Pokemon and follow the eastern trail? It'll take a little longer, but be easier for us all than using our flying Pokemon, yeah!”

Mostly Kukui just really didn't want to go back in the air with anyone else after Moon had almost fallen the day before. He could feel his heartbeat accelerating just remembering that.

Luckily everyone was agreeable, and a collection of Tauros were available to take upon the trail. Lillie rode with Kahili, Kukui and Ilima on their own, with Moon and Hau leading ahead, mostly racing one another. Those two were competitive, always pushing the other further, Kukui observed. That was good. They'd do one another good.

Given Moon, given Hau, they were probably the only two in the world best suited to helping one another grow. It was truly good.

So the afternoon wore on, the ride from Wai'oli Town to Iki proving as beautiful as ever, the orange light of Alola stretching over the mountains and ocean below. There was peace in this moment, travelling together, and each of those upon the trip savoured it. Kept the memory in their hearts.

A Ride-Pokemon Station near to the end of the trail from Wai'oli to Iki accepted the five Tauros, thanked the group for their patronage and wished them well – if they ever wanted to ride around Melemele again, be sure to seek them out! From there it was only a short walk further, mostly downhill, before the gates of Iki Town were in view once more.
Hau raced towards them.

“Ho there!” The voice of Kahuna Hala reached the group before the sight of him did, the man as ever robed in his yellow coat. With a cheerful stride he emerged from the gates, swinging an arm around to collect Hau and hold him tight as greeting. Hau struggled, but it was playful, used to the interaction. Hala chuckled as the others approached.

“Welcome back to Iki Town, young Moon,” he addressed Moon specifically, before letting his grandson go. Hau bounded back to stand by Moon. “And my congratulations to the both of you for passing your first Trial. At this point, prior to my Grand Trial, I would present each challenger with a Z-Ring, and advise them to prepare a Z-Move to display in battle. However, given you already have one…”

The wave of Hala’s arm turned Hau’s attention, along with everyone else’s, to Moon just long enough for the Kahuna to fetch a white ring from his sleeve, “I need only give one to my grandson!”

Hau jumped in surprise, caught off-guard by the theatrics, before his face widened into a classic Hau grin. Hala smiled as he pushed the ring into his grandson’s hands, watching as Hau quickly fastened it to his wrist.

This was a sight that would make the boy’s parents proud, for sure.

“Now then,” Hala continued on, his voice ever the mix of joviality and gravel, “the Grand Trial of Melemele Island is a battle against me, Kahuna Hala, to ensure you two Trainers are ready to continue on. I will not go easy on either of you, so I advise the two of you to train yourselves and prepare. You may battle me when you are ready, but I will not accept a challenge for at least three days. I hope you understand.”

Moon and Hau nodded, before the second turned to the first with a grin.

“So Moon,” he held up a hand, fist closed, “want to figure out which of us gets to go first?”

Having lost the last match Moon very much did, and raised her hand again. She was sure this time she’d get him. After all, he’d never see it coming.

So did her paper fall to Hau’s scissors once again, Moon continuing to be shocked by the boy’s talent for the art. Hala laughed at the pair, the others gathered behind them smiling too.

“In that case,” Ilima waved goodbye, “I will return to Hau’oli and be here in three days time to see your Grand Trial. Hau, if you wish to train, you need only seek me out. I will always be ready to help the Trainers of Alola improve.”

“Got it!” Hau nodded, “I’ll do my best!”

With that the Captain departed, leaving six behind. Hau turned to Moon.

“Hey Moon, let’s hang out more tomorrow to train! I’m gonna head back home now though, have a good night!”

Hala turned, just so, as Hau walked to his side. The young boy had only been out on his Pokemon Journey for a short while, but already he seemed a little matured. Hah, this old man was getting emotional. He looked back to Moon. “Your Grand Trial may begin any day after Hau’s, please notify me when you are ready.” Moon nodded. Good. That was good. Bidding the group goodnight, Hala followed after Hau into Iki.
He’d need to prepare his darnedest to give these two the best Grand Trial he could.

“Looks like we’re heading back,” Kukui grinned at Moon, who nodded up at him. She and Lillie walked together along the way back, Kukui and Kahili discussing flying across Melemele over the next few days to cover any last questions from the townships before the Grand Trials. They’d be moving to Akala along with Hau and Moon, Kukui insisted. Kahili nodded to that.

“Moon, I—” Moon turned to Lillie when she spoke, the two side-by-side behind the adults. Much like the last time they had walked home from Iki together. It already felt so long ago. “Thank you. For everything. These two weeks have been... happy. Thank you.”

Moon smiled at Lillie. She smiled back.

“When you complete your Grand Trial, when you go to the next Island, I'll go too. Not just to help Professor Kukui and Ms. Kahili, but also... for Nebby,” Moon's eyes lowered to the bag Lillie always carried. It shook slightly. “Nebby... comes from far away... and I want to help it get home. It saved me, once. I want to save it too.”

Moon nodded. Placed a hand against the bag and felt the form in it lean into her touch. Lillie saw that too. Perhaps Moon would be a far better carer for Nebby. Moon could do anything. She could support Nebby in ways Lillie never could. Maybe.

But something deep inside of her fought back against the thought at letting Nebby go to anyone. Even to Moon. The intensity of that emotion surprised Lillie. She found herself shocked by it.

She and Moon would be walking similar paths. They would be by one another's side. Maybe that was enough.

Maybe it would be.

The group ended at Moon's house – Moon heading up to her door with a wave to them all, Kahili returning to Hau'oli for the night, and Kukui leading Lillie back down to the lab. Moon's return – unannounced how could you! – thrilled Jewellery, who swept up her daughter in a hug that lifted Moon from the ground. She'd only been away for so little a time, but Jewellery had felt it intensely, knowing soon Moon would leave for far longer. These reunions, they were cause enough to celebrate.

Seeing her mother's happiness, Moon promised to stay close to home until her Grand Trial was done. Oh how wonderful indeed.

Her Pokemon – new, old, and evolved! – were greeted with love by Jewellery and curiosity by her Meowth, the night passing on. The next day would begin Moon's training, as she prepared herself for what needed to be done.

Despite the numbers she possessed, still she felt like she had fallen behind Hau, bested as she had been in their battle before. She needed to be better.

To go any less than all-out would be rude, after all.

Chapter End Notes
As should have been predicted, of course my initial thought of "there may be one or two chapters left of this arc" should have been taken as a guarantee of "there are two chapters left". Of course I'm going to write more than expected. Who am I kidding?

This is a quieter chapter, sort of an interlude between major events. I know such things are necessary in the story, but still I'll admit at first I was thinking "did this chapter have enough?" But there's some solid development in it, so I'm good with it. Here's chapter nine.

Though Hau's personal goal is to surpass his grandfather, he's measuring himself against Moon right now, aware Moon is different but still comparing himself to her. Him being upset that Moon held back in his eyes isn't a trait we've seen in the games, but we've never really had the chance to hold back in them either. Hau's easy-going for the most part, but he does want to keep pace with his friends, and the thought of them not going all out the way he is stresses him. It's complex.

As for the battle, Moon's having her own difficulties at the moment. With only two Pokemon, Hau's devoted all his time to the pair of them, while Moon not only has a full team but many other Pokemon in storage which she has to keep switching around to maintain before the auto-release system kicks in. It's slowing the individual growth rate of her Pokemon down, and she's beginning to feel that. The solution? She doesn't know yet. I want you to remember the parable of the Six Magikarp and One Gyarados - a trainer with the former will not best a trainer with the latter. It's meant to be a lesson about not sacrificing the strongest partner you can maintain to manage many weaker partners, or learning moderation, but as Moon has her strongest partner with her, it doesn't quite apply to her.

It does a little though.

This is chapter nine. The next chapter will be the Grand Trial, and with it the end of the Melemele Arc. I hope you're all ready to move on to Akala Island, for the time is almost here.

So thank you all for reading, leaving comments, or sharing with friends. You are, as ever, appreciated. And please look forward to chapter ten, the conclusion of the Melemele Arc:

A Rising Moon
The next morning it rained.

For Jewellery this proved advantageous, allowed her to convince her daughter to take a day easy, to spend the time at home. Of course Moon would need to train, to prepare her team for the Grand Trial ahead – battling the Kahuna, how exciting! – but it was also important to relax now and again. Even if it seemed like she didn't need it.

Jewellery loved her daughter with her whole heart, and would never ever turn her back on her, this was true. But she was not ignorant to the oddity that Moon was, the impossibility of her ability to maintain so many Pokemon without a single sign of strain.

Most of Moon’s team had calmed quickly – the lawless wildness which freshly caught Pokemon had left only in the hard-headed Bagon. That wasn't a Pokemon Jewellery had known off the top of her head, but thankfully the delightful Rotom-dex had been more than willing to elucidate.

Oh, ha-ha, of course her daughter had caught a Dragon.

...Huh?

Moon told stories of her adventure so far and when it came to the tunnels she'd fallen into, the dark caverns she'd traversed following a song in the distance, Jewellery had been forced to excuse herself for a moment to make a quick call to the Professor.

Kukui, please tell me the situation Moon described isn't quite as horrifying as it sound- oh no? It was far worse and my daughter almost disappeared into a labyrinth beneath the earth? That's fine. No, I'm fine. Fine. Would you and Lillie perhaps like to stop by for dinner tonight? No I simply insist.

We all have a lot to talk about.

Back to the Dragon-type. Jewellery had not raised one herself, no specific bias to her abilities as a Trainer flavouring her team. She'd done well, some might argue very well, and completed her Pokemon Journey close to the end of her teens. The next Pokemon League Tournament in Kanto came just after her twentieth birthday and she entered, eliminated in the first round, and found herself satisfied with that. Cared for her Pokemon but they, raised to be fighters, proved too restless for the more grounded life she chose after.

A picture on her mantle, she and the four Pokemon she'd raised, often drew wistful looks. She hoped each was doing well with the Trainers they’d gone on to.

Meowth settled in her lap.

Moon! Right.

In spite of the past two weeks of adventure, capturing new Pokemon, battling Trainers, being lost in a subterranean cave system that perhaps might have never let her free – okay calm down Jewellery, calm down – in spite of all of those things Moon seemed fine. Chipper even! Like she was as happy as she'd ever been.
As much as a part of her celebrated that bringing Moon here to Alola seemed to have done her well, Jewellery also couldn't help but feel a twinge seeing the joy her daughter had found beyond their home. When Moon completed her Grand Trial she'd be heading to Akala Island, the next over from Melemele.

For most Trainers, their Pokemon Journeys would go far slower. They'd spend time exploring their region before heading back home, working on building their Bonds and teamwork with their Pokemon, improving their ability to sustain their partners before heading out and pushing further, finding new challenges to overcome. A back and forth that lasted until they were done.

But Moon would not do the same, Jewellery could see it just looking at her. There would be no steps backwards for Moon, no retreat from her constant forward march. She would push onwards constantly, meeting goal after goal. Her Pokemon Journey would last far shorter than most.

But she would be away for all of it and Jewellery found herself saddened by that all the same. Such bitter-sweet feelings parenthood brings, watching the growth of one's child.

She'd just need to do her best to make what memories she could now!

The two spent the next day together as well. Although the rain had settled over the city, lightly misting its buildings as the day wore on, still Jewellery and Moon enjoyed its paths and its attractions. A chance encounter with Hau, in training with the Island's Captain Ilima, saw the group enjoying lunch together, the process of Ilima's invitation for Moon to join he and Hau for training interrupted by a shake of Jewellery's head. One more day, please.

The Captain wisely chose not to argue.

On the third day Jewellery taught her daughter everything she knew. She'd spent her years raising Pokemon to battle, bested Trainers who held numbers and power that surpassed her own, and stood on the stage of the League for a moment. Moon knew this, but had never before seen her mother truly battle. So the experience, of Jewellery directing her Meowth and proceeding to best Moon's team, stunned her. How had she never realised?

Jewellery critiqued fairly. Advised Moon on the weaknesses she presented, the ways she could improve her strategy and team. The words she gave, each of them felt like seeing an aspect of her mother Moon had never before known, and Jewellery enjoyed the expressions of surprise she had gained from her daughter. Oh if only Moon could see her commanding her old team, laying waste to her opponents, she would be shocked. Moon nodded, believing her. Jewellery smiled and embraced her daughter warmly.

Moon, you will be amazing. I love you so very much indeed.

Moon hugged her back.

The clouds broke overnight, the sun rising to a clear sky the following morning and, come midday when the light of Alola was at its zenith, Hau, grandson of the Kahuna, undertook his Grand Trial.

The stage in the centre of Iki Town remained, seeing use by the Trainers of the town. That was the way it always was – worn down over the year before being rebuilt for the next Festival of the Tapu. Hala, Kahuna of Melemele, yellow flower-print coat worn over his clothing as ever, stood before Hau.
Hau gave an honest expression, nervous but excited, the fingers of one hand tapping the Z-Ring around the wrist of his other. Moon stood close to the stage, Lillie beside her, each looking up to Hau. Ilima was nearby, while Kahili and Jewellery remained further out in the crowd. Kukui stood on the stage, acting as referee for the battle. Much of the town had gathered here, excited to witness this Grand Trial. To see how Hau, known to all of Iki, had grown.

Excited to watch over the children of Alola's growth.

“Hau!” Hala's voice carried, even in normal speech. The crowd hushed as the leader of the Town and Island both spoke up. “Today you will face your final Trial of Melemele Island, a Pokemon Battle against its Kahuna! A Grand Trial!”

Moon watched Hau. He shifted his stance a little, as if uncomfortable standing still. Lillie, looking over at Hala as he spoke, gasped and tugged at Moon's arm. Moon turned just in time to see the three Pokeballs fly up.

Three Pokemon resolved before Hala, three Moon knew. Machop and Mankey were Kanto natives, Moon had grown up knowing of them, while Makuhita she'd encountered on the path to Verdant Cavern. Fighting-types. Moon internalised that.

“You will be facing these three Pokemon!” Hala's announcement drew murmurs, voices in the crowd acknowledging the Kahuna was not at all going easy on his grandson. “Prepare yourself as best you can!”

Kukui raised his arms.

“This Grand Trial will have no limits in the number of Pokemon used! Upon defeat of all of a Trainer's Pokemon the battle will end! Kahuna Hala, are you ready?” Hala's assertion was loud. The crowd felt in it intent. The Kahuna was going to go all out. “Trainer Hau, are you ready?”

Hau's gulp went unseen by the majority. Those who knew him, those who understood the nerves he felt in facing his grandfather, a man of such intensity it could overwhelm, wished him luck under their breaths and in their hearts. Hau nodded.

“I'm ready!”

Kukui held his hands raised for one moment more.

Then dropped them.

“Then begin!”

Hau led with his Pichu, a Pokemon that immediately drew notice. It was not unusual, or even unexpected for a Trainer undertaking their first Grand Trial to have a second – or even a third – Pokemon, but what mattered here was the timing. Hau had been given his first Pokemon two and a half weeks ago. He had a second already? The fact that he'd beaten his Trial and made it here alone was impressive, but that, he truly was the Kahuna's grandson. What a skilled Trainer of Alola.

He made them proud.

Hau made a substitution quickly.

To Moon it was obvious what was occurring, Hau mirroring the strategy that had allowed him to best her Rowlet in their battle before. Pichu had dodged the attacks of the Machop Hala led with, inflicted an electrical blast, then been called back to allow Popplio to take over the fight. Switching
Pokemon was not only a valid, but also essential tactic to best use one's full abilities, and Hau made full use of it here, the electrical aftershocks upon the Machop easily allowing his Popplio to run circles around it. Or water-jet circles, as it were.

When the Sea Lion Pokemon connected its fifth successive strike the Superpower Pokemon collapsed and did not rise again, called back by Hala as the crowd erupted into cheers. Hau was doing so well! As Hala directed his Mankey to step up, Hau swapped Pichu back in. The same strategy again, just like they'd practised.

Hala raised his arms, the red-orange crystal set into his Z-Ring glinting in the sun.

The gasp of the crowd never even made it to Moon's ears, the intensity of the Z-Aura that flared up around the Kahuna drowning out everything else. When Ilima had shown her his Z-Move it had been alluring. When she'd seen the Totem Pokemon it had been beautiful. But Hala's Z-Aura had such raw force, flicking and flaring like fire itself, that it almost stung to look upon. He felt far closer to the Tapu than to Ilima or the Totem.

Moon watched the motions. The thrusts of Hala's arms that built up more and more of the Z-Aura, swelled it up around him, before transferring it into the Pig Monkey Pokemon. It truly was incredible.

She was amazed.

Hau ordered a command. Hoped to inflict something, anything, before the Z-Move reached his Pichu. He'd seen it before. He knew there was no dodging such a thing. And if he used his Z-Move to counter it, the exhaustion would be... Ilima had made sure in their training not to let Hau try his Z-Move until he was ready to rest. The Captain had known Hau wouldn't last long after using it.

If the electricity hit, it could not be seen through the overwhelming wave of force that crashed down upon the Pichu, that left it unconscious in the aftermath of the attack. Hau called back the Pokemon, his smile nervous but remaining. The crowd cheered for him. Shouted encouragements, Moon and Lillie's voices amongst them, as Hau released his Popplio to continue the battle.

Not done yet.

Perhaps by the after-effects of Pichu's electricity, or the exhaustion from the Z-Move – as demanding upon the Pokemon as it was the Trainer – but the battle between the Popplio and Mankey was significantly one-sided. Hala gave directions but Hau matched them, the speed he'd taught Popplio to use – necessary to keep pace with Moon – giving him the edge he needed. Unable to stand the watery assault the Mankey collapsed soon after. Hala called it back with a smile.

The crowd erupted into cheers as the Kahuna ordered the third and final of his Pokemon forward. The final round.

Z-Moves took a demand. They extracted as much power from a Trainer as they could provide to a Pokemon and allowed it to use an attack that took nearly everything it had. Such things could be dangerous, to Trainers and Pokemon both, which was part of why the process of obtaining them was built into the Island Challenge. It was important to teach these Trainers the necessary respect and care to use those abilities. If they didn't understand them then... too much harm could be done.

Kahuna Hala stood tall. He was a man of experience, and one Z-Move was not going to leave him sleeping the rest of the day away. But that did not mean he didn't feel its effects, that there wasn't a slight tug upon him now, insisting that he slow. Being able to overcome that after-effect was a core tenant of one's experience. It allowed them to go on.
Hau had not a shred of that experience. His Z-Move, yet unused, would be the finale. Ilima had taught him that, stressed that a Z-Move was a trump card to be used with a great cost, terrible exhaustion for both Trainer and Pokemon. One cannot use such a thing foolishly, for it will leave yourself open to all manner of reprisal. Use your Z-Move when you know it will count. That was what the Captain had drilled into this young Trainer.

Hau kept his eyes open for that moment even as he gave his orders, direction after direction, to match his grandfather's commands.

Popplio and Makuhita met in combat. The jets of water allowed the Sea Lion Pokemon to slam into its Gutsy opponent, but the sheer bulk of the Fighting-type made it difficult to unsteady, and each time it was struck it counter-attacked with a palm or chop that felt far weightier than the blows Popplio inflicted.

Hau adapted his strategy. Employed distance, bubbles and sprays of water that avoided the close-range threat the Makuhita was. Its arm-thrusts could project, a little way at least, but at a far enough distance – maintained by the water jets Popplio used to move at great speed – Hau's Pokemon remained safe.

Yet tiredness after the battle so far was rampant, and it was all too clear that in direct conflict Popplio would wear out before the Makuhita. Hau watched closely. Moon clenched her fists, sharing the intensity of the battle. The crowd was almost silent.

Makuhita tried to chase after Popplio, the Sea Lion Pokemon coming particularly close after an attack, only to slip on a streak of water left behind.

“Now!”

Hau shone. Bright light, the white crystal in the white ring around his wrist allowing its release, flared around him, mirroring the midday sun. It flowed from Hau, forward into his Popplio, as Hala's grin showed teeth, joy at his grandson's growth all too clear on his face. He gave a directive, for Makuhita to prepare to take the blow, knowing the slower Pokemon would never dodge it. It all came down to the force Hau could maintain, the power his Popplio could bring. The timing that he'd worked so hard to meet.

Popplio surged forward. Struck the Makuhita. And for a brief moment the entire town held its breath.

Then Makuhita lifted, off of the ground, and the full force of the blow threw it across the stage. Crashed it down upon the wood, the Pokemon struggling to rise again. It made it to a knee. To its feet.

Then fell flat upon its face and moved no more. Kukui raised a hand.

“The winner is: Hau!”

And the crowd erupted into cheers that shook the treetops across Iki and beyond.

Hala's words to Hau, as he held his bleary grandson against his chest, were for Hau alone, but Moon saw the smile on the boy's face as he stepped back, shaky on his feet, the adrenaline of victory keeping him against the exhaustion of the energy he'd surrendered to claim it.

The afternoon beyond was a blur. Hala gave a speech to the town, proclaimed Hau's victory, before allowing his grandson to retire to rest. Moon greeted the Kahuna, was instructed to inform him when she was ready, and nodded. The afternoon flowed on and, when evening came, Kukui had Moon join him and Lillie in returning to Iki, greeting a once-more awake and ravenously hungry Hau. The
three children sat together and the elders watching over them smiled at the way they spoke – at how Hau seemed to blush under their praise, only to be teased a moment later.

Hau and Moon were both trainers of incredible potential, but they were children too, and no-one failed to appreciate seeing them this way. It was good. This was right.

And each slept well that night indeed.

A long-extinct volcano framed the skyline of the south-eastern corner of Hau'oli City, an industrial sector built around it allowing mining efforts to continue in the mountain's husk. On the east-side of this volcano those efforts went unseen, a pristine and untouched slope leading down from the mountain's peak to the fields of greenery that grew on land rich with volcanic nutrients.

It was beyond those fields that the beach upon which the Alolan Pokemon Laboratory, if the ramshackle shack could be called that, was situated. Kahili breathed in the fresh air of the fields as she walked a path that curved around the mountain, wound its way through the fields. It was good to be outside the city like this. She appreciated it.

Today she intended on meeting with Professor Kukui, discussing the plan for how the two of them would approach Akala. They'd be moving on to that island soon enough, and taking their tour of promotion for the Pokemon League with them. It had been... strenuous, attempting to help those opposed understand that the League was being specifically designed to harm none of Alola's traditions. Kahili had found herself needing breaks after some discussions, she and Kukui taking turns negotiating with the more recalcitrant of those intending to inform the two just what a mess they were making with their plans.

She truly hoped Akala Island would be an easier journey. For them, at least. The two little trainers they were following would only find more challenges. As they should.

As was right.

A voice, and the calls of Pokemon responding to it, drew Kahili's eyes from the path she walked and she stopped, catching sight of a trainer in the distance. The vibrant red of her chicken-combed hat was more than enough to tell Kahili exactly who that was. Moon herself, training for her own Grand Trial. Hmm.

Kahili changed her course and approached the girl.

Captain Ilima, to his own despair, had been required to travel back to Verdant Cavern this day, missing once again his chance to monopolise Moon's attention. He'd been sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that now was his time to battle her, to test her and train her for the Grand Trial ahead. Instead he'd been called away for another's Trial. But he'd be back tomorrow for sure, he insisted. They'd have their chance then.

He was sure of it.

Moon's focus was strong, teaching the new members of her team how to work with her. Having seen Hala's preference in Pokemon the day before she'd adjusted her team for it, the Dark-types Meowth and Zorua unfortunately unwise to bring to the battle. Catches from Melemele Meadow, before Moon had fallen into the caves, proved ideal new team members, but working them into pace with the others of her team was proving difficult.
She was beginning to feel like she might need to go far further afield to properly bring her team into shape.

“You're working hard,” Kahili’s voice turned Moon's head just in time to see another giant bird Pokemon sweep by, the Mandibuzz – as Rotom-dex was happy to report the name of – coursing along the flat stone wall of the extinct volcano before landing on a fallen boulder at its base. Kahili tilted her head to the Bone Vulture. “But I can't imagine such an easy-going location is suitable to you.”

Moon nodded, understanding that a Trainer of prestige like Kahili would be able to tell. Kahili pointed with the golf club she carried, turning Moon's attention back to the giant bird. “Perhaps I could help with that.”

It only took a slight clenching of the Pokemon’s claws, its grip-strength incredible, to cause the boulder to explode into shards of rock, remnants thrown across the ground as the Pokemon took off once more into the sky. In the wreckage of its action, dust from the shattering clearing away, the shape of a hole resolved. A way into the mountain. Kahili stepped up beside the young girl.

This was the right decision, of that she was sure. “Let's move on... to Ten Carat Hill.”

A Pokemon of far smaller size, the red bird Oricorio danced before Kahili and Moon as they walked, maintaining a flickering orb of flame overhead. With its light the two made their way into the tunnels of Ten Carat Hill, the pathways within far wider and more open than those of the northern underground. Subterranean Pokemon could be seen racing by, jumping off ledges to descend deeper into open caverns the tunnel passed through. A few stopped to investigate the passage of the two humans, pushed back by Moon's Pokemon under Kahili's request.

But this was still just a formality to what lay ahead.

“Ten Carat Hill is an extinct volcano,” Kahili spoke as she walked, Moon listening as she observed the environment they were passing through, “as well as the source of Z-Crystals and Rings.” That got Moon's attention, Kahili turning just so to see the rapt stare locked onto her face. She chuckled. That was a good reaction indeed. “There are a few sites across Alola where Z-Crystals are found in the earth, and the Sparkling Stones that can be made into Z-Rings are mined, but this is the largest. It's likely Tapu Koko pulled the Stone your Ring is made of from here.” Moon placed a hand upon the Z-Ring. Ran her fingers over the slot waiting for a Z-Crystal to be placed within.

“The west-side of the mountain is for mining, while the east is kept preserved. This path leads up to the inner hollow, one of Melemele's most intense proving grounds. Many wild Pokemon come here to test themselves. You'll find yourself well-challenged indeed.”

As the uphill path they walked within the mountain evened out, the light of day emerged from a hole in the tunnel ahead. It would lead out into the inner hollow of Ten Carat Hill, a location Kahili had spent months testing herself against in her youth. It was her favourite location in Melemele, and bringing a new trainer to it felt surprisingly good. Passing on something she had done to another... felt good.

Surrounded by fields of greenery grown within the mountain's hollow, curious Pokemon eyeing off the intruders at a distance, Kahili faced Moon. Time for a lesson. She pointed with the golf-club she carried.

“I've noticed a preference for Flying-types in your team.” Moon had three that Kahili knew of: Rowlet, Pikipek, and Butterfree. “With your Grand Trial approaching, I imagine they'll be the backbone of your battle with Hala.” Moon nodded. That was her intent. “Then I'll lend you a hand.
I'm a specialist in Flying-type Pokemon, so I'm more than happy to encourage others to work with
them as well. That's why I brought you here, where you'll find some of the harshest challenges
Melemele's Pokemon can afford. I imagine that suits you?"

Moon nodded quickly. This was what she'd needed. Kahili smiled as she swung her club into an
open hand. "Then go to it. I will observe. Do your best."

Moon didn't need one word more. She began to train.

Kahili watched as Moon gave it her all. And noted every last one of her presumptions correct. The
girl had a sharp mind, excitedly speaking about Pokemon Tournaments she had watched in the past.
Half her team were solidly honed – the flying trio having been with her the longest – while the
Bagon, as well as the two new members from Melemele Meadow, proved slightly more stubborn.
Still, Moon worked hard with them, and began to bring them into line.

One of the most important skills for a Pokemon Trainer was being able to reach the hearts of
Pokemon. Kahili watched as Moon did so with ease. She really had everything, didn't she?
Sometimes it almost stung to consider. But Kahili was more than mature enough to suppress that
initial thought. Moon had a long path ahead of her. Kahili would not begrudge the girl that. No,
instead...

Moon turned to watch as Kahili gave an order, as the light inside of Ten Carat Hill faded with the
afternoon sun passing overhead. Kahili's Mandibuzz had been released once more, flying up to a
fissure in the rock-face above. Kahili turned back to Moon.

“When I trained here,” she raised a hand, a sky-blue crystal held between her fingers, Moon's eyes
locked upon it, “I found a Z-Crystal all of my own. Sometimes, though, I think that maybe it found
me instead. After all, I am a specialist of the Flying-type.” A shadow cast overhead was her
Pokemon descending, quarry clutched in its claws. Kahili widened her stance.

“Look closely, Moon, and remember. This is the pose necessary to use the Flyinium-Z and its Z-
Move. This is my Z-Pose!”

Kahuna Hala was notified the next morning that Moon was ready for her Grand Trial. Slightly
sooner than he'd expected, but he accepted all the same, and set a time for that evening. The Kahuna
had commitments to see to throughout the day, after all.

Ilima's return from Verdant Cavern was to discover, to his great dismay, that Moon was preparing
herself for her Grand Trial. Kahili apologised to him for claiming the girl's training, though quite
frustratingly refused to even hint at how it had gone. Hau, hearing of the challenge, spent the day
bouncing around with his Pokemon, excited to see how Moon would do. Lillie, with Professor
Kukui, worked on preparing the boat he kept for travel. They'd be taking off soon, after all.

Jewellery and her daughter ate a light dinner before heading off to Iki Town, the elder so incredibly
proud of the younger. So proud indeed.

Moon wore a shirt and dress of flower patterns, orange and white standing out against her dark skin.
Her hair remained tied back, a ponytail mirroring the one her mother had once worn on her own
journey, and as ever her chicken-combed hat remained squarely upon her head. Moon's love for that
hat was unquestionable. She'd never relinquish it without a choice. Jewellery smiled at it as they
walked on.
It was time.

There was energy in Iki Town as the moon rose overhead, as the sun’s reflected light settled across the town. It was bright, the moon almost full, and none of the bustle of the day had faded. There was to be another Grand Trial, with the other trainer who had begun at the same time Hau had. Those who'd overseen that battle at the Festival remembered the implication of Moon’s second Pokemon. Those with their ears to the ground in terms of rumours, or who had chanced to see her over the past two weeks, suspected more. But those voices didn't stand out amongst the crowd. None knew. Not truly. Not yet.

Moon took the stage. Once more Jewellery, Kahili, and Ilima stood amongst the crowd. This time it was Hau beside Lillie just beyond the wooden platform, cheering for Moon as she stood opposite the Kahuna, Kukui overseeing again.

“Moon!” Once more Hala's voice brought silence, addressing the Trainer before him. “This is your Grand Trial, the means by which your Island Challenge will continue on! By overcoming me, Kahuna Hala, you will advance onwards on your journey! This will be no easy challenge, but face it with head held high as a Trainer of Alola!”

The energetic speech brought raised voices from the crowd just in time to be silenced by the Pokemon Hala released. Huh? Was he for real?

The smaller one Moon had encountered before, lurking in berry piles throughout the roads she'd walked. A Crabrawler. That was fine, she'd beaten wild ones, she was ready to face one stronger.

But the other Pokemon, that one shook her. Even Kukui looked at Hala with a gaze that read clearly 'are you serious?'. Hala smiled. No holding back.

“Hariyama!” Rotom-dex announced the Pokemon's name in the silence that followed, “Arm Thrust Pokemon, evolved form of Makuhita!” Lillie, below the stage, looked at Hau to see the surprise clear on his face. Oh. This was. Oh.

Hala folded his arms. When testing Trainers through a Grand Trial, a Kahuna was tasked not to beat them but to ensure those Trainers were able to surpass their own selves. Hau, his grandson, had struggled with numbers. Faced difficulty rationing his Pokemon's actions to handle a wave of opponents. So Hala had given him three to battle and tasked his grandson to determine how best to overcome them. And he did.

Moon would never be challenged by numbers. No, her struggle was one of power. While Hau raised two Pokemon alone with everything he had, Moon had been swapping between Pokemon, never focusing for too long upon one. Her challenge would be singular pillars of power. So Hala placed those before her.

Now, young Moon, overcome.

Kukui raised his arms.

“Th-this Grand Trial will be an all-out battle between Moon and Kahuna Hala, with no restrictions upon Pokemon used. Upon defeat of all of a Trainer's Pokemon, the battle will end! Kahuna Hala, are you ready?”

Hala stomped a foot down, strengthening his stance. “I am ready!”

“Trainer Moon, are you ready?”
Moon raised a Pokeball. She was ready.

A moment ticked by. Then another. Kukui's eyes lingered on the Hariyama. Hala met his gaze. He looked away. In that case... “Begin!”

Opposing the Crawbrawler, first of Hala's two Pokemon, Moon unleashed one of her own. It had been the first she had ever caught, second-longest of her partners next to the Rowlet she had been gifted, and had grown well. Kahili's assertion had been correct. It had grown well indeed.

The voices of the crowd surged at the Trumbeak, evolved form of Pikipek, now flapping in the air. The first question was whether Moon had caught the Pokemon as is, but the season was still that of hatching, and Trumbeak would be far too hard to find around Melemele at this time. To have such a Pokemon, it would have to be evolved, correct?

How had she gained that? Had it been the second she'd been preparing, those almost three weeks ago? If it had been a Pikipek then, freshly caught as she'd been given her first Pokemon the day before, then...

Then...

...what did it mean?

The Grand Trial began.

Trumbeak's speed was similar to Pikipek’s – its increased weight balanced out by the power it had gained through evolution. Moon ordered an attack, had the Pokemon curve around the Crabrawler, but directed it back each time as the Boxing Pokemon turned to face it. She was measuring its speed, gauging its reaction, and cautious about the power it would express. Wise strategy. Whereas Hau had understood Hala's Pokemon enough to choose his attacks instinctively, Moon was required to observe.

And using a close-combat fighter like Trumbeak, despite its type advantage, still posed risk. Fighting Pokemon were dangerous up close. Everyone knew that.

An order. A gust of wind blown up to push its opponent back, before Trumbeak arched overhead, turned in a tight loop to slam into the Crabrawler's back. A strong strategy. Hala smiled as he gave his own direction. Moon had come at him with everything she had.

A rushed “oooh” raced through the crowd at the impact, the heavy claw of the Crabrawler pinning the Trumbeak to the ground. The pincer glowed in the aftermath of the attack, the energy it had struck with significant indeed. Moon stared, stunned, as her Pokemon tried and failed to take back to the sky. It looked weary.

“As a Fighting-type specialist,” Hala's voice carried to her ears, “I have to be prepared for others to attempt to take advantage of my weaknesses. Flying-types are common, young Moon, so my Pokemon were all taught how to smack them down. Do not assume you have the advantage you think you do. Such thoughts are dangerous things indeed.”

Moon gave a new direction. Ordered the Trumbeak to maintain distance, to blow back winds. But rooted to the ground by the powerful attack it had been struck by, weakened by the hit, the Bugle Beak Pokemon failed to keep its distance. Crabrawler powered through and one more strike from a glowing claw brought the Pokemon down again.

It did not rise a second time.
The surge of voices in the crowd was intense, amazed that the Kahuna had already bested one of the challenger's Pokemon. She wasn't ready, some noted, while others wondered if maybe the Kahuna was going harder than he should. Moon called the Pokemon back.

Released another.

Fresh from Melemele Meadow, still slightly surprised it had been caught amongst the heavy storm of pollen at the time, the green Bulb Pokemon Petilil manifested from the light. Hau shook Lillie's shoulder, exclamations at the new Pokemon, while she stared at it, knowing its line, its evolution specifically, well. It took some more shaking for her to break from that fugue. Right. The battle.

A slow-mover, used to counter-attacking others, Hala's Crabrawler found difficulty in approaching the Grass-type Pokemon, its spores and draining attacks sapping at it. Confident in her opponent's slow movement, Moon directed the Petilil to fall back, maintaining its assault. Opening an avenue of attack.

Pokemon that approached a Crabrawler were targets, but equally so were those who fell back. A quick pursuit, faster than expected, brought it within the Petilil's range. All too quickly the battle was decided – a pincer seizing around the leaves growing from the Pokemon's head and allowing the Crabrawler to savage it, slamming it from side to side against the wooden stage until Moon was forced to call her Pokemon back. Two down. The crowd's intense discussion on how brutal Hala was being continued on.

Moon raised a third Pokeball. Was this to be her starter? Could it best the Crabrawler and then overcome the Hariyama? Unlikely, too unlikely. This battle was already over.

That line of thought ended the moment Moon clicked open the Pokeball and its contents emerged. Butterfree ready to fight.

A Butterfree? Of course it was a Bug Pokemon, those were one of the easiest types to raise and they evolved naturally quick, but even still! How had she raised a Caterpie to evolve in that time? Wait let's not forget the Trumbeak, another evolved Pokemon. This was her third too. Where was her starter? Not with her? How did she have three Pokemon like this in such a short amount of time? How was she okay? Shouldn't she be exhausted? Should she even be standing?

What...

...what was this?

Butterfree combined the best of both Pokemon prior – the flying advantage of Trumbeak, and the ranged abilities of Petilil. Maintaining height over the Crabrawler it showered spores upon it, gusts of wind pushing back the Pokemon's attacks. Hala grinned into the challenge, noting Moon's adapting strategy pushing him down. Good. She was doing well. But not yet enough.

Not nearly enough.

It wasn't just Moon who could change her strategies, Hala adapted as well. Crabrawler raised its claws, blew out bubbles, and began to disperse the spores raining down from above. In the opening provided, the Butterfree unable to harass it, it tightened up, amplifying the strength flowing through its body. Seeing this, Moon grew hasty, aware that a Pokemon allowed the freedom to bulk itself up in such a manner would be intensely dangerous. Gave an order for Butterfree to close the distance and hit with a much more direct attack. After all, the Crabrawler had been hit by many blows so far. It couldn't take much more.
Of that she was sure.

But for the combination of the best attacks and strategies of her previous two team-members her Butterfree had a severe weakness, one far more exposed to the rock-based attack of Crabrawler than even her Trumbeak had possessed. Butterfree flew in, beat its wings to unleash a gust of wind upon the Boxing Pokemon, but failed to push back its tense form the way it had expected.

Failed to create the distance it required to remain out of range.

A heavy claw swung around and struck true. Once more a Flying-type Pokemon denied the air. But unlike the Trumbeak, Butterfree did not rise after even the first. Three down.

The wildness of the crowd, their questioning of the fairness of this battle beginning to fade out in favour of how intense it was, exploded when Moon brought forth her fourth. The Crabrawler had to be tired, it had to be, but Moon was not about to give it any more leeway to take another. Three for the first of Hala's Pokemon, three for the second. If she lost that pace... she wasn't going to. Moon gave her order.

Commanded the Bagon to attack.

A dragon? The discussion of Hala's tactics was completely gone now. Three Pokemon, even with the evolved members, had some member of rational acceptance. They supposed it was possible. Some edge-case Trainer with a supreme gift. Sure.

But a dragon? No no no. Dragon Pokemon were legends. Raising one alone made you a name. And they took so much, were so demanding. How did she have a dragon? What...

...what was she?

Hala raised his arms and light flared around him.

“Well Moon!” His voice came from within the surge of power, almost blinding but for the fact she stared into it grimly. “What will you do in this scenario? Show me!”

He was performing a Z-Move. Bagon was strong, and sturdy, but Moon knew without question a Z-Move would best it. The Crabrawler would be an easy-target after this, but in this moment it was about to take out a fourth of her Pokemon. She couldn't allow that. She couldn't accept it.

There really was only one thing to do.

Moon raised her arms.

The crowd's voices were at a fever-pitch, a battle of unbelievable intensity taking place. Z-Move versus Z-Move, a fighting-infused attack from Hala and Crabrawler against the normal-infused blow from Moon and Bagon. In the crowd Illima clenched his fists so tight he left marks in the skin of his palms, eyes locked onto the battle. This was everything.

It was unbelievable.

Hala struck a fist forward. Moon gave her command. The two Pokemon raced to one another, as much power behind each as could be managed. Two blows at full-force meeting. Only one possible result.

Finally, when the light faded, the Crabrawler of Kahuna Hala was bested, crumpled in a pile from the beating it had taken. But the advantage of those two attacks, it had still pushed against its
opponent, and Lillie stared up at the field with horror seeing Moon's Bagon unmoving as well. Moon's face unreadable as she called the dragon back.

Four down.

Hala gave a command, sending Hariyama forward, as Moon unleashed her fifth. At this point the crowd were beyond incredulity, simply accepting that the Cutiefly Moon unleashed was here. Kahili, standing near Jewellery who was swept up in the battle, stunned by its heights, frowned. Moon had been forced to use her Z-Move. Of course that was understandable, it was a good choice to make in that situation. But she'd sacrificed the advantage Kahili had taught her. A shame.

The difference in size between the Hariyama, bigger than Hala himself, and the Cutiefly, small enough to fit in one's hand, immediately favoured Moon. The tiny bug zoomed around the stage, evading the arm thrusts of Hala's signature Pokemon, leaving puffs of powder constantly in its wake. But there the size lent favour back to the Fighting-type, who ignored such tiny dosages with ease. The battle was one of waiting for that single perfect strike, the Hariyama's movements forcing Cutiefly's route as the Bee Fly Pokemon continued to do its best to leave any mark it could.

Maybe it did. Maybe it added up. But when that one single attack hit, a powerful downwards chop, that was the end for it. The typing helped it resist, for a moment, but once stunned the tiny Pokemon, far weaker than the giant, could not resist the following blows. Moon called it back from the assault.

Five.

The voices of the crowd built. Five Pokemon. Five Pokemon she had sent out and five Pokemon the Kahuna had bested. This wasn't an ordinary Grand Trial. How could it be? But was she really... did she have a sixth? She was raising a hand, there was a Pokeball in it, she did! It had to be her starter, right? Yes! Her strongest Pokemon! Her best against the Kahuna's! She had a Rowlet, that was known, it was a Flying-type. Did she still have a chance?

Did she still have a chance?

Moon clicked the Pokeball. A jet of red-light emerged into the sky, resolved into shape. Oh she had a Rowlet.

Past. Tense.

Blade Quill Pokemon Dartrix, evolution of Grass Quill Pokemon Rowlet. Starter Pokemon were powerful, demanding, and given only to Trainers believed able to handle them. Those Trainers would often go months, perhaps even a year, with that Pokemon alone, that singular Pokemon strong enough with their partnership to overcome many challenges. Evolved they were even stronger. That year, with full attention and constant hard work, could end with evolution. The best of the best walked that path.

Moon, gifted Rowlet twenty nights ago, had done the same. The yells, the shock, it washed as a wave of sound across the town and into the night. What. Was. This.

Hau stared. Lillie stared. Kukui and Jewellery and Ilima stared. Hala stared but the smile on his face said he was as happy as could be.

Kahili, who had witnessed the evolution of Moon's Pokemon herself, shook her head. Even still, without a Z-Move, would it be enough?

She would see.
Moon ordered attack. Hau had trained Popplio to match Rowlet's speed, but that would never compare to that of its evolved form. The Hariyama stepped forward in shock, a claw sinking into its back, before swinging a hand around, slapping aside thin air. Dartrix danced a pattern of strikes upon the back of its head, disappearing once more as the crowd's voices surged into something incredible. Was she actually going to do it?

Hala grinned. Gave command and watched the thrust of his Hariyama's arm glow red. This was good. He was being pushed back. Good good good! Keep it up! The intensity, the drive, Hala's control slipped a little, the after-effects of his Z-Move felt. But that did not cause weakness, did not expose a point to attack. Instead it made him forget, just briefly, that this was a test, not a battle to crush. More power, more intent, flowed from him into his Hariyama than expected.

It sped up.

When the palm thrust hit Dartrix the bird gave a cry that said the attack had strength. It was a Flying-type, it could resist, but its power still did not compare to that of the Kahuna's. The bird flew back, landed before Moon, and gave her a moment to consider. Hala stared her down. The Hariyama was still so strong. The voices of the crowd faded out as Moon's focus locked forward.

As she withdrew the sky-blue crystal from her bag.

“Huh?”

Kahili's eyes widened as Moon's hand swept over her Z-Ring, exchanged one crystal for the other. No...

Moon took a stance. The noise of the crowd faded to whispers. What was she doing? Was she... no. No, right?

Moon raised a hand. Kukui called out to her. She didn't hear him. Hala opened his mouth.

Z-Aura flared around her.

Refugee from darkness, a world without light, a small and purple Pokemon watched from the treeline. There was light, light so beautiful, so safe, it called to it. Light that was a new home. Light that would welcome it and keep it from harm.

Good. This was good.

It raged like a bonfire, the Z-Aura Moon commanded, swirled by the pose she took as she raised her arm to the sky. From her it flowed, down through a Trainer's Bond of immeasurable strength. Dartrix glowed now, shone with such brightness its form disappeared, before ascending into the sky, a pillar of light, seen from even as far as Hau'oli itself.

Then it dived.

Hala gave no order. The sight had struck him dumb, the entire town in silence. The burning light, the flying Z-Move Supersonic Skystrike, fell fully upon his Hariyama. Hala felt it, his Pokemon being beaten, and watched as the light faded to reveal the Dartrix, Pokemon of Moon, perched atop the unconscious form of his own.

Grand Trial complete.

“Th-the winner is: Moon!”
It was impossible to hear Hala's words to Moon, as the Kahuna passed a red-orange crystal over to the victor. Kukui's posturing to the pair said something of his shock, but the sheer volume of the crowd, the battle having driven them to a state of pure adrenaline, drowned it all out. That had been... everything! And then a new voice louder than even their own cracked overhead, the loud cry of Tapu Koko showing its appreciation for the show.

It bought silence once more, a silence taken advantage of by the Kahuna. Ilima and Kahili, figures of notability and respect, made space for Moon to be escorted, led through the crowd to her mother, Hala's commanding voice directing the crowd to show decorum. Lillie glanced at Hau, who was staring at Moon, but he showed nothing but amazement. Amazement she felt too.

That had been... so much.

It took time for Iki Town to calm after that, even with the victorious Trainer absent. Hala handled their attention, attempted to de-escalate those losing their minds at the display shown by the young girl that night. But it was obvious now her legend would spread. Even Hala hadn't expected what he'd seen.

Akala Island wouldn't be an easy time for the girl, but not for the reasons expected. They'd all need to talk about this.

Alola's eyes would be upon her indeed.

Z-Moves were an Alolan speciality. Because of this, battles in Alola drew notice. Trials were private things, held in sacred locations across Alola, but Grand Trials could be different, depended on the Kahuna. And Kahuna loved to display their Z-Moves in battle.

There was decorum in the Festival of the Tapu. That fight was for the Tapu, and should be offered to them alone. But the Grand Trials were not the same. The consequence of that skipped those participant by.

Over the years those battles had become common sights online. Far more intense conflicts, waged by Alolan Trainers gone to other Leagues, drew real attention. But still, a Grand Trial video was nice to see, a new Trainer doing their best. The recording of Hau's would have attracted a few dozen views on its own, were it not for the one to follow. For Moon's.

The video spread like wildfire.

The immediate reaction was shock. Then denial. This had to be faked, there was no way some kid... there was no way! But the need to prove it wrong only drew more attention, the video shared andreshared, hosted and rehosted so fast that there proved no way to stop its course. Across the globe this battle flowed and through it all eyes turned.

Turned to Alola. And to the victor announced.

“The winner is: Moon!”

>>>Welcome to the Pokemon Mail Storage System. Please enter your Login Details.
>kukui@pokelab.alo
Welcome, Professor Kukui.

You have (4) unread mail items.

-------------------------------------------
from: samuel.oak@kanto-labs.kan
to: kukui@pokelab.alo
cc: samson.oak@kanto-labs.kan
subject: Meeting Arrangement!

Greetings there, Professor Kukui!

My cousin, Samson, has been in the Alola Region for the past few months, performing research on Alolan Variants. I'd love to organise a meeting between the two of you to discuss recent events, please let me know how we can make this work!

Kind Regards,
Professor Samuel Oak,
Kanto Research Labs

-------------------------------------------
from: sycamore@pokemon-laboratory.kal
to: kukui@pokelab.alo
cc: number1dex@kalomail.kal, sinalong@kalomail.kal
subject: Your Newest Find

Bonjour, Professor Kukui,

You may remember me from the Pokemon Professors Meeting in Sinnoh three years back – we discussed the possible interplay and relationships between Mega Evolution and Z-Moves?

Two of my assistants, Dexio and Sina, are en route to Alola with a set of Mega Stones; it would be most wonderful to have them meet up with you and yours. I am most excited to hear back from you!

My Thanks,
Professor Sycamore
Kalos Pokemon Laboratory

-------------------------------------------
from: alolaculturecouncil@maliesys.alo
to: kukui@pokelab.alo
subject: Meeting Invitation

Professor Kukui,

Please find attached details approving your presentation at the next Alola Culture Council, to be hosted in Malie City in a month's time.

Your attendance to discuss the planned Pokemon League is expected.

Please confirm at your earliest convenience,
Alola Culture Council
Malie City
Ula'ula Island, Alola

from: juniper@unovalabs.uno
cc: fennel@unovalabs.uno, burnet@pokelab.alo

subject: Oh my Gosh??

Kukui,

Whaaaaaat? Oh my goodness how have you been holding out on us for this long? Who is she? Have you done any measurements? We need a report! Oh my gosh!

Now listen, Kukui, you know I am above such things as threats, I am a respectable Professor after all. But there is an annual shipment of Unovan Treats we take care of that I know dearest Burnet lives for and putting together a report on this super-Trainer you found might just delay it.

Putting our heads together will make everything run on-time though. Without a problem.

Kukui. Her Mental Pattern. This could be IT, Kukui! This could be the key that solves the entire puzzle! We NEED it. Get me that pattern asap or by Arceus's divine hooves I will visit such vengeance upon you as to have never been known before.

Oh my gosh!!!

Much love to you and Burnet,
Juniper, Professor of Unova
Nuvema Town, Unova

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Chapter End Notes

So ends the Melemele Arc of Eldritch, I hope you've all had a wonderful time so far, the prelude has concluded and we're really kicking off now.

This chapter, being number 10 and marking my passing of the 50k mark, is numerically pleasing to me. I like numbers that add up. Were I the type to make wild guesses, and believe me I am, I would estimate this is the 1/5th mark of the story. That would make Eldritch in full roughly 50 chapters and 250-300k words total. But that's a wild guess based on nothing but instinct. Things could be vastly different. You don't know. *I* don't know.

But we'll find that out together, won't we?
How have you enjoyed the story? What hints of the plot have you seen, scattered through the chapters? What predictions do you have for what will come next? What are you excited to see? I'm interested to hear your thoughts, your comments as always an incredible source of energy that lets me power on. Rather than a "whenever I feel" timeslot, I'm thinking about staging weekly releases, perhaps at about this time each week. Would you prefer a consistent release schedule - providing I have no trouble maintaining it, or does the lure of "an update at any time" appeal more? That's important information too. Let me know.

Thank you, all of you, so much for reading. As much as I love telling this story, seeing you all receive it is an equal joy to me. If you know someone you think will also appreciate this tale, please consider sharing it to them, and helping my work reach more eyes. Nothing would make me happier. Well, maybe if you did that and commented as well ;)

That's it for this chapter and this arc - the time comes now to move on to the next. I'm excited for it and you should be too. You never know what'll happen next as we follow the one, the only,

the Eldritch.
Entry into the Alolan Pokemon League was predicated upon completion of one's Island Challenge, the besting of the four Kahuna atop Mount Lanakila itself. To this end not one aspect of the Island Challenge would change. Trainers would embark upon their Pokemon Journeys, and those who completed them would secure their entry. It was the same as everywhere else. It was the same as it had always been here.

The Elite Four, the Kahuna of Alola, would be gateway to the League. Those who overcame their trials would be eligible for entry. And, at the end of each cycle, a Pokemon League Tournament would be held. That was how it would be.

Though the Pokemon League's tournament structure differed from region to region, cycle to cycle, one thing remained true: all eyes were drawn to it. From that arose conflicts, different Leagues in different regions struggling to avoid their tournament being distracted from by another. As more and more regions embraced the League model the challenge of scheduling magnified, until the point came where a cross-regional council was required.

The Pokemon League World Association is formed of representatives from every League-holding region, their sole intent to avoid clashes in scheduling that would draw attention from one League to another. For now that is the only role this association plays, but it is believed they will serve as the eventual foundation of the World League itself. That time, however, has not yet come.

For now their only responsibility was in ensuring no region's League imposes upon another's, and that was what Professor Kukui had approached them to do.

Before that time he had met with the Kahuna. Through them proposed the idea to the Tapu, who would tear down anything they did not approve of. With approval construction began upon the League, to be held at the peak of Mount Lanakila, and Kukui had gone to the World Association to plot out a time.

This was the conclusion they had reached.

The next best time given was within a year. That was unacceptable. If construction focused entirely upon a stage perhaps they could make that, maybe even stands, but the full League itself would never be finished.

The next time given was in three.

In three years Kukui knew the momentum behind the new League would not hold. The cultural swing towards it needed to strike while the iron was hot. It was impossible to hold a full League in one. And too late to hold one in three. A creative solution needed.

One he came to.

At the end of this year a Tournament would be held.

It was to be an Exhibition Tournament, a competition with reduced numbers composed of Trainers by invite. The Captains and Kahuna of Alola, of course. Legendary Trainers who had overcome their Island Challenges and gone on to do great things. A few Trainers from other regions, their entry
secured by writ of passage from their Leagues. And those Trainers who had bested their Island Challenges in that time. That was the design he had settled on.

This tournament would capture the hearts of the people and ready them for the full Pokemon League Tournament in three year's time. For the crowning of Alola's Champion.

Knowing that, when giving Moon and Hau their Pokemon, Kukui had been sure they would lead the Tournament to come. He sensed in each great potential, was sure that even with such a demanding timeframe the two had a strong chance to complete their Island Challenges within it. The Exhibition Tournament at year's end would inspire them too. And, at the head of the youth of Alola, they'd lead the way into the Pokemon League and ensure it within the region's culture forever.

Now he knew different.

Where once he saw potential, now he saw impossible ability. Moon of course but Hau, he didn't realise it, but his own pace was beyond exceptional too. The two of them, they might very well make it by the end of the year.

Might stand on the stage with everyone else.

Less than a year remained.

“Hey Moon!”

Crisp dawn air, the light of the sun barely cresting over the horizon and none of its warmth reaching those gathered upon the Hau'oli Marina, cracked under the voice calling out. Reactions were quick – from Professor Kukui immediately and panickingly shushing Hau – to Kahili’s eyes scanning the area for anyone to have reacted to the call – the morning thankfully as quiet as planned – to Lillie staring at the figure approaching.

Wait, really?

It was hard to tell anything about the one who approached.

In opposition to the usual bright colours Moon wore this outfit was muted. The long pants were a dark mono-colour, if not black close enough to look so from a distance. The shirt had a double layer, white trim under sea-blue fabric, mostly hidden by a darker blue jacket worn over it. It had taken just over three weeks for Moon to adapt to wearing light clothing that matched the Alolan weather, and now being up before the heat of the day forced her to dress far warmer.

The larger bag she carried, necessary supplies for her Akala journey stored within, would have to contain lighter wear for when the heat was out.

It was the hat that stood out most, wide-brimmed to match Lillie's own and covering Moon's face, a single orange flower accessory attached to it. When Moon did step aboard the boat the others had gathered upon, preparing to sneak off in the dawn before any attention could be drawn, Lillie gasped at what she saw.

“Oh Moon your hair!”

Moon's hair had changed. No longer tied in the ponytail her mother had once worn as well, now it was split into braids hanging behind her shoulders. Far more notably though, stunning to Lillie at the
sight, was its new colour – as much an inversion from its previous black as Moon's outfit from her preferred vibrant colours. Moon raised her head just so to meet Lillie's eyes, a hand brushing strands of the caramel blonde away from her forehead. Lillie looked away, realising her staring had been rude.

Moon looked down, hat covering her face once more, as she moved on past.

“Okay we're casting off!” Kukui's call was for the group to be ready, the boat he owned now prepared to take the five aboard across the sea to Akala's shore. They'd be docking at Heahea City, meeting the Kahuna there, and continuing on their journeys. Kukui looked at Moon, who had gone to stand near to the stern. He sighed.

That just wasn't right.

The boat's engine hummed to life.

Three days. Three days of the world figuratively exploding around them. Kukui hadn't slept the night of the Grand Trial. He'd been musing on the day, caring for the Pokemon at his lab, and thinking perhaps about turning in when the call from his wife came in. Told him to check the news without delay.

And there it was, clear as day, Moon's name out there with all eyes upon it. Moon of the Alola Region, an eleven-year old girl with six Pokemon – some evolved, one a dragon, who could use two Z-Moves in a battle without showing a single sign of strain. Then the calls started. The emails. The knock on his door at one am in the morning.

It was bedlam.

Kahili lent a hand immediately, forewent her own sleep to fly Moon out of the area, to get her to the other side of Hau'oli where people were far less likely to look. Ilima took Moon in without question, his mansion house easily accommodating her, and proceeded to lie with a straight face to every reporter who'd asked if he'd seen her. Moon? No, not since the night of her Grand Trial. You're being a little bit aggressive though, aren't you? She's only eleven. Have some decorum, please.

It didn't help.

Eleven years old and the entire world wanted to see her. Wanted her to stand on a pedestal so they could ooh and aah at the mysterious Trainer who seemed to possess no limits. Kukui attempted de-escalation. Ilima attempted de-escalation. Kahili and Jewellery gave not a single kind word to those plying them for knowledge and Hala, oh, the Kahuna rampaged his way into the central news network of Alola to decry the treatment of this girl. Show some sensitivity!

But it wouldn't last. Moon was too much, too exciting, for any amount of pleading for sanity to work. There really was only one way she'd be able to face Akala. To continue on her Trials. The Moon the world knew would have to disappear.

Kukui turned and looked back at the girl again, as the waves of Alola's sea lapped at the boat coursing over them. Jewellery had agreed immediately: Moon needed to continue her journey. Because if she didn't, if she were forced to hide in one place because of who she was, it would do damage that couldn't be measured. And Jewellery would never allow that to pass, tear down anyone who tried to hurt her daughter, no matter what. Words couldn't describe how relieved Kukui was to be on the same side.

Still, there was a cost. To travel in any location filled with people Moon must be unrecognisable.
Even Kukui hadn't realised it was her until she boarded, amazed by Hau's perception. He leaned forward, hearing that discussion playing out now. Lillie had approached the young man. Their voices carried back by the wind.

“How did you know that was Moon, Hau? I couldn't recognise her at all.”

“Really? I could tell right away!”

“How?”

“Dunno, I just could.”

Well that sounded about right for someone with instincts as sharp as Hau's. Kukui shook his head.

Kahili, seated within the cabin, caught the motion.

“When you invited me to help prepare Alola for the League, I didn't expect this.”

“Who did?” Kukui's exclamation came with slightly more exasperation than he'd intended. He'd been fielding a lot of people over the last few days. “Moon though, I hope she's alright.” Kahili watched as Hau walked past the windows of the cabin, heading from bow to stern. Considered.

“I think things will work out.”

“Hey Moon!” Moon started from her thoughts, leaning against the back of the boat and watching Melemele Island in the distance behind them, looking to Hau as he addressed her. “Come check out the front!”

No real resistance to having her arm tugged at, Moon allowed Hau to lead her up to the bow, the distant Akala Island growing closer with each passing second. Wind rushed past her face, blowing her hair back and threatening to dislodge her hat, if she didn't raise a hand to keep it in place. Looking to Lillie as she passed her by, Moon noticed she was looking back.

Tentatively, Lillie smiled at her.

“Come on, leave your hat with Lillie and come to the front!” Hau's badgering pushed Moon to remove the covering, Lillie accepting it and motioning for Moon to go forward. For as much as Hau enjoyed the wind racing over him, she preferred being just a little bit back from the water thank you very much.

At the front of the boat the wind was at its fullest, cold air blasting over Moon's face, her eyes widening as it washed over her. Hau grinned, taking another step forward to the very peak of the boat. Moon mirrored him.

“It's the best!” His voice, whipped by the wind, reached Moon and she looked to him, his wide smile at the air and the water and the light of the sun falling around him as untroubled as ever. It was a relaxing sight. “I can't wait til we get to Akala, to see all the new Pokemon and all the new places! That's a super-important part of the Island Challenge, y'know! Seeing all of Alola yourself!”

Moon considered that. She'd seen so much on Melemele already. Quiet winding paths through forest. Bustling city filled with people and Pokemon. Lush rolling grasslands, mossy caverns, mountaintops and tunnels leading down to the most beautiful water she'd ever seen. Totems and Tapu. The people and Pokemon she'd met.

It had been good. It had all been good.
“You excited?” Hau drew her eyes back to him, grinning at her, “Ready to do your next Trials?”

She was. She nodded back. Smiled and looked forward.

She was ready to go on.

It was mid-morning by the time the boat of Professor Kukui made landfall at the docks of Heahea City, capital of Akala Island. With his usual excitement Hau jumped from the boat, declaration of “land ahoy!” hilariously mistimed. Kukui chuckled at it as he and Kahili followed after.

“Oh Nebby!” Lillie failed to stop the Cosmog's escape from her bag, noises of complaint about being cooped up when so much fresh air had been flowing by being made. She stepped off of the boat, attempting to coax the Pokemon floating above her head to settle down.

Moon, oversized hat secured upon her head once more, followed last.

Land ahoy indeed.

“You to find a shirt that suits you, huh Kukui?”

The voice greeting the group prompted Lillie's panic, a much sharper whisper for Nebby to calm down and get back in her bag given off. Kukui rested a hand upon her shoulder. “Don't worry Lillie, she's in the know.” Lillie looked up at Kukui with a glance of concern.

The woman approached with a smile.

She wore pink, the colour of Akala, darker in her short-cut pants and lighter in the halter-top over brown skin similar to Moon's own. Decorations adorned her neck, ankles and one wrist, the other clasped by a Z-Ring. Her dark hair and eyes bore similarity to Moon's own as well – before the disguise Moon had employed at least. Lillie stared at her in silence.

“Good to see you,” she descended the stairs to the dock one step at a time, careful paces as her eyes swept over the group assembled. “I am Olivia, Kahuna of Akala Island. I'd like to welcome you to its shores.”

“And I'm Mallow!” The second voice came from a younger girl, racing down the stairs far faster to dash past Olivia and up to the group. A pink flower set amongst long green hair, she brushed a hand through it, a smile wide on her face. As with most residents of Alola she had arms and legs uncovered in these hotter months, a faint teal pair of shorts and overalls worn over a pink shirt. “One of Akala Island's Captains!”

“So hey!” Bounding forward into the group, Mallow's eyes settled on the quiet Trainer at the back. Up close she could tell. “You're Moon, right?”

“Easy there Mallow.” Kahuna Olivia's voice contained the slightest hint of command, enough for the Captain to leap back with an apology. Olivia shook her head. “We're very pleased to meet you both.” She looked from Hau to Moon, the latter finally looking up to meet her eyes. She'd heard enough from Hala about the last few days. He'd been downright kind in the degree he'd held back upon those interested in Moon.

She would have been far more... enthusiastic... in letting those intruding know just how unwanted they were.
“Yeah!” Mallow nodded excitedly, “I can't wait for you to do my Trial! Both of you! It's going to be awesome!” The energy of the older teen girl enthused Hau, who immediately started attempting to question her about it, though Mallow quickly became quite dodgy about the specifics. No spoilers!

Lillie, a little overwhelmed by the energy of Mallow and the... presence... of Olivia, held Nebby close to her. Olivia studied the Nebula Pokemon. Interesting. Then turned her eyes to Moon, who'd kept quiet so far. The girl was always quiet, she'd been told, but there was a difference between quiet and withdrawn. She was fearful of standing out.

It really set Olivia's nerves aflame.

“Okay!” Clapping her hands shifted some energy, helped her refocus on what mattered. “The two of you little Trial-goers, Moon and Hau, are now tasked to overcome the three Trials of Akala Island. These Trials are elementally themed: Water, Fire, and Grass. The order you can do them in is up to you, but since the two of you have starter Pokemon...”

“I'll do the Fire Trial!” Hau's hand shot up a bare instant before he announced himself, bouncing on his feet, ready to go. Olivia smiled at his energy. Good. She liked that.

“And you?”

Moon was quieter in expressing interest in the Water Trial, her starter Pokemon best suited to it. A Dartrix, an evolved Rowlet, Olivia knew. Beyond ahead of schedule. Perhaps impossibly so. But it would find challenges too.

The Captain at Brooklet Hill wasn't the type to let anyone have it easy.

“Aww,” Mallow kicked at the ground, “that's no fair that no-one wants to do my Trial first.” Olivia smiled at that too. Mallow had been filled with intense excitement about the upcoming Trainers ever since the video went out. She wanted to do her absolute very best for them both. A good Captain. A good person too.

“Well,” Olivia found Mallow staring at her with starry eyes as soon as she began, “Hau and Moon will need introductions to Captain Kiawe and Captain Lana. Why don't you take them to Paniola Town, and then Moon on to Brooklet Hill?”

“Oh yes!” Mallow bounced, nodding rapidly, her pace exhausting. She whirled on the others. “Happy to be working with you,” a quick salute, “I'll show you all the best of the best on the way to Paniola and beyond! The farms there produce some of the tastiest ingredients in Alola! I can make you something amazing!”

Kukui smiled, happy with the arrangement as Hau immediately started cheering at the prospect of good food. That'd help those two get back into their pace.

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“Okay then you two,” drawing their attention back, Kukui flashed them a grin. “How about you spend today checking out Heahea City, and then tomorrow you can head off with Captain Mallow? Sound good?” He needed to get the pair, Moon specifically, to his wife's lab before the day ended anyway. Three more emails since the first contact from Juniper had grown more playfully threatening each time.

He wasn't ready for the playfulness to drop.

“One moment, Kukui.” Olivia stepped forward, voice dropping just a little. Serious time. Kukui looked at her in surprise. Mallow and Kahili moved up to complete the square. A different topic entirely.
“Okay Moon!” Outside the discussion, Hau found his energy peaking. Now that a plan was in mind, he needed to get out and run! He pointed out into the city proper. “Let’s go exploring! We can check out all of Heahea if we go now! Let’s move!” He didn’t even wait for her to respond before dashing off, setting a pace that had to be followed.

Moon spent a moment, looking back at the group, and caught Lillie’s eyes. She was hovering closer to the others, intending to go with Kukui to visit Professor Burnet. But she also waved to Moon.

“Go ahead,” she called as those behind her spoke, “we’ll catch up!”

Moon spent a moment more before turning and dashing after Hau. Out into the city.

Back to the other conversation.

“I received word from Captain Mina,” Olivia spoke with a voice so grave Kukui felt his heart sink. Oh. He knew what that must mean. “Kahuna Koa's health has turned. His family and Tapu Fini are on vigil. They're saying he doesn't have long left.”

“I see.” Kukui spoke with a tone few rarely heard, lost of all his natural enthusiasm. Though Kahuna Koa's health had been in decline for some few years now, he'd been as jovial as ever in talks, and given the impression of still going fine even when Kukui had last spoken to him. He'd known the Kahuna for as long as he could remember. Looked up to him. He breathed out a sigh.

“That’s part of why I came to meet you,” Olivia shook her head, “I want to borrow your boat. We should head to Poni Island and see him. Kahuna Hala and Nanu are heading there too.”

“Right,” Kukui nodded, agreeing without question, “yeah, we'll head off. Kahili, can you—” and only now did Kukui see that beyond the group of four was only Lillie, whispering thanks and reassurances to Nebby in her bag that she'd let them out again as soon as she could. A muffled 'pew' answered back.

“Uh, where are Hau and Moon?”

“They went to explore,” Lillie answered simply, Kukui's slight frown dislodged from his face with a shake of his head. He nodded again.

“Okay then, Kahili, can you take Lillie to the Dimensional Research Lab to see my wife? I'll be back as soon as I can.”

“Of course,” Kahili moved over to Lillie, “Please give Kahuna Koa my regards. And...” for a moment Kahili stumbled on the words. Faced away from the others so that she could say it. “My farewell.”

“...right.”

The sight of the boat departing the docks once more drew from Kahili a sigh. Lillie looked up to her.

“I wonder,” Lillie's words were paced, deep with thought as she spoke, “how Kahuna Koa's family are doing. Losing a family member can be...” a long pause, “damaging.”

Kahili looked at Lillie. Heard enough to make a well educated guess. It wasn't like she knew but... some things were obvious just hearing them. She shook her head. “In Alola we all work together to hold one another up. Share joy and suffering both. No matter how hard it is, we will always have others who are there for us. That's what it means to be a part of Alola. They will make it through.”
Lillie looked back to the boat in the distance. Being a part of Alola, huh.

Three groups went in three separate directions from the docks of Heahea.

Upon his boat Professor Kukui headed west, Kahuna Olivia with him on their way to Poni Island. Their discussion wavered, from the situation with Kahuna Koa, to the work Kukui had done so far with the League, to the two young Trainers that had alighted upon the shores of Akala that morning. So many things to be aware of and to face. Olivia commiserated Kukui’s exhaustion. He really was giving it everything he had. He appreciated her understanding just how much it was to handle.

It really was almost too much for any one man.

Heading east across Heahea City, Kahili led Lillie, Captain Mallow walking with them and plying the older legendary trainer with questions. Yet word of trouble within the city, the presence of Team Skull more active today than those few past, drew Mallow away, requiring her to see to her duty and chase the local boneheads out. Left to their lonesome, Kahili and Lillie continued on to the Dimensional Research Lab and the awaiting Professor Burnet. It would be good to see her once more.

Dashing through the city every which way to hear every rumour, sample every food, see every store and person and Pokemon, Hau led Moon on a whirlwind tour. His laughs brought smiles. His indication of things of interest turned Moon's eyes to them. His energy kept her focused. And the two raced on.

An hour passed by before they slowed, dropping their wandering to get food instead. Hau's natural instinct for wherever malasada could be found came in handy, the two each acquiring some. Enjoying it. Slight whispers, identification of Hau at least, lurked about the periphery, but the two children found themselves unapproached for the moment. Other whispers in the town coming to ear instead.

“Did you hear Team Skull has been seen in the north of the town?”

“Ugh, yes. They've been skulking around Heahea City for too long as it is, but now to be so brazen?”

“I was hoping the Kahuna would chase them out but I haven't seen her today.”

“Captain Mallow has been helping but there's simple so many of the thugs!”

“Is there really no-one else who can help?”

“No-one at all?”

Hau, finishing his malasada, gave Moon a grin.

“Hey Moon,” she looked at him with curiosity, following the slight tilt of his head to the roads leading north, “Why don't we go check that out? If we find Team Skull we can show 'em who's boss, ya?”

Moon considered for a moment. The words 'dumb hat' floated through her head alongside the remembrance that her most visible trademark was not on her person, as flashy and obvious as the Rotom-dex sequestered within her bag. She nodded at Hau with a look most intent.
It would be good to bust some skulls.

Heahea City was different from Hau'oli, built not nearly as tall, nor as wide. But the roads stretched long, and the population along them was dense. Racing ahead Hau briefly lost Moon, who wandered at a slightly slower pace. It was good to see who was about. Ride Pokemon on the roads. Stalls selling all manner of product. People in discussion. And no-one looking at her at all.

She continued on.

“Oh, excuse me! Please consider helping development of a new region in the Alola Islands? Please excuse me! Could I talk to you about the Poke Pelago? Can I- nevermind.”

A voice calling for attention drew Moon's eyes to a stall, a hastily assembled structure of wooden boards with 'Poke Pelago Island Development' written across it. Standing behind the stall was a man in a white shirt and wide straw hat, heavily built body toned from field work. The hair peeking out from beneath his hat was light blonde, and reminded Moon of Lillie. She approached him.

“Oh, hello young lady.” His voice was despondent, tired after hours of being ignored by all passing him by. “I don't suppose you'd like to hear about the Poke Pelago?”

Moon’s nod restored life to his eyes in an instant. He straightened up and launched into his pitch.

“The Poke Pelago is a series of small islands to the north-east of Akala,” he gestured as he spoke, enthusiasm in his voice, “and a future haven for Pokemon! I'm working to develop it into the ultimate place of rest for Pokemon, and am seeking people willing to lend their Pokemon to the effort! Just one Pokemon would make a world of difference and, well,” his speech teetered off, the man slumping back down upon his stand, “I guess asking you wouldn't really help, would it? I mean, you'd only have one Pokemon.”

Moon shook her head. The man looked at her and was surprised by the intensity she looked back with. Really?

“Oh, do you mean that? You'd be willing to let me borrow a Pokemon to help develop the islands? Should I... speak to your parents? I, uhm, oh forgive my manners I didn't even introduce myself. My name is Mohn, it's a pleasure to meet you!”

Moon considered a moment before giving her name. Made sure no-one was listening in. She watched the eyes of the man widen for a second. Then focus.

“I see.”

There was a moment of silence between the pair, Moon waiting for his reaction, Mohn considering. Then he shuffled with a pocket and withdrew an item. It might just be worth a shot.

“This is a Ride Pager,” he held it out to Moon, who took and examined the small machine in curiosity. It was white, with a golden symbol embossed upon it – a stylised trident by appearance. Moon considered it. Mohn explained. “It's used to summon a Ride Pokemon – a Charizard, specifically. Unlike regular Ride Pokemon, that Charizard will only fly you between your current location and the Poke Pelago, but it will always take you back as well. You can use it to come and go whenever you want.”

A personal Ride Pokemon? Moon looked at Mohn to make sure he was sure. He nodded.

“I owe you this much for believing in me. I can find my own way back to the Poke Pelago by boat, come by in a few hours and I'll show you the place – you can decide if you want to help me then!”
Moon nodded. Placed the Ride Pager within her bag. Mohn smiled. “I'm really dedicated to this, to creating a place Pokemon can be free and safe. I can't wait for you to see it! And to make my dream come true!”

She would. Taking her leave, Moon considered. Maybe. Just maybe...

“Oh Moon!” A voice she knew drew Moon's attention, Lillie appearing behind her. She smiled to her and Lillie smiled back. The interaction relieved each. Without thinking Moon ran a hand through her now blonde-brown hair. Lillie didn't miss seeing it. “I'm sorry.” Moon's attempts to refute her apology failing, Lillie insisted upon giving it. “You've... been through a lot, haven't you?” Another moment of seeing in Moon's body language something the girl never said with words. Lillie shook her head and indicated the way. “Shall we?”

Making her own way forward, Lillie took the lead, Moon following after. She turned, just once, to see the stall Mohn had been in empty now, the man having taken off for the docks as fast as he could. She'd follow up on that later.

It might just be everything.

“I was...” Lillie spoke as they walked, looking down the road at the building towering in the distance, “heading to the Tide Song Hotel. There's someone I wanted to meet there... someone very important to me.” When Moon looked at her in interest, Lillie shook her head. Refocused. “But I wanted to tell you!” She looked back at Moon, “about Tapu Lele.”

A distant crack of thunder in Moon's memories surfaced. She tilted her head.

“Tapu Lele is the guardian deity of Akala Island, just like Tapu Koko is of Melemele,” Lillie continued, running a hand over the bag she carried to calm Nebby within. “It's said to live in the Ruins of Life, to the south of the island. I can't go there on my own but... I hope to visit when Professor Kukui and Ms. Kahili make their way down there. To help Nebby get home I need to learn more about those Ruins. That's what Nebby told me.”

Moon smiled at that. Lillie didn't realise why.

“And if... if you happen to make it there as well,” Lillie glanced away, fidgeting with the strap of her bag, “I'd like it if you could come with me too. Please.”

Moon waited for Lillie to look back at her before nodding with a smile. She would. Lillie smiled back.

The two continued on.

Ahead at the Tide Song Hotel they broke apart, Moon hearing rumours about a battle with Team Skull reminding her she'd lost Hau, Lillie seeming uneasy at the mention of the group. She insisted she'd be fine to meet up with the person she was waiting for here, then come find Moon and Hau after. Moon nodded to her and headed off.

To the edge of Heahea City where a Pokemon battle was just concluding.

“Hmph,” the victor closed his Pokeball, the one green eye visible beneath his crop of blonde hair narrowed at Hau, “and here I thought you might actually give me a fight.”

“Seriously!” Hau remained jovial, “You're super-strong! Why're you with Team Skull? You should be doing your Island Challenge like us!”
“Don't act like you understand me,” the voice of the boy was derisive, as cutting as the red slash stitched into his jacket. “I don't intend on taking advice from Trainers who aren't even trying to win. What were you even doing?”

“Just having a good time?” Hau shrugged, “When you're battling you've gotta enjoy yourself! Otherwise what's the point?”

“That's pointless,” the blonde shook his head, “all that matters is growing strong. Wasting your time not even trying... I have no interest in it.”

Moon's approaching footsteps drew attention. The blonde boy looked up at her, eye-contact between them filling Moon with a third wave of deja-vu. She wondered why. Then Hau turned to see her.

“Oh hey Moon!” He waved without a care, “Come check this Trainer out! I saw him ordering Team Skull around and then we had a battle – he's seriously strong! Like seriously!”

The boy's eye narrowed further.

“Moon...” he said her name just so to show he clearly knew what it meant, “so you're the one.” Coming to a stop, Moon stared him down, posture cold. He smiled and there was no warmth in it either. “My name is Gladion. Battle me and my partner. You, at least, should help us grow.”

Hau jumped back. “Get 'em Moon!” She nodded.

Withdrew a Pokeball as Gladion raised his own.

At the edge of Heahea City, especially with the rumour of Team Skull's presence, the number of people was significantly reduced. Still some did lurk at the edges, and perked up seeing a second Pokemon battle begin. The last one had been exciting. This one would be too.

Moon chose her Meowth, back with her after her Grand Trial's conclusion. Pokemon that she hadn't used in her Grand Trial were best now, making it harder still to identify her. Dartrix and Bagon remained with her but she'd avoid using them as best she could.

She desired no attention at all.

“I hope you're ready.” Gladion clutched his wrist, steadying his shakiness before unleashing the Pokeball. It opened to release the Pokemon within.

It stood taller than Gladion, taller than Moon, honestly taller than most anyone she'd seen. It was strange, a fin-tail but four clawed feet, a mane and crest of grey locked down by bronze metal. Silver eyes stared out from slits in the construct wrapping its head. Gladion gave the order, tightening the muscles in his leg to keep the shaking from growing. It was time to fight.

“Null, go forward!”

Moon gave an order, a command for her Meowth to dodge, moments before the Pokemon Null with speed far more than its size implied slammed into and sent the Scratch Cat flying. Its landing was hard, the Pokemon slowly returning to its feet, before Null rammed it again. It didn't stand a second time, Moon called it back.

“Really?” Gladion huffed the word, chest heaving. “That's the best you've got? You? What are you doing?”

Moon stayed silent and unleashed her second choice.
“Null go!”

A heavy thud was the helmeted Pokemon's head meeting that of a Pokemon smaller but no less determined – Furfrou, the poodle Pokemon, pushing back against its attacker. Gladion smiled at this, a muscle in his face twinging when he did. Ugh. Still not enough.

Moon gave sharp orders, Hau watching the battle and considering how different she sounded within it. The Furfrou’s natural resilience let it fight, and it beat back Null, before the larger Pokemon pushed it down again. The difference in strength was still far too much.

Moon pushed the Normalium-Z into her Z-Ring and performed its pose.

“Null! Crush it!”

As the Z-Aura transferred from Moon to the Furfrou, the Pokemon's fur shining blindly white, Null tensed and flexed, its forepaws expanding in size as power flowed through it. Breakneck Blitz, a tackle filled with Z-Power, surged towards Null and struck it head on, the Pokemon making no move to dodge.

Every move to counter.

When the Z-Aura faded away, light disappearing into nothingness, Moon stared, her Pokemon pinned under the claw of the one opposing. Null roared, the noise muted within its sealing helmet, the metal rattling as it shook its head from side to side. Gladion was breathing heavily.

“Z-Moves,” he pushed out the word with scorn, “can't compare to Null. Don't think using one means you've won anything. Now why don't you really show me what you're worth.”

Moon called back Furfrou. Unleashed her third.

Gladion's preparation to attack the Inkay, which wouldn't be able to dodge Null's speed, came to naught as it did just that, stunning him just long enough for the illusion-clad Zorua to score a dark-infused blow to Null's side. The immediate reaction of the far-stronger Pokemon, flexing its muscular frame and blowing Zorua back, dispelled the illusion and allowed Gladion to understand. So that was it.

“If you're just going to play tricks,” ignoring Hau's 'hey are you okay' through gritted teeth, Gladion swept an arm through the air, “you won't do a thing.” Null lunged again, this time prepared for superior speed. Zorua dodged, was pursued, and a heavy head slammed down upon it. Moon quickly called it back. Gladion showed teeth. “You're not doing nearly well enough.”

Dartrix emerged from a jet of red light.

Hau, watching the battle, heard the voices around them now identify the Pokemon. Glanced at Moon in concern. She wasn't paying attention. Was focused only on the fight. Gladion was swaying, knee momentarily bowing before he shook his head and straightened back up, giving another order to Null. But the gaps between his response time were growing wider, and Moon's orders to her Pokemon remained as sharp as ever. The speed of Dartrix wasn't something the larger Pokemon could keep pace with. Time and time again it failed to land attacks and each time Moon made sure Dartrix landed its.

Gladion, vision wavering, clamped his eyes and grit his teeth as he raised the Pokeball he held. So this was as far as he could go.

The end of the battle was anticlimactic. With Null called back Gladion forfeited, breathing heavily
and staring through narrowed eyes. Moon stared him down.

“I may...” he panted, exhaustion at maintaining the incredibly powerful Pokemon clear, “have lost here, but that's only because... I wasn't strong enough. We'll fight again. And I'll beat you.” When he took a step back he nearly tripped and fell. Hau raced to him.

“Hey, come on,” the picture of concern, Hau held out a hand, “do you need help? Let us-”

“I don't-” Gladion wrenched his arm away from Hau, nearly falling again as he stumbled to the edge of the city, “need help from you. Someone who doesn't even bother trying to use their full power, who just takes it easy and accepts being weak. Who doesn't even care. You're pathetic. Compared to her.”

Hau fell silent. Gladion struggled on.

“Hmph. And here I was... supposed to meet someone... ha... she'll be upset at me... for this...”

Left alone Gladion made his way to the city's edge, disappearing into the tree-lined path beyond. Hau watched him go.

Moon turned her head to see the crowd of people gathered nearby.

“'scuse me! 'scuse me! Make way make way!”

“Beautiful lady coming through!”

The crowd, beginning to approach what they were sure now was the mysterious Trainer Moon, were quickly broken apart as two voices and their owners shoved their way through, two figures stumbling out in front. Immediately they swung back on the group. Hands to hips.

“Hi there, you know it's rude to stare, right?”

“Yep!” The black-haired woman agreed with the man, raising a hand to lower the sunglasses over her face just a little. “If you want to meet a Pokemon Trainer, we'll be happy to give you all a battle.”

“I'm all ready to go now that I'm off that plane!” The man raised an ultra-ball, giving it a little shake. “Who wants some?”

Quickly breaking apart, the crowd scattered away from the rowdy trainers. Moon watched as each extended a fist to the other and tapped them together. Before they rounded on her.

“Ah ha ha!” The man lifted a sun-hat to reveal a crop of brown hair, flipping off his sunglasses and slotting them into his yellow Alolan Exeggutor-print shirt. “We didn't meant to surprise you so sorry about that. The name's Dexio!”

“And I'm Sina! A beautiful name for a beautiful lady!” The woman wore a shirt similar to Moon's, though it was white over black compared to her blue over white. Moon blinked, staring at their wrists. Z-Rings? No...

“And we are-”

“We are-”

Each struck a pose.

“On vacation!”
Silence reigned. Hau walked up beside Moon to stare as well. The two held their pose just a little bit longer.

Then straightened back up.

“Ahem,” Dexio coughed, “actually we're Pokemon researchers! We work with Professor Sycamore in the Kalos Region.”

“We're here in Alola learning about its culture and Z-Moves,” Sina nodded, “and it'd be great to talk to some trainers doing their Island Challenge.”

“I honestly I'd love to battle you,” Dexio spun the ultra-ball he'd shown before on a finger, “but after the fight you just had I think you'd probably rather get some rest.”

“You saw that?” Hau's question was met with a nod. Sina smiled at him.

“You did well!” She clapped her hands together, “Way better than I would have at your age.”

“You're both skilled young Trainers!” Dexio nodded, “I can tell. You know how strong Trainers can recognise each other? I can definitely see you're both full of potential! You should be proud.”

The double-punch of compliments helped Hau perk back up a bit. He smiled. “You hear that Moon?” He nudged her with an arm, “We're really cool!”

“Moon,” when Dexio said her name, Moon's eyes shot to him, hearing recognition in the tone. She took a step backwards.

“Ah wait wait wait!” Sina held up her hands, taking steps forward at the same pace Moon took them backwards, “We're not weird or anything! But we did want to talk to you! It's important, please hear us out!”

Hau stepped back to stand by Moon, who stopped once he was by her. Sina lowered her hands. Dexio stepped forward.

“See in the Kalos Region,” Dexio held up his arm, showing the ring around his wrist to the pair. There was a small jewel affixed within it, “we have this thing called Mega Evolution. Have you heard of it?”

Moon nodded and Hau shook his head. Dexio grinned.

“So Mega Evolution is kind of like a Z-Move, but instead of your Pokemon doing a powerful attack instead it turns into a muuuuu,” spreading his arms out as he held the word, Dexio smiled as Sina joined him, holding out her arms as well, “-uuuch stronger Pokemon! For a little while, at least.”

Hau's eyes lit up with excitement. “That's so cool! How does it work?”

“Well,” Sina held out her arm, allowing Hau and Moon to inspect the ring up close, “You have to have a Key Stone to help Pokemon Mega Evolve, and then your Pokemon has to hold the right Mega Stone too.”

Hau tilted his head. “Mega Stone?”

“That's right!” Dexio nodded, “You need the right Mega Stone to make the right Pokemon Mega Evolve. Not every Pokemon has a Mega Evolution, but more Mega Stones are being found all the time, so maybe one you have now will be able to Mega Evolve one day!”
Hau nodded with excitement. That was so cool.

“So we've been studying Mega Evolution, and how it interplays with Z-Moves!” Sina's words drew both Moon and Hau's eyes to her, each's interest now well and truly piqued. She smiled at the sight. Such curious children. How wonderful.

“And that includes working with Ms. Kahili Hano herself!” Dexio grinned, the two young ones' heads swinging back to look at him instead. They were enthralled now. Good. “She helped us test Mega Evolution and Z-Moves, and it helped us understand a lot more about them. She really did us a huge favour by lending a hand.”

Curiosity now driving him, Hau had to know. “What happened?”

“So here's the thing!” Sina announced the results, performing a Z-Pose neither Moon nor Hau recognised. “When you do a Z-Move, it puts as much power into your Pokemon as it can, leaving you all tired out and bleary, bleh.”

“And the same with Mega Evolution,” Dexio continued, the two pinging from one to the other. “It takes a huge amount of power from the Trainer, and so you can't do it twice without rest. It's just too exhausting to keep up beyond that.”

“The best Trainers can reduce the amount of time between their Z-Moves and their Mega Evolutions, but there's still a limit that we know of.” Sina. “Which is part of why a Z-Move performed by a Mega Evolved Pokemon has never been seen! Even Ms. Kahili wasn't able to – she raised a Pidgeot in the Kalos Region, and learned to Mega Evolve it, but couldn't perform a Z-Move while it was in that state. It's the same as when you try to do two Z-Moves, or two Mega Evolutions, you just fizzle out! Poof!” She waved her hands indicating the cloud of exhaustion that came off of Trainers run dry by the powers they could provide.

“But we still got to test a lot with her, about the energy Mega Evolution and Z-Moves create. They're different, but similar, and maybe incompatible? But we just don't know. Cause trying to do them together is the same as trying to do either of them twice.”

Dexio’s pointed look at Moon after saying that did not go unseen. Hau caught it as well, glancing at the girl by his side. “Uhh...”

“A gift!” Fumbling with his bag, Dexio failed to find what he was looking for before Sina stuck her hand into it and pulled out a pendant with a small rainbow orb affixed within it. Offered it to Moon instead.

“This is a Key Stone!” Holding it out to Moon, Sina jiggled the chain a little until the young Trainer warily reached up and took hold of it. Dexio held out a larger stone.

“And this is a Salamencite, a Mega Stone for Salamence!” Hau was looking from Dexio to Moon, unsure as to the gifts being given so freely. Moon stared at the orb. There was a feeling to it, like it was sparking. Kind of but not quite like a Z-Crystal. She held out a hand. The orb felt heavy within it. Her fingers closed around it.

“Alright!” Dexio clapped, “now you're a Trainer who can Mega Evolve! Once you have a Salamence, just give it that Salamencite and wish with all your heart through your Key Stone. You and your Pokemon working together, wishing together, that's how you'll become even stronger!”

“And Hau!” Sina didn't make any mention of how she already knew Hau's name, “if you get a Pokemon that can Mega Evolve, we'll give you a Stone too. We're going to be here for the Pokemon
League, so you've got plenty of time. Hey you might even battle us there!"

“Oh cool!” Distracted from his thoughts Hau nodded, excited at the thought of his own Mega Evolution. “Okay I'll let you know! Uh, if I find a Pokemon that can Mega Evolve? How do I know that?”

“Just check in with us next time you see us, we'll be around.” Dexio gave a pose ending in an elaborate thumbs up. Sina positioned herself to fit into it and put up her own next to his.

“Oh okay,” Dexio nodded, “it was nice meeting the two of you. Good luck on your Island Challenges!” Hau nodded and waved. Moon gave one less enthusiastic, still kind of thrown out by the two Trainers who had approached her and given such gifts unprompted. Dexio and Sina took off. Contact made.

But even still.

“Hey,” Dexio shifted an arm, nudged his elbow against Sina as they walked, “pretty crazy huh?”

“Yeah,” Sina nodded back, rubbing the arm for show more than Dexio having done anything. “Just looking at her feels like running into a brick wall. Anyone practised enough to have the sense is gonna know who she is the moment they see her.”

Dexio chuckled, continuing to roll the ultra-ball between his hands. “And you say that without having a single Psychic-type on you. Because apparently biases are for chumps.”

“I like Ice-types,” Sina stuck her tongue out at her partner. “And you are a chump.”

“Guilty as charged.”

Technically, she hadn't lost three children in Heahea City's limits. That was what Kahili Hano reminded herself of as she entered the Pokemon Center on the north side of the city, hoping to find even one of the trio. She'd accepted Hau and Moon had gone exploring. She'd had Lillie with her when visiting Professor Burnet and both Kahili and Burnet had agreed it was fine for Lillie to head to the Tide Song Hotel.

The fact Kahili had enacted no follow-up plans whatsoever to find the three didn't mean she'd lost them, per se.

She just felt like she had.

“Oh hey! Ms. Kahili!” The voice of Hau served as relief, Kahili spotting him and then Lillie with him a moment later. If the two hadn't met up by coincidence exploring the city, likely one had stopped in at this Pokemon Center to find the other already there. She approached them hoping to see one more lurking nearby.

No such luck.

“How have you two been today? And have you seen...” she paused for a second, considering the busyness of the Pokemon Center. Some eyes were on her now. She was notable, after all. “Your third?”

“She went out,” Hau shrugged, “I think she wanted to find somewhere a little quieter.”
Hmm. Moon wasn't the type who'd be in any danger wandering on her own, especially not with the Pokemon she had, but Kahili still couldn't help but entertain some doubts. Hopefully it wouldn't be long before she returned.

“So hey!” Hau's voice broke through her thoughts, drawing Kahili's eyes back to him. Lillie, sitting at the same table, had her bag across her lap and was running a hand over it. Hau grinned. “Can you tell us about your Mega Pidgeot?”

A moment of surprise before Kahili felt herself smile. Well... she pulled out a chair and sat down.

“You've done your research,” memories of her time in Kalos, the path that led her to take part in its League, floated up from within her head. It had been good. “She's not with me now though I'm afraid.” A moment of concern on Hau's face and horror on Lillie's made Kahili realise just how poorly she'd phrased that. She quickly waved her hands. “No no, not like that-” the two calmed, “just that I left her with a friend I made in Kalos. Something of a promise to the both of them, that I'd come back no matter what.”

Lillie's look of intense focus upon the legendary Trainer she'd grown up following the exploits of showed she simply had to hear more. Kahili smiled.

“I guess I'll tell you about her.”

Wind whipped across Moon's face as the Charizard she rode atop the back of flew through the orange afternoon skies of Alola. As soon as she was beyond the city's limits, wishing to avoid attention in the act she was undertaking, she'd used the Ride Pager, released the Flame Pokemon in much the same way she would from a Pokeball. Once boarded, it took off into the sky.

Soaring out over Akala, winding her way past the massive volcano towering up from its centre, Moon made her way to the north-east, across the land and then out over the ocean. It took time, the Charizard following a straight line to its destination, but soon enough a small set of islands nestled amongst the waves resolved into shape.

Until the Poke Pelago came into view.

Mohn, having arrived back by boat slightly earlier, jumped in surprise at the roar of the Charizard. Was she really... yes she was! He waved enthusiastically to Moon as the Ride Pokemon came in for a landing, the young girl almost tumbling off of it. Mohn smiled at her. She seemed slightly harried. But she was here! How wonderful!

“Welcome to the Poke Pelago!” Mohn spread his arms wide, indicating for Moon to look around. She considered it. Flat land for the most part. Dense growing vegetables. A giant tree-like vine growing out overhead. The place was rather... “It's a bit rough, I'll admit.”

Mohn, despite lost memories he wasn't worrying about, had retained quite a significant degree of his abilities. The solar panel and network array he'd set up allowed the PC he'd found to function, connecting him to the Pokemon Storage System, but the real crowning jewel of the setup was the hack he'd installed upon it.

By tradition, once keyed to a Pokemon Trainer's registration, the Pokemon Storage System automatically stored Pokemon beyond a Trainer's sixth. It was for safety reasons, as having more than six Pokemon caused any Trainer to quickly lose control of them, their Trainer's Bonds decaying under the stress of managing that number. It still wasn't understood why six was the hard limit. But it
was. And the system had been built to handle that.

Mohn had disabled that check entirely.

“So in the Poke Pelago,” he instructed Moon, showing her the computer, “you can leave Pokemon you've caught to help out. Once you're far enough away the Trainer's Bonds between people and Pokemon fade, so if you leave one Pokemon here you can go back to Alola proper and then withdraw another from your account!”

Mohn smiled, pleased with the setup he'd created. “This way, many people can contribute to the development of the Poke Pelago, each of them leaving a Pokemon or two while not affecting their team. I know it seems like a huge task, especially with not many people having shown interest yet, but I'm sure that with time I'll be able to get plenty of Trainers' attention! Then with everyone's Pokemon working together, the Poke Pelago will become-”

Mohn's spiel fell on deaf ears, Moon's attention focused on the PC. One by one she had selected each Pokemon she had caught, activating their retrieval. One by one each Pokeball opened, the Pokemon within free to stretch and stand before their Trainer. It took only a few minutes to empty her account entirely. To be surrounded by Pokemon caught by her.

Pokemon bound to her.

Mohn had not a shred of the necessary experience, at least not remembered, to be able to sense a Trainer's Bonds. Looking at Moon, she looked like just an ordinary girl to him. But the sight of her surrounded by some dozen-odd Pokemon, each of them looking at her like she was the world and she showing only happiness in their presence, that sight still reached him.

Well... maybe he wouldn’t need to ask anyone else for help with the Poke Pelago after all.

Moon spent the remainder of the day here. Night falling in Heahea did not see her return, and unaware of the stress she was creating Moon continued happily on. Helped her Pokemon work with Mohn, get used to following his directions, and begin development of the island. Though Mohn offered her his house, the shack he’d constructed as a place one could sleep the night, she didn't need it. Her Pokemon all curled around her when it was time and Moon slept soundly amongst them. Safe and at peace.

The auto-release timer, forcing her to juggle her Pokemon, weighed no more. They had a place. And while it was fully believed all Trainer's Bonds would decay with distance, no understanding or belief applied to her. She'd leave that morning and they'd remain bound to her.

Every Pokemon left here would.

So yes, this was perfect indeed.

There was nothing left to hold her back.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so this chapter was sliiiightly bigger than the average. I'm fairly confident this is just because there was simply so much to get through to establish the beginning of the Akala Island Arc. The Arcala, if you would.
We're seeing differences now. In the game canon, Hapu's grandfather passed away a few years before the Sun/Moon story began. That's changed now. Gladion usually shows up outside Brooklet Hill, but given Moon and Hau will be heading in different directions come Paniola Town, he arrived a little early. His team's much smaller too. Supporting one super-powered Pokemon at his age is no easy feat, after all.

We'll learn more about Dexio and Sina with time - I went into this chapter believing they each had Psychic-type preferences, only to discover later on that it was only Dexio and Sina used ice types. But Sina having a Psychic-bias has important value to me, so as author I expressed my explicit power to do whatever I want. It's a dangerous ability, but used wisely can make things far better. Trust in me.

Similarly, I only learned recently that you can perform both a Z-Move and a Mega Evolution in the same battle, just of course not with the same Pokemon. That genuinely surprised me - I was sure you could only do one of those two combined. But for the purposes of my canon that's not a thing. Author's privilege. Trust.

Finally the Poke Pelago. I've been feeling the weight of the auto-release system as much as Moon has, and while it is essential to prevent the cruel act of indefinitely maintaining Pokemon in suspension, it was still getting on my nerves. Glad to have that off my shoulders. Now there's nothing left to hold me back. Me or Moon. We're going places now.

Everyone's reception to chapter ten was vastly enjoyed by me, I'm as thankful as ever for every last comment you send my way. Please be assured, I have no intention of stopping any time soon, I'm loving telling this story way too much to do that. Look forward to more chapters, and more content, as regular as I can make it.

We still have oh so very much to do.
Alola in Mourning: Kahuna Koa Passes On Amongst Family And Friends

Surrounded by loved ones, Kahuna Koa of Poni Island was confirmed to have experienced a peaceful departure late in the previous evening, leaving behind a legacy of almost ten decades as one of Alola's longest-serving Kahuna.

Alongside his family were Alola's other Kahuna, as well as Tapu Fini, Guardian Deity of Poni, with whom Koa had shared duty of care for the Wild Garden of Alola. Though solemn in seeing the eldest Kahuna of Alola off, each of those spoken to spoke clearly of Kahuna Koa's well-lived life, and the many lives he has touched over the years. Tapu Fini departed shortly after the Kahuna's passing.

Kahuna Koa's near-century of service has overseen countless changes in the Alola Region, and he has remained at the forefront of all of those he was witness to, assisting the Region in all things. Considered a parental figure by generations of Trainers who he had taught in the Poni Wilds, a friend and mentor by the other Kahuna, and a reliable figure by all of Alola, his passing will touch the hearts of the entire Region.

A staunch advocate for the growth of people and Pokemon together, Kahuna Koa's efforts in maintaining vast stretches of nature are considered fundamental to the current shape of the Region, and as such his effects can be seen across Alola, ensuring such key locations as – (continued on page 2)

To Follow In His Footsteps

Although Kahuna Koa's health has been in decline over the past few years, with other Kahuna lending frequent hands in managing Poni Island, as well as the Island Challenge upon it, Kahuna Koa had remained active and engaged as best he could, with his rapid decline in recent days coming as a total surprise.

His passing comes at a critical time for Alola, with the planned Pokemon League's structure still heavily under debate. Kahuna Koa had insisted upon enacting changes to the Island Challenge to better make available Alola to all Trainers, which had clashed with other factions of the Region arguing for the preservation of the current system.

The Kahuna to follow is expected to be a key voice in this debate, which is reaching a breaking point as the construction of the League itself continues.
The primary candidate for the next Kahuna, who will be approached and chosen by Tapu Fini, is Poni Island's Captain Mina, whose unique relationship with the Tapu – (continued on page 6)

**Trainers Gather in Alola**

Construction of the Alolan Pokemon League has continued to draw world-wide attention, interest in Alolan Trainers maintained by travelling representatives of the Region.

Kahili Hano, recently returned from placing in the Kalos Pokemon League semifinals, has been an active participant of the League Structure debate, insisting alongside Alola's Professor Kukui that the Pokemon League, and a system of entry for it, should be available on a global level.

While this debate continues, more and more notable Trainers from other Regions have been seen, many previous League competitors. The initial Pokemon League, to be held as an Exhibition Tournament prior to the planned completion date of construction, is expected to play host to a number of these visiting Trainers, with the remainder made of Alola's Captains, Kahuna, and key Trainers including Ms. Kahili Hano herself.

Among sightings of these visiting trainers, reports of the rumoured Pokemon Trainer Moon – (continued on page 9)

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The early morning light of Alola embraced Moon, its warmth upon her shoulders as the Charizard she rode circled over the north of Akala Island's Heahea City. She had woken with the dawn, the sun's first rays cast across the ocean and over the Poke Pelago, and smiled. Been surrounded by Pokemon she still felt a connection to. Good. This was good.

No holding back.

With a promise to return as soon as she could, advice for each Pokemon left behind to do their best to help Mohn's work, Moon took her leave, the Ride Pokemon stored in the Pager she had been given returning her to the Island she had left behind. Just as Mohn had said the Charizard aimed for precisely where Moon had left, a clearing just beyond Heahea's north-east exit, and soon enough Moon's feet were upon Akala's soil once more.

Back to it.

The plan was to leave the city with Hau, Captain Mallow escorting them to the sites of their next Trials. Unsure as to where either Hau or the Captain could be, Moon made her way to the northern-most Pokemon Center of Heahea. When someone was lost, the fastest way to find them was to go to the nearest Pokemon Center. That was a lesson taught across every region in the world.

Moon entered the Center's doors and it took all of Kahili's strength not to yell her name loud enough to shake the building. Instead she clutched the table she, Hau, Lillie, and Captain Mallow were sitting at, grip so tight the skin of her hands turned ghostly pale. Hau waved to Moon, while Lillie looked crossed between horrified and relieved. Captain Mallow frowned.

Moon joined them. Other Trainers in the Center who recognised Kahili, Mallow, and a smaller number Hau, considered putting two and two together before an intense gaze from Kahili, attempting to calm her emotions by venting eye-daggers at anyone who looked at her funny, turned them away.

Best leave sleeping Spearow lie.
“We missed you.” Kahili’s words were iron beaten into shape by sheer terror at Moon’s disappearance morphing into frustration at her blasé return. “A warning about your leaving last night would have been appreciated.”

“Hey where’d you go?” Hau's relaxed tone was the only one at the table, Kahili still attempting to recover from planning out the sweep of Heahea and beyond she’d have to execute to find Moon now that the sun was up. “You kinda disappeared in the afternoon.”

Realisation that her actions had caused great stress for the others surprised Moon, remembering only now she had told no-one of her departure the day before. A part of her rationalised that her intended plan, to take a Ride Pokemon given to her by a stranger to an island in the middle of the ocean on a chance whim that it might have been the key to solving her Pokemon overload issue, would have been met with disapproval, while the truth that she’d simply forgotten to tell anyone simmered beneath the surface.

She wasn’t used to this. Kahili frowned. “Are you well?”

To that Moon nodded, but the older Trainer's frown deepened. Something was wrong. In silence Kahili stared and Moon paused under the look. Still Kahili looked. Something was off. Something wasn’t right. What was it? She couldn’t... quite... place it...

“Hey is that a Key Stone?” Mallow’s question, asked in the silence of Kahili’s interrogation, immediately widened the older woman’s eyes. She almost grabbed at the cord around Moon’s neck, the pendant hanging from it, before pulling back her hand. Now leaning halfway over the table, Kahili stared at the gem. What?

“Where- where did you get that?”

“Oh right!” Hau looked sheepish now, realising that after quizzing Kahili about her Pidgeot and Mega Evolution all yesterday afternoon, he’d never mentioned why he’d known that. “Moon and I met some people yesterday, and they gave her it! They were, uh, Pokemon Researchers? From Kalos! Right?”

Moon nodded. Kahili was staring. Reaching into her bag, Moon withdrew the other half of the gift they’d given her. Set it on the table so all could see.

Kahili’s nostrils flared.

“Dexio.”

Further out in the city, getting a nice holiday breakfast with his partner in crime, Dexio sneezed and shivered. Sina the same a moment after.

“A Salamencite.” Kahili wasn’t up for more than a few words at a time now, each sentence she made needing a moment to handle before she continued. “They gave you. A Salamencite.” With the air of danger emerging from the woman, no-one else chose to speak. Moon returned the Mega Stone to her bag. Kahili’s eyes followed it with razor focus.

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“Uh,” unsure as to the best method to deflect the current tension, Mallow went for the easy way out. The literal way out. “Anyway, Hau, Moon, shall we get going? Paniola Town isn’t too far away, but it gets pretty up-hill at times. If we go now we can be there for lunch!”

The mention of lunch hit Moon with remembrance that she had yet to eat breakfast, and she paused a moment to quickly grab something from the cafe. While she was waiting Lillie found her way to her side.
“I,” Lillie held her bag close, Nebby within it. Moon ran a hand along its side again, feeling the Nebula Pokemon within lean into her touch. “I won't be heading north, with you. Professor Kukui told me we'd be spending a while in Heahea City. But we'll be here when you and Hau make it back! So... good luck, Moon, on your Trials. I'll see you when you return.” Moon smiled at Lillie just before her food was served.

Lillie smiled back at the sight of the young girl tearing through her meal. She must have been hungry.

A part of her was already looking forward to seeing the two when they returned.

“Okay!” Mallow took the lead as soon as Moon was done, Hau falling in beside her, “Time to head off!” The Captain turned back to Kahili and waved, breaking the older Trainer out of her rage fugue. She stood up and approached.

“Do your best,” speaking to Hau and Moon both, her eyes lingered on the pendant Moon wore, the Key Stone set within it, “and we'll see you when you return. I look forward to hearing about your Trials.”

“Yeah!” Hau gave a jump and a cheer. Moon nodded. Mallow smiled and guided the two out.

“Now...” when Kahili blinked her eyes lit with flames dancing behind them, “Lillie, will you be fine on your own until Kukui and the Kahuna return?”

“I...” Lillie stepped away from Kahili, whose radiating presence was far too much to approach, “yes. What will you-”

“I.” Kahili took a single determined step. The path to the exit of the Pokemon Center cleared in an instant. “Have some Trainers to find.”

A few blocks away, visiting a shop of knick-knacks for tourists, Sina held an Exeggutor mask over her face. “Hey Dexio!” The man turned back to the woman's call. “I'm in disguise!”

The road from Heahea City to Paniola Town started in lush forest, heavy greenery bordering the north-east of the city. The path was easy, and Mallow skipped along it with a whistle and a smile. Being surrounded by dense foliage was her element, after all. Hau and Moon followed after.

“Okay!” Spinning around to face the pair, even as she continued to walk backwards, Mallow held her arms outstretched. “We'll be heading through this forest for about an hour before we get to the hills, so make sure to enjoy it while it's easy! The Island Challenge is all about working together with your Pokemon to overcome your opponents, and that means the hard parts of travelling Alola too! If you want to do things early, you're going to have to work extra hard for it, okay?”

Hau nodded. That was something he'd been taught from a young age, instructed to both respect and face the challenges the Islands would give him. Moon followed his lead, but didn't fully understand just what the Captain was referring to. Mallow smiled at them.

“Good! Let's go!”
With intense strides Kahili Hano walked the streets of Heahea City, eyes roving from side to side, building to building, person to person. She was hunting, and the intensity that surrounded her pushed back those who recognised the famous Trainer and at first intended to approach. P-probably best not to right now.

A pair of seated people she walked past lowered the newspapers they had been reading once she was beyond them, the news of Kahuna Koa's passing printed upon the pages. Dexio and Sina let their eyes meet.

“She seems mad.”

“No!” The trio of Trainers, one Captain and two Island Challengers, came to a halt as a small brown Pokemon dashed past them, disappearing into the greenery on the other side of the path. Moon immediately raced off in pursuit.

Mallow's laughter at the sight of the Trainer disappearing into the tree-line followed after her but went unacknowledged. Moon wasn't stopping for anything. Not with that target ahead. Mallow glanced at Hau with a smile. “She's quick to chase what she wants.” Hau nodded back. Yeah, she sure was.

“So hey,” leaning against a tree, waiting for Moon to return with the prize she'd set her eyes on, Mallow considered Hau. Grandson to Kahuna Hala, who she'd only met a few times. She'd watched the recording of his Grand Trial too – he'd done really well! – and he seemed to be going perfectly fine even now. Two Pokemon at eleven. She'd done similar but it had still taken her longer than him. He really was something too. She smiled. “How're you feeling?”

“Me?” Almost surprised to be asked, Hau glanced around. No-one else. Looked back to Mallow. She tilted her head and nodded. Hau frowned. “I'm fine. Nothing wrong here!”

Was that so. Mallow pushed back off the tree and turned her head, looking in the direction Moon had gone. She'd be back soon enough, new Pokemon in hand. Mallow could already tell. That girl just felt like she could do anything at all.

“She's something else,” her words drew Hau a little closer, crossing the path to watch in the same direction. “Hard to believe, really.”

“Yeah,” Hau had no trouble agreeing, watching the bushes beyond the path sway. “I gotta work extra hard to keep up.”

Mallow's pause went unnoticed. She spoke again a moment after. “Do you?”

“Yeah!” Hau nodded more enthusiastically at this, “She's got all these Pokemon, so I need to do my best not to fall behind! We're training hard every day! And...” The immediate drying up of Hau's speech drew Mallow's eyes back to him. He was looking away. Shuffling from one foot to the other. She waited another moment.

“Yes?”

“I just-” the words came out fast enough for Hau to then hold back on them, bouncing between wanting to talk and wanting to say nothing. Mallow waited. After a moment he continued. “I battled someone yesterday. He told me I... I wasn't trying. That I was path- that I wasn't as good as Moon.”
Mallow held her words. If she knew who had said that, she'd have something to say to them. “And I mean I'm not!” Hau's admission didn't help Mallow's consideration. “She's incredible and... I'm trying. But maybe it's not enough. All I was thinking was, I want to grow with my Pokemon, and that if we did our best and stayed happy we'd make it but... maybe I'm not trying hard enough. I just... I don't know how to keep up...”

In the silence that followed there was another rustling of bushes, another Pokemon dashing out from them across the path. The same as the last, but one far more confident and curious. It stopped and inspected the pair of humans before it. Mallow held back.

“Hey Hau,” he looked up at her voice, before following her attention to see the Pokemon. Quickly stepped up to it and opened a Pokeball. He had to try, right? Mallow's question continued, “You're raising your Pokemon with love, right? You care for them?”

The red light from the Pokeball gave way to a yellow shape, electricity crackling from red cheeks. The Pokemon, one that could only be raised with the care of a true Pokemon Trainer, answered the question as loudly as Hau did.

“Of course!”

Mallow watched the battle. Watched as Hau's Pokemon cornered its opponent, who fell under its electrical bolts soon enough. The difference between wild Pokemon in this region and the young boy was already so much. Rustling in her bag, Mallow caught Hau's attention and held out a Pokeball, light pink in colour. She smiled as he put it to use.

If he was raising his Pokemon with love and care, then Hau... “You're going exactly as fast as you need to.”

Moon returned with a victorious grin that only widened to see Hau clutching his own new Pokemon. Treating the one she had bested with potions she kept, Moon and Hau allowed theirs to run about and play with each other as they oversaw their new partners.

As Rotom-dex gave a detailed explanation of the Evolution Pokemon Eevee.

“So then!” Mallow watched the two children playing with their Pokemon, forming the Bonds that would see them on to greater heights. Moon at this point came as no surprise that she could catch whatever Pokemon she set her eyes upon, but Hau claiming a third and – Mallow noted – still doing fine was a shock. Ten minutes ago she'd been comparing Hau to her own growth. Now he was far beyond her. These kids... “Any future plans for those two?”

“Zzt!” Launching into a spiel about the varying evolutionary possibilities for Eevee, Rotom-dex continued to float above the group. Mallow waited for it to finish before making her opinion known.

“Well I think you should both evolve them to Leafeon!” The two looked at her while Mallow smiled back, watching the two Eevee at play. “After all, the Grass-type is the best!” Perhaps she could be accused of leaning too heavily upon her type-bias, but that was the point! It was there to support you and help you grow. For those who followed theirs, at least. “There's even a place in my Trial Site where they'll evolve!”

Hau spent a moment considering, but Mallow could already see Moon's attention turn back to the Pokemon before her. She already had a powerful Grass-type after all.

“Otherwise Kahuna Olivia has a whole bunch of Evolution Stones you can use, you just need to ask her later!” That got both Moon and Hau to nod. Mallow smiled.
“Zzt!” Accessing another article, Rotom-dex sounded off again. “Presenting data from current public research efforts attempting to identify further Eevee evolutions! Unova Region Project: investigation into the seasonal cyc-”

“Okay okay let's go,” Mallow waved for Moon and Hau to stand up as the Rotom-dex continued to report on the global search for further evolutions of the mysterious Pokemon, “the hills are just ahead, it's time for the hard part!”

The path they'd been following opened up, forest clearing away to the beginnings of an upward trek. Paniola Town, and the farming land around it, lay further still ahead.

It was time to climb.

Purposeful intent guided Kahili Hano across Heahea City, questioning everyone she saw for clues. She paused for a moment, breathed out frustration, and continued on. No stopping. Not until they were found.

They weren't getting away.

Behind the glass of the shopfront Kahili had stopped before, Sina licked absently at the ice-cream she held, Dexio continuing to deliberate his order behind her.

In comparison to the active forest they'd travelled through, Moon and Hau saw little wild Pokemon on the path beyond. Stretches of farmland contained herds of Pokemon – Miltank, Tauros, Mudbray, and Mareep – however they kept mostly to themselves beyond the fencing along the road. Once in a while a vehicle could be seen in the distance, running along the wider roads flowing from town to city, but this track itself was walked by these three alone.

Quickly the climb began to wear on them.

“Keep going you're doing great!” Mallow had walked this path enough to be pretty good at it, but she'd still want to take a load off and get some food by the end. The Pokemon with her were more than capable of carrying the two kids if needed, but she'd only do that when they weren't able to go any further themselves. It was important to push yourself as part of your Trial. That was part of Alola's tradition too.

Goodness, she watched as Moon and Hau continued their climb, speaking to one another as they went, each pleased with the Pokemon they had caught.

They really were so young.

A steel bird circled over Heahea City. It was no omen, nothing particularly of note, but a threatening pall continued to build upon the shoulders of the two who didn't notice it. Not until it was too late.

Sina stopped Dexio and pointed, identifying the Skarmory cresting just overheard, only moments before a heavy hand settled on each of their shoulders. A steel voice greeted them.
“Dexio. Sina.” Neither turned around to look Kahili in the eye. Too much raw danger emanated from her. Dexio gulped and focused on the taste of the ice-cream he’d had before. Ah. That had been nice.

“Let's. Talk.”

“What were you thinking?”

Attention flickered to the loud voice in the Heahea City Park, but wisely those who got close enough chose to back off again. Firstly because there appeared to be a furious oni there and secondly because that furious oni was Kahili Hano and so the two she was dressing down probably deserved it.

Kahili dropped her voice to keep the specifics quiet. The last, the absolute last thing she needed right now was this getting out.

“A Salamencite? Are you insane?” Dexio and Sina at least had the decency to look shamed by Kahili, but that wasn't nearly good enough. She ground a foot against the grass. Unbelievable. Of all the irresponsible- “What is wrong with you two? She's eleven!”

“Y'know,” Dexio held back a flinch when the furious Kahili turned on him, maintaining his ground thanks to his own experiences, “it's really not that different from what you all do here.” The ice of the moment extended as Kahili stared him down. He shook his head and continued. “I mean, the whole Island Challenge gives a bunch of eleven-year olds those Z-Crystals, right? Using Z-Moves is as draining as a Mega Evolution.”

“Firstly.” Kahili’s dagger stare went undeflected as she launched her rebuttal, “Z-Crystals are presented to Trainers when they complete their Trials. The number of Trainers to complete a Trial at that age is... small.” Dexio made a noise like that kind of distinction didn't matter. Kahili raised her volume a touch. “Secondly.” Silence. “Using a Z-Move exhausts. Mega Evolved Pokemon are wildly powerful and not fully in control – presenting threats to their Trainers especially when new. And Mega Salamence is one of, if not the, most vicious and uncontrollable of them all. Do you have any concept of how dangerous it is to hand that to someone? A child, Dexio. Sina.”

“A child with a Bagon!” Sina countered this time, “Not a Salamence. No Mega Salamence yet.”

“Yet.” Kahili said the word with all the speed of a bullet. It shut the pair up. “Who even- who even knows how long it will take her. She's impossible. It could be less than a year.”

“We are here to help y'know.” Dexio's words earned a note of scorn from Kahili. Sina shook her head.

“We are! It's not like any of us know what's going to happen, but we're definitely able to help no matter what! You know we're good for it.”

It was frustrating for Kahili to admit that. The two possessed a gift for bringing out a Trainer's latent abilities. Pairing them with Moon would be...

“She's eleven.”

“She needs people who can help her find her limits safely.”
“The Mega Stone won't hurt. We'll know when her Bagon evolves long before it evolves again. We can intercede then. Safely.”

The argument of the two upon Kahili, who was so very tired from the previous night of trying to find the absent Moon and then the morning of hunting for the pair in her frustration, wore her down. Her shoulders sagged.

“I'm still mad at you two.”

“Let us buy you lunch to make up for it?”

“... fine.”

By the time the midday sun hung heavy in the sky overhead, absent of clouds, its blue reflected in the sea seen far below, Hau, Moon, and Mallow entered Paniola Town. Centre of the farming region on the north-side of Akala Island, built into the western slopes of Wela Volcano, it served as central hub for the area, the population of every farm around making their way to the town according to their need.

The energy here was different to Heahea or Hau'oli, to Iki or Wai'oli. The cities were busy, modern, people and Pokemon all going about their way. The towns had been quiet, slumbering, tradition a cloak worn upon old shoulders.

But here in Paniola Town was the movement of a people alive and united. Everyone knew one another, everyone worked hard, and everyone cheered together. People greeted each other as they went, not so close as to repeat the motion every day, but not so far as to never truly know the other. Mallow smiled as she walked through its gates and quickly those who saw her said hello. Greeted the young Trial-goers without anything but warmth and welcoming.

Moon relaxed as soon as she realised she had nothing to hide.

“Okay!” Mallow pointed with full determination, eyeing off the Pokemon Center ahead, “We are sitting down and getting food!” To that Moon and Hau agreed immediately. They'd made it past the climb, the upwards path following the slope of the mountainous expanse that conquered Akala's north, but it had still been tiring. Adding to that Hau now supported a third Pokemon, which Mallow reminded herself of as she arranged food for the three to share. A third Pokemon and he'd kept going. Kept pace and made it to the top.

Moon was something else, an impossible power, but Hau, Hau was someone incredible too. Comparing himself to Moon the way he did, he'd never really know it. There was something sad about that, Mallow thought.

She might send Kahuna Hala a word later. Just to let him know.

Once fed, once rested, Mallow took charge once more and led the two across Paniola Town. She'd sent word to Captain Kiawe the day before, and so to see him standing in the centre of town, arms crossed, waiting patiently, brought a smile. Mallow waved on approach.

“Hееееy! Kiawe!”

Captain Kiawe gave the impression of someone who walked the path Hau and Moon had climbed every single day. He wore red, the colour in his shorts, his sandals, and the highlights amongst his
black and wavy hair which resembled a flame itself. That was the end of what he wore, his upper body shirtless, the tattoos upon his shoulders on full display alongside his muscular build.

Both Hau, who had never met the Captain, and Moon, stared at the dark-skinned figure as he waved back to Mallow and approached. There was a lot going on here.

“Greetings!” Kiawe spoke with a naturally loud voice, coming to a stop before the group, “And welcome to Paniola Town! I am Captain Kiawe of Akala Island, head of the Fire Trial at Wela Volcano. I believe one of you intends on taking this Trial as their first of Akala?”

“Oh yes!” Hau jumped, waving a hand, “That's me!” Kiawe nodded, arms still crossed. Mallow, standing behind Moon and Hau now, poked her tongue out at his stoic appearance. He didn't react to it.

“Very good,” Kiawe addressed Hau, “I look forward to seeing your challenge. If your goal is to take on my Trial, I will depart Paniola Town tomorrow, if you are prepared?”

“Yep!” Hau nodded again, “I'm ready!”

A moment. A pause. Kiawe let his eyes pass over the two Trainers. He'd heard everything too. Every Captain had. Still...

“Are you?” The question actually stopped Hau's jumping. Kiawe considered. “It is a Captain's prerogative to say when a Trainer is ready for their Trial. Perhaps you would be willing to undergo a test?”

Hau nodded immediately, completely ready for anything. Kiawe turned his eyes on Moon. “The both of you, in fact.” She looked directly at him and for a moment he felt like the world paused. There was something about her he couldn't place. Something unnatural. She was a Pokemon Trainer who had six Bonds, powerful ones too, Kiawe knew that. But even still she wasn't anything like the few he'd seen.

Maybe it was just because she was so young.

“In that case!” Hau spun to face Moon, who turned to face him as well. She knew. Nodded even before he said it. Hau grinned. “Let's have a Pokemon Battle, Moon!”

Paniola Town didn't have battling grounds the way other places did, and so Kiawe led Moon and Hau beyond the town's borders into a field where they would have the freedom to go all out. Taking position as judge, Kiawe waited for Mallow to step up beside him. His request that she 'keep an eye open' was met with a dry 'of course'. She wasn't about to ignore what they'd see in this.

“Does either Trainer have a request for the rules of this battle?” Kiawe's announcement drew both Hau and Moon's attention, but one response outs ped the other, and Hau's answer of 'go all out' faltered under Moon's specifications. “Very well!” Kiawe raised his arms, “This will be a two versus two Pokemon Battle! Prepare yourselves!”

“Hey Moon!” In the time before the battle began, Hau's voice stretched across the field, “Why aren't you going all out? We're meant to give it everything we've got, right?” He didn't want to fall behind. He didn't want to be nothing. If she didn't give him everything she had then he'd never keep up with her. That wasn't fair.

But Moon's answer was different. This demand wasn't to make things easier for Hau, or harder for her. It was to think in a different way, battle in another manner she'd have to learn. And against Hau she'd be pushed to give it everything she had.
He was silent after that declaration.

“Hey Kiawe quick!” Kiawe looked away from the field just in time for Mallow to take the picture on her phone, capturing the two of them with Hau and Moon in the background. “Awesome!” Sending the snap along with a message of ‘Fight time, wish you were here =)’, she turned her attention back to the battlefield as Kiawe sighed and did the same.

A little later Captain Ilima responded to the picture with a single “:(”.

“The battle!” Kiawe’s naturally loud voice brought Moon and Hau back to attention. Moon raised a Pokeball. Still somewhat questioning Moon's intent, Hau did the same. Two versus two. Let's go.

“Will begin! Trainers... go!”

Two Pokeballs opened and two Pokemon appeared. Moon, leading with Bagon, enjoyed the cry of the Rock Head Pokemon, glad to be out once again. Holding back to keep attention off of her had been... way too frustrating.

Finally she could cut loose.

The Pokemon opposing her however came as a surprise. Moon was used to her battles with Hau ending with starter against starter, but today Hau had led with Popplio. Unsure as to his plan, Moon directed her Pokemon forward. Popplio was fast, but Bagon was sturdy. She had confidence.

Hau directed his Pokemon to do the same.

The grass of the field was not thick, did not provide real cover, yet somehow with its water-jet speed Popplio made use of it all the same, moving quick enough to momentarily dart out of view. Bagon's speed did not match its opponents' when the Sea Lion Pokemon used its water to move, but each time it struck there was a moment where the Dragon was free to counter-attack. Water was ineffective against a Dragon-type Pokemon, allowing Bagon to weather the attacks freely. Slowly the battle tipped in Moon's direction.

“Does he...” Mallow considered, watching the battle play out. She wasn't an expert at Water-types or anything, but after a solid year as a Captain she knew a thing or two about the Alolan Starters, “not know?”

“Perhaps,” Kiawe remained impartial. “Many Trainers continue unaware of their Pokemon's full abilities. If he does not understand the strength he possesses then-”

“Hey Hau!” Ignoring Kiawe's reply Mallow had bounded across the field, yelling out to the Trainer, “Don't you have any other moves?”

It was a prompt in the right direction, not outright advice, but perhaps she would still be scolded for it. Still, when Mallow looked back at Moon, the girl didn't seem upset in the least. If anything thrilled when Hau tried something different. First bubbles, obscuring her Bagon's view and allowing Popplio to get closer. A tackle without water, though still not enough to overcome the strength of the dragon, who smacked its opponent back.

Then Popplio gave a cry that glowed, the sound becoming power in the air. It was a technique it had never been directed to use before, one neither it nor Hau had been aware of. But in battle a Trainer can often reveal a Pokemon's abilities by their own will to win. In Hau's command to search for something else, his Popplio found the answer.

A new attack, and one the Bagon was not only unprepared for but weak to. It fell and did not rise. Hau cheered. Moon smiled.
Popplio glowed.

“Hey hey hey!” Mallow’s cry of shock accompanied the sound of pictures taken on her phone, snap after snap of the glowing Pokemon as energy coursed through it and its shape morphed into something else. “Really? Is that really-”

Kiawe watched Hau. He faltered for a moment, then shook his head and raised it again, eyes bright. Moon had evolved her starter Pokemon within three weeks of obtaining it. Hau was not even a week behind.

It really was stunning to see.

“Zzt!” Free to observe the battle, the Rotom-dex joyfully announced the new observation. “Brionne, evolution of Popplio, the Pop Star Pokemon!”

Moon cheered loudly. Hau just smiled, still somewhat stunned by it. Knelt down to the Pokemon as it returned to him and coursed a hand over its head, across its sleek blue fur. He was catching back up. He grinned at the Pokemon as it barked back at him. No time to stop now.

“Moon let's keep going!”

As Moon called back her Bagon and unleashed her Dartrix Hau sent Brionne forward, intent on allowing the two starter Pokemon, raised together, now evolved, to meet in battle once more. So they did, jets of water once more carrying the Pokemon at speed necessary to chase Moon's own, while Dartrix unleashed leaves that swirled through the grass and left stalks falling in their wake.

Tired from the battle before, even with its evolution, Brionne did not fight for long, yet still managed to strike some blows against the Blade Quill Pokemon. Using the powerful voice attack that had bested Bagon worked, and Hau smiled to see Brionne doing its best. He was keeping up.

Then Dartrix slammed it to the ground and Hau called his Pokemon back, thankful for all its hard efforts. Sent out his second, to match Moon's. The pace was in his favour, even if he felt that Moon's restriction favoured him to begin with. Still, he'd see the battle through, as she'd wished. He wouldn't fall short again.

Not him and not Pikachu too.

“A Pikachu,” Kiawe observed the Pokemon as Moon and Hau gave commands, the Mouse Pokemon hammering Dartrix with electricity, “He evolved that too then.”

“Yep,” Mallow joined Kiawe, the eyes of each on Hau, “Not sure when, after his Grand Trial but before today. So that's two evolved Pokemon, one from a baby, one from his starter, and he caught an Eevee this morning too.”

“Amazing.” There was little else else Kiawe could say. A Trainer like that only came once in a generation. Hau was truly incredible. But then...

The shining bright light wrapping around Moon was the Z-Move she was preparing, passing its power on to Dartrix. Pikachu's energy going into this battle made it dangerous, forcing her to go for a decisive finisher. It was the best way.

Yet Hau learned too. He had watched her Grand Trial. And the timing was right for him. A Z-Move would answer a Z-Move. His own Normalium-Z shone.

In the light of two Z-Moves colliding, the intense force and focus blinding and deafening the
Trainers to anything else, only Mallow heard Kiawe yell in excitement at the grand battle before catching himself, attempting to pretend like he hadn't been swept up in it. She laughed at him. He pretended not to hear.

The light cleared. The result the same as before. Z-Move against Z-Move. This was how it ended.

Moon called back her Dartrix as Hau did the same for his Pikachu, Kiawe raising both hands and announcing the battle as a draw. Each Trainer had committed two Pokemon and all four of those Pokemon had been knocked out. The battle was over.

Hau fell to a knee, vision blurring, breathing heavily. He'd really gone all out huh? Step by step Moon approached, her pace even, her breathing the same as ever. She extended a hand and Hau took it, grinning at her as he stood back up, shaky all the same.

If only for a little bit... he'd kept pace. He told her that and she smiled. Good. That was... good...

Mallow took the collapsed Hau off of Moon, the young girl flustered by his sudden fall. It wasn't a surprise though, the Captain considered. Maintaining three Pokemon, two of them evolved, one having just evolved, and then using a Z-Move? She'd have been done for the day after that at thirteen. It made sense. What didn't was...

“You did well.” Kiawe spoke to Moon, Mallow helping Hau stand as he muttered apologies for his exhaustion. She'd have none of that though, and brightly helped him back to the Pokemon Center in Paniola to rest. The two moved off. Kiawe led Moon after.

“You feel fine?” Kiawe's question was answered by a nod. Six Pokemon, one an evolved Starter, one a Dragon, the remaining four who knew what. And a Z-Move. And she was fine. They had a theory, something they'd discussed in calls about this impossible Trainer. Seeing this battle, Kiawe began to believe it. It was not that the Trainer Moon had some incredible ability to resist the demands of her Bonds, that she powered through their drain with head held high.

It was that Moon did not feel the demand at all. As though providing this power meant nothing to her. That it was the barest drop from a well with perhaps no bottom. Looking at her as she walked, making her way back to the town, Kiawe became convinced that must be true. The feeling around her, it was of something endless. Something big, much bigger than anything he'd ever seen before.

A Trainer with more fire than perhaps Wela Volcano itself.

He was looking forward to seeing how she approached his Trial.

By the time Hau was rested enough to be back on his feet night had fallen, Kiawe leaving the town to make his way to a distant job. Still the Captain had promised he'd be there the next morning, ready to lead Hau further upon his Island Challenge. Mallow would do the same for Moon.

Left to her own devices, Mallow seized control of Kiawe's house, his family ceding the kitchen to the industrious cook of a Captain. Her style when it came to food was something unique, but she experienced more successes than failures, especially with the slightest guiding hand.

For the young Trainers their son would be aiding, Kiawe's parents happily joined them in a meal. Mallow grinned as everyone, people and Pokemon alike dug in.

It had been a busy day today. Likely just as busy tomorrow. Good. She liked it that way.
She really couldn't wait to see what these young Trainers did next.

A boat docked in Heahea City late that night. From it two figures emerged, exhausted from the day. They hadn't slept the night before, and fielding questions from all angles as they lent a hand to the family of Kahuna Koa, splitting attention upon them, had worn them both ragged.

Kahuna Olivia waved Kukui along. At least a drink that night before they crashed out. She owed him that much for the amount of attention from curious reporters he'd absorbed. Kukui couldn't say no to that.

Kahili caught them shortly after and joined them.

“She has a what?”

Kukui's incredulous cry, half begging to be told he'd heard incorrectly, found no mercy from Kahili. She nodded and repeated herself. “Moon has a Key Stone and Salamencite.”

Kukui wasted only a moment more of staring blankly before finishing his drink.

And so the next morning came. Hau and Moon stretched in the morning's light, emerged from the house of Captain Kiawe – the offer to spend the night from his family very appreciated – and prepared to move forward. Mallow and Kiawe spent a final few minutes discussing how best to guide the pair.

Then approached.

“Alright!” Mallow pointed, “Moon, we're heading further through the farmlands, and then around Wela Volcano's west side and on to Brooklet Hill!”

“As for us,” Kiawe gave a different direction, “You and I, Hau, will be travelling down to Royal Avenue, at the centre of Akala, and then up Wela Volcano's east side to my Trial Site.”

Moon and Hau each nodded. Turned to one another.

“Hey Moon,” Hau extended a closed fist, “I'll be at the Battle Royal when I finish my Trial, meet me there?”

Moon met the fist with her own. And nodded. Time to go on.

Parting ways, each smiled and kept heads held high.

Their next Trials lay ahead.

Chapter End Notes

First it's differing styles - I'll write this chapter as a research report, I'll pepper in some interviews, I'll check Kukui's emails. Next comes work styling, I needed CSS to make
the columns on that newspaper article work. This is a gateway, I know it, but lord if I'm not barreling through all the same. Whatever happens it'll be as much a surprise for me as for you. I have no grand plans beyond the story itself, but see where that's gotten me so far. Who even knows at this point.

I'm using Hawaii as a model for Alola, duh, but also moreso than Alola itself does. The path between the city Heahea is based on and the place Paniola Town references has a 1500 foot height difference spread over roughly four hours walking. It was most definitely NOT that intense in this version of Akala, but it's not a flat walk like it is in the games either. Good walk though. Very nice views.

Where Melemele Island was the establishment of the setting, introduction of major players, and really kicking things off, Akala Island is about one branch of the main trio - Moon and Hau's friendship and rivalry. They might be doing their Trials in differing order, but don't think that doesn't mean they won't have plenty of chances to interact. I know what I'm doing with this. Believe in me.

Hau, he makes it to the same stage you do you know. In Sun and Moon he makes it to the League at the same pace you do, in Ultra Sun and Moon he makes it THROUGH the League at the same pace you do. He might not be the Eldritch, and measuring himself against that hides his awareness of his progress, but his gift is exceptional. I'm really proud of him. He's a good kid.

Next chapter it's off to Brooklet Hill. Even I don't know where the chapter will end, but that's part of the fun. The Water Trial lies ahead, and Captain Lana's never been the easy-going type. We'll see what she has to level against Moon soon enough.

As always, thank you all for reading, I truly hope you are enjoying this ride. Your comments continue to motivate me to work hard, and I'm filled with nothing but raw determination to keep this story going. There's so very much more I want to show you all of this tale.

The best is well and truly yet to come.
Mallow dressed herself that morning enjoying the sun's light shining in through the upper windows of Kiawe's family house. It was to be a busy day for her, leading the trainer Moon past the farmlands north of Paniola Town, and then through the forest beyond. Most trainers would follow the western roads, heading through the coastal townships until they reached Brooklet Hill, but that would not be the direction they went. Oh no.

Far too many eyes along that way.

It was an unpleasant thing, the thought that this girl Moon had no safety on her own. Travelling together with your Pokemon, it was meant to be the symbol of freedom. Anyone could do it if they tried. But Moon's meteoric rise to fame had staunched that. Too many people wanted to see her, talk to her, find out why she was the way she was. Alone she would be hounded, unable to find peace. It was awful.

Knuckles rapped against wood. “Hey Moon, may I come in?” An affirmative in response. Mallow entered the room the girl was in.

Most trainers who travelled did so alone or with friends. Wandered from place to place around Alola, grew and matured, taking on the Trials as they went. Those who proved adept for raising Pokemon, for maintaining and growing their power, overcame those Trials, the rate different for everyone. Eleven years of age was when it started, but only an exceptionally small and skilled subset of those who took the Island Challenge completed it in less than three. That was simply the way that it was.

“I've got some clothes that might suit you, would you like to take a look?” Interest answered Mallow’s question. She smiled and offered her own stored here. Something Moon might enjoy. Something to help her be herself again. That was what Mallow offered.

To be a Captain of Alola had two requirements. First, you must be under the age of twenty. This ensured constant change amongst the Captains, their time of service averaging three to six years. A Captain was tasked with maintaining a Trial Site, raising and keeping the Totem Pokemon within, and overseeing the Trials taken by trainers across Alola. Through this system many of Alola's strongest Trainers came to share the responsibility of caring for its sacred sites and nurturing their sense of responsibility to the people, Pokemon, and land around them.

The second requirement was to have completed their own Island Challenge.

Kahuna Olivia had told Mallow once that a Kahuna does not battle in their Grand Trial to claim victory, but instead to impart a lesson. For every Trial-goer a different lesson was needed to direct them, to help them grow further with their Pokemon, and a Kahuna must be able to determine what that lesson should be. It was one of the most important aspects of their role.

Mallow wondered what she would battle Moon to teach, if she were the Kahuna overseeing Moon's next Grand Trial. Moon’s battle yesterday with Hau had been a draw, each expending two Pokemon equally, but that had been a result of Moon's own choice. She'd specified the limits, which favoured Hau. And she'd measured herself as well, all the same.

Moon could use two Z-Moves. Even thinking about that Mallow shook her head. In a single day she
could use three, spaced roughly four hours apart, and by the third she'd be out within a half hour. Moon had used two in the span of five minutes. She'd used a Z-Move for the first time ever a week before, Ilima had reported. The numbers were all wrong. They were all so wrong.

“Oh how about some green? Would that look good?” Moon considered the shirt Mallow was holding up, forest-green with a ribbon tied around the waist. Held out her hands to try it on. Mallow smiled and handed it over.

The Captains of Alola were family, their age ranging from fourteen to twenty, from the average youngest one would complete their Island Challenge to the age of retirement from the role. They relied on one another, those younger seeking advice to stave off self-doubt from those older. And no matter what they were always there for one another and always willing to lend their aid.

To this end, both Mallow and the third Captain of Akala Island, Lana, had a stash of clothing kept at Kiawe's house in Paniola Town. Kiawe was the only one of the three to live on the northern half of the Island, which proved difficult as all three of Akala's Trials were to be found there as well. Because of this Mallow and Lana both spent a large amount of time away from home, staying close to their Trial Sites or lending aid across Akala before returning home for a few days more. Staying at Kiawe's house helped, and he enjoyed the presence of his fellow Captains as much as they did his.

In Alola, the only way to overcome adversity was together, after all.

The sum total of this was simply that it proved no issue at all for Mallow to dig up clothing she hadn't worn in a while that would loosely fit Moon, who was only slightly shorter than she was. And having something new to try out, to try and find herself in, would help. Mallow got that impression immediately.

Moon's hair was caramel-blonde, hanging loosely around her shoulders. She sat quietly and accepted Mallow's help to tie it into braids, making mention it had to make her look different. Different to the Moon Mallow had seen in the video, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, smiling wildly without a single care.

Even in the battle against Hau the day before Mallow hadn't seen that free-spirited smile. Not once on Moon's face. She didn't like that one bit.

Moon with six Pokemon. Moon with the ability to perform multiple Z-Moves in a row. Moon who the entire world had discovered and was so intent to find. Moon who'd had to be disappeared from their sight. Moon who Mallow was escorting personally through the dense forest of Akala because it would keep her away from where those interested might gather along the traditional path of an Island Challenge.

Moon who didn't smile. Not like she should.

Hau had been caught up in this too, that was why he was being similarly escorted. Young trainers should be free to roam, but Moon and Hau both would be stopped and quizzed if caught alone. Moon for who she was, Hau for his proximity to her. Given the young boy's struggle to assert himself while being measured against Moon, that would do nothing for him either. It was a mess.

It was all such a mess.

Mallow breathed out, stood up, and smiled. “You look good!”

Olivia had told Mallow that the Kahuna battle to teach. In her Final Trial, facing the four Kahuna atop Mount Lanakila, Mallow had been taught to stand against adversity. To mind her Pokemon's
limits. To listen to their voices. And to not be cowed by those standing against her. Be confident. Have confidence. She remembered that still.

She didn't know what Moon would experience when facing the four Kahuna at the end of her Island Challenge. She didn't know what Moon would experience when facing Olivia for her Grand Trial at the end of her time here in Akala.

But she knew what she'd want to teach Moon, if she were the one Tapu Lele chose next.

She'd want to teach Moon to smile.

Dressed in a blouse of forest green over white shorts suited to Alola's warmth, Moon brushed a stray blonde hair from her forehead and adjusted her wide-brimmed hat. Aside from her dark-skin there was little that could compare her to the Moon the masses knew. Mallow led the way with the girl following behind, beyond the reaches of Paniola Town after their parting with Kiawe and Hau, and thought.

There was a lot to think about.

“It's quiet.” Her observation was agreed to by Moon – Paniola Town was the type to have hustle and bustle from the moment the sun rose, but this morning it was silent. Ideal for leaving without attention but... Mallow shook her head. “Everyone's still feeling Kahuna Koa's loss.”

Moon didn't know Kahuna Koa.

“Kahuna Koa was the leader of Poni Island,” Mallow told the story as the two started to walk, making their way out to the farmlands beyond Paniola. With plans for the area Mallow wanted to go on foot, which Moon seemed fine with. She seemed to enjoy the walk, seeing nature at an easy pace. That was the right attitude to have for a Trial-goer without question. “He was kind of like... the nice grandpa of Alola? Everyone knew him like that, even Kahuna Hala! He was really kind and really strong and always said that what he wanted most was to help teach more people to love Alola, its land, people, and Pokemon. Everyone admired him.”

He sounded impressive.

“He's had trouble for a while, days where he wasn't able to get up and leave the house, but he always made sure to be ready for a Trainer when they were on their Island Challenge. There's been...” Mallow counted against her fingers, measuring the two year span since completing her Final Trial, “Fif...teen... people after me who did their Final Trials? No wait I'm getting something wrong.” She resumed counting again. “It's... about eight to ten per year, right?” Moon looked at Mallow like she was asking her. Mallow shook her head. “I'm forgetting something but it's only been a couple. He really did seem fine two years ago.”

Silence. The topic wasn't exactly the type to help someone smile. Mallow caught that only as she was giving her final thought.

“I hope his family is okay.”

Loud braying broke the silence to follow, a herd of Mudbray storming up to the fence along the road Mallow and Moon were walking. Smiling and laughing Mallow reached out to the Pokemon, who in their excitement to see her pushed up against the fence. A voice called out over the herd's noise.
“Hey Mallow, don't let them break out again y'hear?”

“Kay!” Mallow rubbed her hands over the noses of each of the Pokemon, pushing them back at the same time, encouraging the herd to back up a little. Another Pokemon pushed through them.

“They're always like this with you,” the woman was seated on the back of a Tauros, looking over the Captain and young one with her. Island Challenger? “You spoil them too much whenever you visit.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Mallow apologised in a tone that said she felt in no way apologetic at all. “I can't help it! They're all so cute!”

“Honestly,” the woman rolled her eyes, before making eye contact with Moon. Young one. Rare to see a trainer on a Trial in Akala that young looking. Must be skilled. Hmm. “Captain Mallow’s meant to help keep the peace in Akala, but every time she comes through these farmlands she just riles everyone up.”

Mallow pouted but it was clearly a play expression. The woman cast her eyes back over to the girl. “Adrien’s been looking for you by the way,” her words drew Mallow’s attention back, joking stance giving way to interest, “think he wants you to help with a Herdier that won’t play nice.”

“Honestly,” Mallow put her hands to her hips, mimicking the woman's word and shaking her head, “how many is that now? How does one person successfully raise that many unruly Pokemon?”

“Darned if I know,” the woman was directing her Tauros to move, the crowd of Mudbray following with it, “but it'd help us all to have it far better behaved. See what you can do.” As the farmer woman rode the Wild Bull Pokemon away Mallow waved. Moon waved too. Mallow turned back to her.

“I tend to spend a lot of time in the farmlands,” she explained, “my family has a restaurant in Konikoni City: I can't work there a lot so instead I help out with managing ingredient deals. The farms here produce a lot of good stuff.” Moon nodded, interested in that. Mallow smiled. “Well when you come to Konikoni City, I'll meet you there and make you a meal. Just don't blame me if nowhere else will do after you've tasted the Aina's Kitchen best!”

Moon smiled a little and the two moved on.

Built into the nutrient-rich slopes of Wela Volcano, the farmland beyond Paniola Town produced much of the Alola Region's foodstuff. Herd Pokemon were kept in farms across the Akala Plateau, a stretch of relatively flat land that encircled the south-western half of Wela Volcano before plunging down to the shoreline below.

Along the paths and roads between the farms criss-crossing the land Mallow led Moon, checking in upon each she passed. Moon watched as the Captain navigated with ease, joyfully conversing with each farmer she stopped along the way, and fawning over the Pokemon that came up to see her. It was almost intimidating, the way she could handle so much around her without missing a beat. Crowds weren't Moon's thing. Lots of people talking, especially people she didn't know, was overwhelming. But Mallow didn't get overwhelmed. Mallow didn't need to get away.

Mallow shone.

Moon didn't say that but maybe Mallow could tell she was thinking it all the same. She smiled as they left the latest farm they'd stopped in at, Mallow helping the farmhand with a recalcitrant Herdier, lecturing the young man about letting the Pokemon he raised run him ragged. You need to give them plenty of exercise to keep them content: if you're not able to keep up then you'll just make things worse for the both of you! She'd given that speech before. He'd better listen this time. Or else.
Moon hadn't thought the Captain was the type to look threatening, with her constant smiles and joyful expressions, but the farmhand had backed up with an expression that said he understood. Moon hadn't caught it on Mallow's face before the Captain looked back at her with a grin.

“Alright then, shall we move on?”

Not every field was farmland owned. For as many herds of Pokemon were kept in farm environments, others were left to wander free. A greater responsibility shared across the farming community of Paniola ensured the herds never caused too much harm, but it was good to allow Pokemon to roam as they would across the land. Alola was their home too.

“Would you like to catch some?”

If it were any other Trainer, any other at all, Mallow wouldn't suggest this. But Moon could do it. And Mallow wanted to observe that. Even now Moon had her Eevee with her, the small brown Pokemon running about, though staying closer to its Trainer than most. It had a bit of a nervous disposition.

Mallow smiled listening to Moon speak to it, reassure it, teaching it about her and ensuring they were ready to work together. She sounded like the best of the best, the purest of Pokemon Trainers, those who could speak to their Pokemon and communicate every last bit of their intent. It wasn't just Moon's incredible ability to sustain six Trainer's Bonds, she was also an exceptional Trainer – in both raising Pokemon and battling with them. She was someone incredible and impossible already, but with growth she'd surpass every prediction.

Mallow was sure she was watching a legend in the making.

Still, there was something weird. There was something weird about watching Moon directing her Eevee, battling against a wild Mareep along the way. There was something weird about her when she commanded her Dartrix, the Blade Quill Pokemon evolved far sooner than most. There was something weird about the way the light caught the Key Stone in the pendant she wore, something she should not have.

There was something weird about Moon, something that felt off in a way Mallow couldn't place, and she continued to be unable to place it as Moon continued throughout the day. Caught a Pokemon and then another. Sent them off to storage. Mallow walked up beside her.

“So hey, what's the plan for those new Pokemon?” Her question prompted a look from Moon that seemed confused. Which was also weird. “If you're not going to use them, they'll just get released after a little while. You're not... the type of person who just takes out and puts them back all the time to keep a collection, are you?” There were systems to detect that, but it took a little while. Then prompted an investigation. Those were never fun.

Moon shook her head emphatically. The expression on her face was nothing but distaste for the concept. Good, phew, good. Mallow had been sure Moon was the type who loved Pokemon with her whole heart. She wouldn't be that kind of person.

But then what...

“So what will you do?”


“Zzt!” Always eager to be called on, the Rotom-inhabited Pokedex in Moon's bag emerged. Moon
made a noise at its forceful exit, the fact it would respond to anyone who asked an annoyance, but
didn't grab for it as Mallow queried. Well, she was allowed to ask.

“How many Pokemon does Moon have?”

“Pokemon encountered: sixty! Pokemon caught: twenty-three! Zzt!”

Mallow whistled. Moon didn't make eye-contact.

“You know some people,” commenting idly, Mallow kept walking, Moon following after with
Rotom-dex floating behind, “make deals with Pokemon Research Labs, go on big journeys to catch
all the Pokemon they can for the Pokedex. So when they catch a Pokemon it gets sent to the lab
instead of the Storage System, and then when examination's done they release the Pokemon again.
There's a few Trainers who've done that in Alola, though that's more working with the Aether
Foundation. Professor Kukui doesn't really have the space for that sort of thing.”

Moon did look up in interest, but Mallow didn't turn back to her. Just kept on walking. “Course that's
a deal they only make with accomplished Trainers, since they don't want just anyone catching
Pokemon from the wild. That depletes the environment after all!”

Moon had heard a little of the Aether Foundation. They were a Pokemon conservation group, who
cared for injured Pokemon before returning them to the wild. It was good, what they did. She
approved.

“So you don't have anything like that, do you?” When Mallow did turn back it was to catch an
expression on Moon's face that said clearly she did not. Mallow turned forward once more. Hm hm.

Moon wasn't the type to volunteer information. She was guarded. Understandable, in a way, but
even still she was sitting on some sort of secret. Some reason she caught the way she did. But if
Mallow asked would Moon tell her? She seemed resistant to it. Hmm.

Maybe she'd ask the others.

“Oh the Daycare Ranch!” The last stop before they veered off of the beaten path was the Alola
Pokemon Daycare, a special ranch built equally in the fields and forest of the Paniola Farmlands. A
special site where Trainers could leave Pokemon for a while, it was used by those who were
struggling with a new or evolved Bond, unsure of the time it would take to adapt to, or those who
could not keep Pokemon with them for a while – whether due to sickness or some other situation.

Mallow lent a hand often to the location, all three of Akala's Captains keeping an eye on it. Those
who cared for the Pokemon there were skilled at what they did, but keeping so many Pokemon in
one place could still lead to struggles. Sometimes it helped to have an extra pair of hands.

The meaning of Alola was to look out for one another and lend a hand, after all.

“Let's go in!”

“Greetings, welcome to the Alola Pokemon Daycare! Oh! Captain Mallow, good to see you!” The
woman behind the main desk inside the building Mallow had entered waved, Mallow waving back
in return. Moon followed behind, but kept quiet and to herself. The clerk looked past the Captain at
her. “May I help you, miss?”

“What do you think?” Mallow turned her attention on Moon too, who focused on her alone. “Would
you like to leave a Pokemon here? Do you need to?” Moon shook her head quickly enough in
answer that Mallow couldn't help but smile. Didn't need the help at all.
Mysterious.

“Then I'm just checking in!” Mallow turned back to the clerk, who immediately joined the Captain in an animated discussion about the going-ons of the ranch. As usual the warmer weather had drawn out many people who'd started journeying and battling once more, and the result of that was Pokemon evolutions some weren't prepared for. Aside from caring for Pokemon the Daycare also offered courses to help Trainers work with their Pokemon to push the limits of their Bonds, to try and help them maintain their new and stronger Pokemon. Those courses always had mixed results, the ability to develop Bonds still lacking understanding despite the millennia humans had shared together with Pokemon.

In the end the most reliable way to push one's Bonds came with time and growth shared together. Little more.

“Are you with that young Trainer then?”

“Yep, helping Moon on the way to her next Trial!”

Mallow’s carefree use of Moon's name drew an immediate shocked glare from the girl, however the clerk didn't react to it at all, simply laughing lightly before smiling at Moon. “How wonderful,” her words showed no understanding at all, Moon's expression changing to confusion, “you must be quite the skilled Trainer.”

Moon glanced at Mallow who smiled and nodded at her. What did that even mean? But Moon at least approached now, feeling the slightest hint more confident. If she didn't have to avoid making herself known here then...

“Honestly,” the woman sighed just as Moon closed in, causing her to stop still in her walk, “normally I'd love to offer a Pokemon Egg, those we are left with by Trainers unprepared to take them. But would you believe it, I gave our last one away just the other day!”

“Aww,” Mallow pouted again, “I was hoping you'd have something suuu~per awesome to share!”

“Well now you know we can't promise that,” the woman laughed a light-hearted laugh. Moon relaxed once more. “And that young boy seemed to need something he could care for. He was very stressed.”

Moon looked up and asked.

“Oh? No, I didn't get his name. He was a polite young man, blonde-haired, though possibly overworked. Honestly I was unsure if a Pokemon Egg would help, but he seemed pleased to take it. I hope caring for a young-one helps him find peace.”

Moon considered that. Filed it away for later. Mallow didn't know what any of that meant at all. She shrugged.

“Oh well,” turning to leave, she indicated for Moon to follow, “Guess we'll head out then! I'll come back later this week to see how things are, do your best!”

“Oh of course!” The woman waved goodbye as Mallow did the same, “Stay safe out there, little Moon!”

Moon didn't look back but Mallow smiled when she caught the expression on her face all the same. That was better.
Despite the early morning start for the Captain and Trial-goer, Mallow's visitations upon the many farms across the Akala Plateau had already set the time past midday. Stopping at the border of forest and plains, the road they were following ending at the ranch left behind, Mallow sat down and opened her bag.

Time for lunch!

Food was shared with Moon, Mallow's Pokemon expert foragers who brought back berries and plants that could be enjoyed by her and Moon's Pokemon both, and the pair of humans and their Pokemon relaxed under the shade of the leaves. Even at this slow pace it had still been a good walk to the forest's edge.

And now for their journey's next leg.

“We'll be meeting Captain Lana in the forest,” once done cleaning the remains of their lunch, Mallow retrieved something else from her bag. It was a device Moon recognised, but in a colour scheme unknown to her. This Ride Pager was pale green, branded with a Pokeball on the back, while hers was white with a golden symbol she didn't know.

Actually, now that she thought about it, that symbol did seem familiar. But to what? Moon shook her head.

“Here we go!” Activating the Pager, Mallow unleashed a Stoutland, who promptly began to nuzzle for affection. She rubbed its face with a smile. “Tauros are faster, but they can't navigate the woods as well as a Stoutland. Hop on board!”

The riding gear set up on the Big-Hearted Pokemon was for two people, a variant Captains kept for helping others get around. It was the responsibility of a Captain to care for the people across Alola, and having Ride Pokemon that could carry many was valuable. Because of that Mallow, like every other Captain, had a Ride Pager of her very own. One of few.

The culture of Ride Pokemon was an Alolan tradition – Pokemon raised to carry people across the land. They were not Pokemon held by a Trainer's Bond, but instead those who formed a partnership with Alola itself. Lent their aid in exchange for care. A different kind of bond. One with far fewer demands.

For most people Ride Pokemon would be experienced through rental stations, the system offering ways to borrow those Pokemon and travel within set locations. Wider-ranging Pokemon could be booked for tours of less inhabited locations, but they would need to be cared for by those heading out, a degree of skill in caring for Pokemon required before the rental would be approved.

Ride Pacers were new. While Ride Pokemon were a time-honoured tradition, the keeping of them had been done through ranches, barns, and other places those Pokemon could stay. The limitations of storage slowly being tested by the increasing population of Alola. A breaking point nearby.

Development of a solution started with the Aether Foundation. A project of theirs ended with – or rather produced as a side-effect, the original goal never mentioned – a new development, a way of transferring a Pokemon through the trade-system to a storage device bound to no Trainer at all. A device that could hold Pokemon without any Bond required.

The initial prototype from the Aether Foundation allowed for only a single Pokemon to be stored within. It was the work of Captain Ilima, contacted by a friend who worked with the Foundation, that led to the development of its current model, a version that could store a multitude of Pokemon. A device that could change the world.
Ilima, working with the Aether Foundation, ensured safeguards. The original device stored a Pokemon within it. The new version linked to the Storage System, ensured the same auto-release timer was used. Wisely did the Captain cover the tracks of the first version of the device – missing in an accident, its blueprints all that was left behind. A method to store a Pokemon without any guarantee of release, without any requirement for a Trainer to feel a Bond, it was dangerous, far far too dangerous.

Honestly, Ilima was thankful that the original device had disappeared, though the specifics of its loss were kept from him. However it may be, the longer that discovery of the original design could be kept back, the better.

Such a devilish item was better off lost.

Today personal Ride Pagers were in short supply. The Captains, Kahuna, and a few key Trainers across the Region had them as a means to support Alola best. Then those who could afford them. Gating by price, the slow release of the devices to the world, had been agreed to between Ilima and the Aether Foundation, accepting that its use would allow for the betterment of the world, though the danger hidden behind it would need to always be measured. For now, a drip-feed to see the effects. To allow them to put a stop to anything that went too far. To test and ensure.

It was still early days.

Moon didn't know this and Mallow didn't think on what little she did. Instead the Captain guided the Stoutland she sat upon the back of, weaving between trees at a pace that had her hair streaming behind her, smiling as she made every nudge and motion to keep the speed. She enjoyed this.

She really did.

Moon wasn't quite as adept at speed. Her first exposure to riding Pokemon properly had been the Tauros in Hau'oli City, and those followed clear lanes. After that was riding on the back of Professor Kukui's Braviary and Moon's almost fall from that still affected her. Heights were not a thing she enjoyed.

The ride to Iki Town atop Tauros-back was with company she knew and trusted. Moon was safe amongst them, and Hau's challenge to her had occupied her thoughts. The crossing of the sea from Melemele to Akala, when Moon had stood at the forefront of Kukui's boat, had again been at Hau's encouragement.

But this was different still. This was having no control, Mallow the one directing, as the Pokemon the two rode upon dashed through the forest, weaving its way between trees that, if hit, would end poorly for all three of them. It was an intense experience and not one Moon was prepared for – Captain Mallow getting far too into the groove of riding to notice the discomfort of her passenger.

Not until she slowed down to a stop.

“Okay, I- Moon?”

On unsteady feet Moon attempted to disembark the Pokemon, one hand over her stomach. A foot missed a stirrup.

“Woah!”

At least she was quick on her feet, Mallow rushing over to catch Moon before she fell. “Are you alright?” The queasy look on Moon's face quickly told Mallow she wasn't, and she relaxed her grip so Moon could dash off into the bushes.
Ah whoops.

When Moon returned, a haggard expression worn, Mallow clapped her hands and held them over her bowed head, resting upon her knees still. An apology must be more than words. “I'm sorry!” A loud splash of water nearby drew Moon's attention away. “Seriously!” Mallow stood up, missing the sound over her own distress, “I wasn't thinking I'm sorry! I really mean it! I do!” Moon's attempt to not focus on the experience struggled under Mallow insistence on acknowledging it. She continued towards the sound.

Mallow, still unaware there was anything drawing Moon, sure it was only her pushing the girl away, felt stricken. She'd messed up so bad oh no oh no. What was she going to do? “Moon,” following after Moon, who'd passed a few trees and had her back to her, Mallow approached, “I'm really really sor-”

“Hup!”

“-ack!”

It was the work of an instant. Moon had followed the sound of splashing to find a stream running through the forest, a girl sitting before it with fishing rod dangling out over the water. Just as Mallow had begun speaking the fishing girl had pulled with all her might, hauled a bright red Pokemon from the water, and sent it flying right into Mallow's face.

Picture perfect aim, really.

“Mallow?”

A face full of Magikarp, Mallow flailed, leaning backwards after the impact before straightening up and letting the fish fall to the ground, bouncing unhappily on the grass. Moon reached down and picked it up.

“Lana!” Mallow's tone was immediately accusatory, “You did that on purpose!”

“Not at all,” the one known as Lana, a girl shorter than Moon with a short cut of sea-blue hair, approached the pair shaking her head. “The Magikarp slipped off of my line. I think they're cleverer than most here.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” Mallow placed her palms against the sides of Lana's head, staring her down. Lana smiled serenely. “The master fisher let a Magikarp off her line, sure Lana, sure.”

Moon, now having reached the stream, set the Magikarp back into it. It splashed her happily before swimming away. Turning back to the pair, Moon watched as Mallow rubbed the knuckles of one hand against Lana's head, the smaller girl sticking a tongue out in jest.

“Admit you threw that Magikarp at me Lana.”

“It jumped right at you, maybe it wanted to eat the flower you keep?”

“Grrrr!”

There was something to it, the way the two were clearly as comfortable as could be with one another, that made Moon miss Lillie and Hau. When the three were together, when they relaxed and simply were in the same place, that was good. It was a special kind of good better than any other. The only thing like it was the time spent with her Pokemon.
Time spent with those you cared about, huh.

“Hello,” the voice, far less energised than Mallow's, greeted Moon, the girl standing before her. Up close it looked like she was wearing her shirt and pants over a swimsuit. Moon greeted her in return. The girl smiled.

“I'm Lana, Captain of Brooklet Hill. It's nice to meet you, Moon.”

There was a third requirement to be a Captain of Alola. Having completed your Island Challenge, being the right age to spend a few years as a Captain, of course. But thirdly came the right nature. A Captain must care for Alola. Must be ready to raise people and Pokemon. Must help polish the Island Challenge to shine and through it the Trainers that faced it. To do that took understanding and skill that stood above the rest.

The truth was that while Captains were required to surrender the position at twenty, many took the role before the age of sixteen. It was those with the pure ability and drive to overcome their Island Challenge in so short a span of time that were truly Captain material.

Captain Lana of Akala Island, who had completed her Island Challenge the fastest of the current Captains of Alola, was a fearsome force who communicated little of that in her greeting to Moon. Smiled gently. Had recently flung a fish – or at least was being accused of doing so – at Captain Mallow. Looked at Moon with interest.

“How are you feeling?”

The truth of that was that Moon was still a little uneasy after the ride through the forest and, after expressing that, Lana gave Mallow a look that instantly brought the girl back down to her knees. “I didn't mean tooooo!”

Both residents of Konikoni City, Mallow and Lana had grown up together, becoming fast friends. In each they had something they admired in the other – for Lana it was Mallow's ability to befriend and ally with everyone around her, while for Mallow it was Lana's unflinching drive that let her overcome any challenge placed before her. The two shared their Island Challenge, though the difference in age meant Mallow had started hers a full year and a half before Lana.

For as many friendships struggled under the difference between two Trainers, others only became stronger, each matching the other's pace. Lana caught up to Mallow magnificently, only for Mallow to grow even further in competition. For someone who, when completing her Akala Grand Trial had admitted to Kahuna Olivia that she was not sure she'd be able to continue on, Mallow reached her Final Trial at a proud fifteen, Lana only a half year behind.

Lana knew that it was her drive chasing Mallow that had helped her do as she had done.

Now they were Captains and where usually it was the older Captains helping the younger ones find their confidence, here it had been Lana once more pushing Mallow forward. Inspiring her to embrace her nature of befriending everyone she met to overcome her lack of faith in leading as a Captain would. A year ago Mallow had been filled with nervousness every day, unsure as to anything she was doing. Today she never looked back.

Lana strung an excellent joke off of that to poke fun at Mallow not noticing Moon's troubles, only upsetting her further. But Lana's teasing never had edge and it helped Mallow relax even as she complained about her own mistake.

Moon, watching this complex dance between the two play out, found herself surprised by how
natural it felt. The way they interacted and motivated each other, it was good.

She liked it.

When Mallow saw Moon's smile her own face cracked with one far wider, Moon realising she'd been smiling involuntarily only a moment after. She raised a hand to her cheek.

“Well then,” dusting off her pant legs from where she'd been sitting at the stream's edge, Lana clicked a button on the fishing rod she'd left lying on the ground, the device telescoping down to almost nothing, “shall we move on?”

“Okay then!” Standing up as well, Mallow nodded before turning to Moon. “Moon, Captain Lana will be looking after you now. When you complete your Water Trial, you're heading to the Royal Avenue, right?”

Moon nodded. That was where she and Hau would meet.

“You'll probably find Captain Kiawe there, so you can go on to your Fire Trial. After that is your Grass Trial, so do your best so I can see you soon! Okay?” Another nod. She would.

She couldn't wait.

“Alrighty!” Waving, Mallow stepped away, once more using her Ride Pager to unleash the Stoutland, who continued to snuffle around looking for food amongst the forest bed. “I'm heading off! Good luck with your Trial! Make sure to look after her, okay Lana?”

“Yes yes,” Lana waved languidly, responding to the gesture Mallow made indicating her eyes then Lana. Then the green-haired girl was off, once more riding at speed, leaving Lana and Moon behind. Lana turned to Moon. Looked her over.

Wow.

She really felt incredible.

It took a long time, a decade of Pokemon battling at least, for a real sense for Trainers to develop. Those with two or three, those who'd never stopped, they could tell a strong Trainer at a glance. Sense the Bonds a Trainer had with their Pokemon and the raw power those Bonds amounted to.

The best of the best could tell the results of most battles by simply looking at two opposing Trainers. Most. There was always room for surprises.

But even with only a rough four years of experience, Captain Lana felt something looking at Moon. This mysterious Trainer who showed no limits, she felt that way. Endless. That was the best word for it. Endless.

Lana withdrew a Ride Pager and released a Pokemon of her own.

“Moon,” stepping towards the bustling stream, Lana indicated the Transport Pokemon gently bobbing in the water's flow, “Lapras will take us further on.” A moment more to notice Moon hadn't heard a word, simply staring at the floating Pokemon. She was the type to be transfixed by a new sight then.

Lana didn't mind that at all.

“You needn't worry,” when she spoke again she finally caught Moon's attention, drawing the girl's
eyes back to her, “this Lapras is a far gentler ride. Although, if you would believe it, it can outswim a
Kyogre when it needs to.” Moon's nodding at Lana's words came to a sudden and immediate halt.
She stared blankly. Lana chuckled and gestured to the Pokemon. “The stream will take us far
through the forest towards Brooklet Hill. When you are ready...”

Still kind of looking at Lana weirdly after that sudden claim, Moon stepped out to the Pokemon, who
crooned a note of song to greet her. Oh, Lana smiled, she liked her. That Lapras usually kept her
opinions quiet.

Moon really was something else.

Lana boarded and the pair set out.

The Akala Plateau made up the south-western side of Wela Volcano. Far enough north plains gave
way to forest, and far enough through that forest the slope changed as one entered the north-west.
Bubbling brooks and coursing streams flowed down from the mountain and ran further north,
coalescing from the wide catchment and ending at one place alone.

At Brooklet Hill.

Through this, Lana was the perfect Captain for the location. Her talent for raising water Pokemon,
her natural understanding of that aspect of Alola, it allowed her to travel the countless tributaries
across Akala's north with ease. She and Mallow had picked a meeting place in the forest, beyond the
sight of the rest of the world, and exchanged Moon at it without issue. Now it was Lana's turn,
charting the flowing waters and taking Moon through the forest, through this backwards path,
towards the site of her next challenge.

To where all the water flowed.

Lana fished. The Lapras she kept as a Ride Pokemon was more than capable of travelling on its
own, following the stream as it wound its way through the thick Akalan forest, and so Lana had the
time to relax. To sit at the Pokemon's back and let her line dangle in the water left behind.

Moon watched with curiosity.

“With the speed we're travelling at,” Lana spoke as they went, Lapras's consistent and unwavering
speed shaking the pair in no way at all, “it's difficult to catch things.” She flicked the rod. A
Magikarp splashed in the water before Lana pulled the line back and cast again. Moon watched as
not a minute later the Captain brought up a Goldeen instead. If this was when it was difficult for
her...

Time passed. Lana spoke lightly, asked questions of Moon's experience before making grandiose
claims that absolutely definitely weren't true at all. Right?

True or false, Captain Lana wasn't telling.

It grew dark. Mallow and Lana had met past midday, and the river's flow through the forest involved
little of the sun making it to Moon or Lana's eyes. By the time it was late afternoon the flora-rich
environment was already dark. Moon huddled closer to the Lapras, wrapping her jacket around her –
retrieved from the bag she carried – and waited. Lana gave a countdown, announcing how long it
was to their destination.

Just half an hour left.

Just ten more minutes.
Five more.

There minutes.

Two.

One.

“We're here.”

In the time they had travelled the stream had merged with more than Moon could count, growing wide into a river that flowed with powerful intent. Yet the Lapras had never changed its steady pace, never been unbalanced, the perfect wayfaring Pokemon of the sea. It was almost stunning how smooth the ride had been.

“Careful now, don't slip.” Lana bounded to the shore with ease, before reaching out a hand to help Moon down. Only when the girl was also on solid land did Lana call back the Lapras, returning it to the Ride Pager she held once more.

Then turned to face the light of the building before them.

It wasn't a Pokemon Center. And this deep in the forest, no sighting of roads about, the structure was clearly no hotel. Moon didn't know what it was. Lana answered her unvoiced question clearly.

“This is a Pokemon Rangers' Station, where those who help keep Alola's environment safe stay. We'll be resting here tonight.”

Oh. That made sense. Was that fine?

“The Rangers know me, we'll have space.” Lana led the way, up the wooden staircase to the second-storey entrance. Navigated easily through the building, greeting those along the way. If they made any notice of Moon, Moon didn't see it. She was tired.

“Take it easy.”

With that command Moon relaxed. Shared food with the Captain and her Pokemon, eased into the room she had been given, and slept the night away. These days of travel, seeing Alola, they were good. But still there was the pressure behind them, the knowledge that the way she was moving was because of the world's eyes upon her.

Because she was the way she was.

Moon slept fitfully, dreaming of an Alola where the sun didn't rise and the sky was alight with eyes watching her every move.

That night it rained.

Chapter End Notes

A world-building chapter this time around. My original notes detailed up to the end of the Water Trial, but that would easily double this chapter's size if I did that and I'm just not about that. The Water Trial comes next and this chapter exists as a travel one. A
chance for me to flesh out the world of Pokemon and Alola, to dive into the characters we're seeing, and to build up what lies ahead. At its core I feel this chapter does a lot, but a lot of what it does is in setup that will pay off over the course of the entire story.

It makes it difficult to evaluate on its own in the midst of writing the entire tale. I hope you all enjoy it. That is my main wish.

I'm changing my writing style now - instead of trying to do chapters in big single bursts, to instead do a block of words each day. Being more consistent about it should be better for me and hopefully result in better quality too, but we'll only see that with time. Nonetheless I've already got all my notes for the next chapter ready to go, so I foresee no problems writing it over the coming week and having it ready to go at the same time next week. Are you excited for the Water Trial? You should be.

Captain Lana doesn't do things by half measures.

Aina's Kitchen is an anime reference - in the Sumo anime it's in Melemele, but since in the game canon Mallow lives in Konikoni, the restaurant her family owns goes there too. No in-game name so I took the anime one instead. That's how I roll! Regarding the Pokemon Ride system, just being able to call up Ride Pokemon at a whim, especially the Charizard Flight, completely destroys all narrative travel of this story. So I restricted it all heavily and I vastly prefer it that way. That was the sole motivation I started with for that. As for the ages of various characters, and the lengths of time of challenges and captainships, that's something I puzzled out that I feel I've got a good enough grip on. So much of the raw canon is barely defined, leaving it up to me to work into a shape that works.

I think I did though. I feel pretty good about how the overall design ended up.

Thanks to you who read, as Eldritch grows in size I fear it becomes daunting to new readers but there's no way I'm going to stop. For those who made it this far, whether following with each update or reading in bulk months past this date, thanks so much for doing so. Please look forward to what comes next.

For the Trial of Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill.
Clouds hung heavy in the morning sky, muting the light with their rain-swollen forms. Moon awoke to a knock on the door of the room she was resting in, Lana’s voice telling her they’d be eating soon. Dressing herself, looking out the window, Moon saw trees alone, lit by dull grey. Little else.

The hours last night had been quiet, the few other figures in this building, this Pokemon Rangers’ Station, giving them space. Moon had been free to, with Lana’s encouragement, allow her entire team out to eat. For all of them to be at rest.

Places like that in Alola weren’t as common as they should be for her. That was why Lana had brought her here. To a place she could be free.

Moon walked the halls of the building, leading away from the room she had been given. Beneath the carpet wooden floorboards creaked, the building old yet sturdy. A timeless classic, some amongst the Pokemon Rangers’ Association would describe it. Some.

She’d eaten in a dining hall of no small size, down the staircase on the first level of the building they’d entered on the second. At the time, besides she and Lana, there had only been one or two other people who’d kept quiet and to themselves.

Thus the juxtaposition hit Moon especially hard as she opened the door.

“So I was thinking about patrolling up-stream this coming-”

“-rain means we’ll see extra pressure at the chokepoints-”

“-see the Aether presentation? Some really cool-”

“Please trade shifts with me! I gotta get to Heahea tomorrow night for the show!”

“Saw some Team Skull punks around Brooklet Hill, they’ve really been getting brazen.”

“Did you hear the Trumbeak this morning?”

“Oh pass the honey!”

“What do you think?”

“How about we-”

“-agreed let’s-”

“Sure wish we had some more.”

Voices from every direction fell upon Moon’s ears, some two, three dozen odd people seated at the long tables arranged throughout the hall all in animated discussion over breakfast. Moon stared at the numbers, so active, so energetic that she wasn’t sure what at all to do. Hearing the door open a few turned, spotted her, and made mention to others. She watched nudges and whispers course along the tables as people looked her way before returning to their food.
Eventually the notice reached Lana herself.

“Oh Moon, good morning.”

To Lana Moon went, all too aware that while everyone around her was engaged in their own business, they were still sparing her glances. She tried not to look their way.

“Over here you two,” the voice at the table Lana had come from beckoned her back with Moon in tow, the man sitting there continuing to work his way through a sizable breakfast. Lana sat herself comfortably where she had been before, Moon slower to take the empty seat at her right. She looked in curiosity at the man eating his fill.

Every last person in this hall, besides Lana and Moon herself, wore jackets of similar design: bright red in colour, emblems Moon didn’t quite recognise of yellow, pink, red, and purple sewn across them. This man though, strongly chiselled, dark skinned with a clean shaven face and buzzed black hair, his jacket was a little different. More ornate, highlights along the seams. In any group it would scream ‘this is what the leader wears’. Lana caught Moon’s stare.

“This is Captain Jackson,” her introduction was acknowledged by a nod of the man's head, taking a sip of his coffee to start the morning right. “He's the head of the Pokemon Rangers' Association in Alola.”

Moon nodded her own acknowledgement moments before the loud sound of Jackson putting his mug back on the table drew eyes to him. He looked directly at her.

“Don't hesitate to eat,” his first words pushed Moon's attention to the spread on the table before her, and with a gesture of reassurance from the man she began preparing a plate. Something warm for a dreary morning like this. Jackson seemed pleased at the appetite Moon showed. Kids should be eating well, after all.

Between focusing on her food Moon observed. Many of the people, these Pokemon Rangers, were in discussion with one another between bites. Some stood and moved around, joining other conversations. One or two played with Pokeballs, balancing them on fingers or idly passing them from hand to hand. Every last one had at least one on them.

And almost constantly one had something to ask their Captain, whether advice on the current state of the environment, thoughts on how to approach a specific problem, or even for suggestions on how better to work with their Pokemon partners. Moon heard enough in just that small span of time to understand that Jackson was not only a figure respected deeply by his subordinates, but also a man both experienced and skilled.

The kind of person who impresses others just by the way they were.

“It's,” his plate cleaned, Jackson spoke again, turning to look at Moon. She'd been doing her best not to take notice of anyone looking at her that morning, and so it took a moment to realise Jackson had spoken. She looked up at him as he continued. “It's not really my place to say this, honestly, but I am sorry. You don't deserve what you have to go through. It's wrong.”

Moon's focus on her food fell away.

“Curiosity is a valuable thing, it drives so many of us in life. But it must always be tempered by respect. Those who let their interest overwhelm their sense have done you wrong. I wish it were not so.” Moon said little. Looked at Jackson but didn't really see much. Being prompted to think about it, all of this, quickly overwhelmed. Jackson shook his head. It frustrated him. Deeply it did.
“I was in Melemele recently, checking out the tunnels in the north.” That day, flying from Verdant Cavern, searching for Lillie, wandering through the earth, it remained vivid in Moon's memories. Jackson continued. “We're going to have to work extra hard to make sure no-one else ends up in those caves. It was lucky that things ended the way they did.”

Moon had heard that sentiment more than once already. She'd had enough of it. Perhaps sensing that, Jackson changed tack.

“Captain Lana,” the way he said it, the way Lana preened under it, showed an established rapport between the two, “has told me you'll be preparing for your Trial at Brooklet Hill. For as long as you are in the area, please consider this station somewhere you can stay in peace. And if any single one of my Rangers troubles you,” there was just the slightest tinge of volume in the way Jackson's voice rose, not enough to be any different from speaking normally, yet the entire room seemed to quiet just a little. Like everyone heard him when he spoke with command. “Well. They won't.”

A Jackson promise wasn't something to turn your nose up at, that was for sure.

“The Pokemon Rangers,” now that Lana was done eating she began to speak with a far more energetic expression than Moon had seen on her before, “are Alola's protectors of nature. Captains care for sites sacred to the Tapu, but Pokemon Rangers work all over Alola, keeping places safe from people but also for people. They're the best. I'm going to be one when I'm older.”

Jackson laughed but it was a warm and good-natured sound. Lana's smile didn't change.

“Captain Lana's been working with us since she was made such, she'll be a Ranger as good as they come when the time comes.”

“Captain Jackson,” the term Captain meant something different applied to Jackson than it did to Lana, but each still referred to the other with it in full respect, “used to be an Alolan Captain too. He was in charge of Brooklet Hill long ago.”

“Not that long!” Jackson's tone this time was recrimination for Lana, marred by the fact other people around had begun listening in and all took great amusement at the young Captain's subtle dig at the older's. Their noises of entertainment drowned out Jackson's complaint. He shook his head. Lana didn't miss the gesture of Moon holding a hand to her mouth, quietly laughing behind it. Oh that was nice to see.

As long as Moon could laugh there was still hope to see her through this.

“Moon,” Lana spoke with slightly more intent now, focusing entirely upon the Trial-goer beside her. Moon looked to her. “Before you undertake my Trial, you must pass a test. When you are ready, come outside. I will be waiting.”

“Eat well then.” Jackson's voice directed Moon's attention back to her plate, not yet cleared, as Lana took her leave. The Captain stopped and spoke to a few of the Rangers, already a member in all but title, but moved on quickly enough. Left the building to breathe the air still thick with moisture from the last night's rain.

Moon ate. Jackson continued to field questions from his subordinates. Just listening in, Moon understood he was on management duty today, but only for as long as he had to be before he could get back out into the field. The type of person who wasn't interested in sitting still with paperwork, who had to be out there in the depths of nature – that was exactly what she expected someone who led a group like the Pokemon Rangers to be.
Jackson saw her out when she was ready.

“Be careful while you're here,” he spoke with knowledge, leading Moon up the staircase to the exit from the building. “When the seasons change the activity of local Pokemon changes with it. Right now is a time of great conflict between Pokemon establishing new territories. Be cautious. You picked a fine time to test yourself against Alola.” It had only been three and a half weeks since Moon had begun her journey. It should have been another month, maybe two, before even the best of Trainers made it to Brooklet Hill. And there they would stay for far longer, pushed back by the Trials of Akala and forced to train and grow with their partners. That wasn't how the one known as Moon operated though. Her rate of growth, it was faster than she travelled.

Truly ridiculous.

Jackson opened the door for her, wooden steps leading down to the forest floor below. “And remember, you may return here whenever you wish.” Moon nodded and thanked him. Heard the door close behind her as she descended the steps, spying Lana standing by the river that ran by the Rangers' Station.

The Captain turned to face her once Moon's descent was complete. Raised her hands, two different Pokeballs in each. One Net one Dive. She nodded.

“Let's begin.”

“Zzt!” Responding to the presence of Pokemon, Rotom-dex emerged from Moon's bag and hovered overhead, announcing what it saw. Moon selected two Pokeballs of her own in that time. “Pokemon identified! Octillery, Water-type, evolved form of Remoraid! Cloyster, Water and Ice-type, evolved form of Shellder! Zzt!”

Moon raised her hands with a pair of Pokeballs in response. Lana nodded.

“I will be testing you.” She didn't bat an eyelid at the Pokemon to appear, the Dartix and Meowth. A part of her had wondered if Moon would bring her dragon to battle, but with her own Cloyster here Moon had wisely chosen not to. Her Dartix was already at significant risk from it. Lana could see Moon's attention focused upon the Bivalve Pokemon. She really did have good instincts.

But it wouldn't be enough.

“This will be a Double Battle, are you ready?”

Moon had yet to take part in a Double Battle alone. She had planned to at the Pokemon School in Melemele, but that clash had been interrupted. And no-one along her travels so far had extended that challenge.

Double Battles were tests that went beyond a simple two against two, fought one at a time. Splitting one's focus, and the energy they provided, between two Pokemon exhausted readily. Even Trainers of skill could be wary about engaging in such a fight, aware that an extended conflict might leave them exhausted. Moon had yet to experience it, and Lana knew that. But she needed to.

Otherwise she'd never match up to what lay ahead.

Moon's nod said she was ready. Lana's smile took a wilder edge, surprising the girl before her. It was rare she got to cut loose this way.

She was really going to enjoy this.
“Then begin!”

It wasn't fair. It wasn't meant to be fair either. The difference between Lana and Moon may only be a few years in the grand total, a gap that as they grew older would mean less and less, but right now it was the world. Moon had finished one Trial and one Grand Trial. Lana had completed her Island Challenge, and served a year of Captainship after that.

She crushed her.

For Moon it was stunning, an experience unlike any other. Against Tapu Koko she'd been aware of its power, struggled to assert herself against it, been allowed to act if only for a moment. But Lana didn't even give her that. The moment the battle began Moon was on the defensive, Lana's commands equally split between her Pokemon, the two covering one another perfectly. Moon didn't have a strategy in mind, her usual battle tactics refined in the fight itself. And she didn't get to have a strategy. It was the matter of moments, two perfect blows equally against her partners, Moon's attention unable to focus on either to give commands.

She stood there, silent and staring, as Lana called back her Pokemon. As Moon's two, her Dartrix, her Meowth, lay bested before her.

She hadn't been able to do a thing.

“You're not ready.” Lana's words were a weight Moon hadn't felt before, slamming down upon her shoulders. Her head hung as she fumbled with her Pokeballs, calling back the two partners she'd failed. She couldn't say a thing. The Captain approached her and held out a hand.

“You must train,” there was her quieter voice now, the intensity Lana had shown in battle gone in the flip of a switch. “The forest around Brooklet Hill, explore it, walk the paths, meet with the Pokemon, and better yourself. Your power, your abilities, are unrefined. You cannot go further relying on an unpolished gift. We won't let you.”

Moon nodded, eyes still lowered. Lana moved her hand forward into view. A small metal rod lay in it.

“Take this,” Lana lifted her hand, encouraging Moon to accept the gift. “The rivers around here are perfect for fishing. Take the time to familiarise yourself with Water-type Pokemon. If you follow the path,” Lana indicated and Moon followed her gesture, seeing now through the trees a dirt-lined track, “you'll find your way to the Brooklet Hill entrance. There is a Pokemon Center there as well. Do not enter Brooklet Hill yet, but train in the area. Better yourself. Do you understand?”

There was a long way to go. A million things she could do to improve. Here Moon stopped. For now.

Lana held back a vicious smile at the intensity in Moon's eyes when she raised her head. Good. Good. This was a Trainer who wouldn't be cowed. This was a Trainer who wouldn't be stopped. She'd get stronger. Much stronger. Perfect.

She was going to be amazing.

Moon trained.

She walked the path from the Rangers' Station and found busier roads, dirt and grass tracks that saw clear daily use. The bite of chill in the air, left from the previous night's rain, combined with the moisture to keep most people away. Gave her the freedom to move. To seek out Pokemon in grass
and in water. To battle.

To catch.

She visited the Pokemon Center, now and then. Made exchanges. If anyone in there, a small few travelling the area, paid attention to her, she didn't make note of them. Walked with head held high and eyes full of purpose.

She had to train.

Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill observed.

When it came to this area, only the most experienced Rangers knew it better than her. The backwards paths, the open ways between dense foliage, the places to watch the thoroughfare beyond, Lana knew them all. And so she observed the Trainer Moon, come from Kanto, now a resident of Alola.

And this is what she saw.

She saw Moon unleash a Pokemon and command it against the wild ones she crossed. Try tactics. Play defensive at times to observe and think. To last longer in battle while keeping her team safe. The thing she had been unable to do against Lana before. Even when multiple Pokemon were drawn to her ruckus, even when Moon brought out a second to fight, she kept her defense. Wild Pokemon were far less able to threaten than Lana had been, but still Moon was doing exceptionally. Her rate of growth as ridiculous as every other part of her.

It was something else.

Lana saw Moon catching Pokemon. And adding them to her team. Her composition changed over the course of the day, more Grass-types appearing within it. Preparing to counter the Water Trial. Amazing.

Trainers settled into teams they knew. Lent upon what typing biases they might have to help support just a little more. Grew to understand the weaknesses of their team and trained to counter them. To be prepared for any angle.

Moon was different. Moon didn't need to adjust the abilities of her team when she could simply change her team entirely. Mallow had called Lana that last night, making sure they had arrived safely before speaking about Moon. Noting the way Moon caught Pokemon, and how odd it was that she did. Wondering if Lana could figure it out.

She couldn't. By all accounts, it made no sense. No-one could juggle so many Pokemon the way Moon did. There had to be a trick. But Lana couldn't find it. Not, at least, until Moon wandered off the path.

Lana followed, her footsteps quiet, her presence unseen. Moon was wandering through the woods, her Dartrix scouting ahead. When it reported finding something, whatever it was looking for, Moon thanked it and returned it to its ball. Continued on.

Into the clearing that lay ahead.

Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill watched. Watched as Moon stood in the centre of the clearing, looked up to the cloudy sky overhead, and withdrew an item from her bag. Something Lana couldn't tell at this distance. Something white. Moon pressed a button upon it.
Wait, was that a-

A beam of light resolved into the shape of a Pokemon Lana had never seen up close before. A Charizard.

What.

She held back. Watched as Moon boarded the Ride Pokemon – Ride Charizard – then took off. Into the sky. Lana watched the direction. North-east. Moon disappeared from view.

And left much to think about in her wake.

For Moon it was important to return. The Bonds between her and her Pokemon, they drew her back to them. They were waiting for her. She focused on them, held herself against the height she travelled at, arms tight upon the flying gear the Charizard was equipped with, and continued on.

Beyond Akala's north-east to where the Poke Pelago lay.

Development had been quick.

A natural hard-worker, with the Pokemon Moon provided Mohn had easily settled into a routine. Work alongside the Pokemon. Help direct them to clear and till the land, to shift the earth, to tend the crops. Break time for food, food Mohn provided, harvested from the plantlife growing across the islands. Then repeat.

Moon had only been here three days ago. Left the morning after her arrival. But now she was back and she found herself surprised by the changes Mohn and her Pokemon had wrought. She suddenly felt like she believed in the Poke Pelago just a little bit more.

Her arrival came as no surprise. All of her Pokemon knew it, all turned to the sky long before the Charizard she rode was within range for its roar to be heard. Mohn waved as the Pokemon came in for a landing, his smile as wide as could be.

He'd never fail to smile for the one who'd agreed to help make his dream come true.

“Welcome back!” The greeting was responded to hazily, Moon uneasy after the flight. It was enough of a distance on the Ride Charizard to be off-putting, especially for someone so young. He sympathised. “Your Pokemon have been doing well!”

Mohn offered a tour. The fields were clearer than before, better able to support plants tended to by the Pokemon lending their aid. A bridge to the next island was at work, a way to allow the Pokemon to develop the others around. The thick and fast-growing trees on this island allowed for such construction. A fine start.

Moon settled with her Pokemon and spoke. Her words for them alone, Mohn left her in peace, continuing his own work. When not developing the islands he was continuing to toy with the Pokemon Storage System. A request system, where Moon could specify Pokemon for him to return to the PC for retrieval, had been completed only recently. He'd been surprised to see a message from her already.

She was quick to adapt.
As quick to grow as the Pokemon she kept.

Moon observed their growth. Working hard, supporting this island, it kept them healthy. But more than that. They were strong. Not as much as those who'd spent a length of time at her side, but far more than those living wild. They still drew strength. Still grew from her. Good. That was what she'd hoped.

Through this, she really could go all out. No need to hold back. Just like she'd promised.

She spent a number of hours more.

Mohn taught her about the islands. Showed her the work he and her Pokemon had done. Discussed future plans, and was reassured by her that more Pokemon would be caught. She believed in the Poke Pelago too. He smiled widely to hear that.

Moon changed her team, introduced the members with her to their fellows, and then took her leave. A part of her would love to stay, to spend the night with them surrounding her once more, but she knew now was not the time. Kahili's panic at her absence had avoided explanation by lucky distraction, the Key Stone she had been gifted inciting the woman's ire. But if Moon did not appear that night Captain Lana would no doubt search for her. And Moon did not want that.

She felt that if she told anyone, if she revealed the Poke Pelago and the way she used it, it would make nothing better. Only draw attention she did not want. Keep this to herself. This way of being herself.

That was better.

Captain Lana saw the Charizard pass overhead. She had given the topic rest within her mind, focused on observing how the seasonal changes in Brooklet Hill were measuring out, and determined how much longer. Two more nights, tonight and tomorrow. She was sure of that.

Then it would be time.

Moon and Lana returned to the Pokemon Ranger's Station separately. Greeted each other upon arrival. Lana did not mention observing Moon's actions, nor her mysterious departure. Moon did not mention the changes she had made. Simply noted she had trained. The Captain accepted that.

And after the bustle of the evening, the local Rangers sharing their meal, their presence increased in this location while Jackson remained in the area, after all of that Moon slept. Low rumbles echoed from the clouds, their payload once more washing the forest night. A storm was building but each time it tried to manifest it lost hold of the moisture it had built up.

Night turned to day and Captain Lana instructed Moon to battle her once again.

Moon opened the Double Battle with a Z-Move, an action few would ever do. Yet it was far too soon, Lana prepared for anything, and so she intercepted it, had her Cloyster act in defense. The blow hit, but its power was stripped by the protection her Pokemon raised against it. A surprise tactic like that, it wouldn't work at all.

Moon was already performing the motions for a second.

“Then I!” Lana moved. Raised her arms, the Z-Ring around her left wrist set with a blue crystal, and performed her own pose. Waves, like the rolling ocean. Power flowed from her into her Octillery while Cloyster defended once again.
And a surge of water washed out with overwhelming force, lashed up the two Pokemon Moon had used – a Mareep in partnership to the Dartrix this time – and held them fast within its spiralling torrent. Another battle brought to a close.

Lana hefted a sigh and walked without any sway at all. In this moment she could not show any of her Z-Move's effects upon her. Not with Moon before her. Not like this.

“You shouldn't do it like that.” Moon was once more stunned by the crushing defeat she had suffered at the hands of the Captain. Lana shook her head. “Z-Moves aren't meant to be used like that. Your Pokemon were beaten because they were exhausted by their use. You didn't think beyond believing they would work, did you?” The girl refused to look up again. Lana sighed. “Moon, think about your Z-Moves and what they mean. They're the bonds between you and your Pokemon. A sign of your trust in each other. When you use them, you're trusting one another that the time is right. Please. Keep that in mind.”

It took a moment for Moon to nod. To work past her disappointment at her defeat. Lana smiled.

“But honestly, two Z-Moves, you really are something.” Moon looked up. Lana indicated the path. “Let's move on... to Brooklet Hill.”

The flooded terraced steps of Brooklet Hill were richer with life than most of Alola, aquatic Pokemon of all types able to be found within their waters. The flow of brooks, streams and rivers across the northern stretch of Akala, all culminating at this singular point, helped gather these Pokemon together, and ensure a location vibrant and alive. Lana loved it. She truly did.

“Look.” Beyond the entrance to Brooklet Hill Lana turned Moon's attention, pointed out a clash upon the water. A Surskit was skating over the surface of a pool, a Goldeen repeatedly jumping out of the water and attempting to slam it with its horn. As they walked another Pokemon dashed past them, diving into the pool and joining the skirmish. The sound of splashing followed after the pair of humans walking through. Lana smiled.

“This is the time Brooklet Hill is most alive. The Pokemon claiming territory, fighting amongst themselves to settle their disputes. Becoming part of this will be your Trial. When you are ready.” Moon nodded and didn't at all realise Lana's ploy. Readiness was never going to be a factor.

Whether or not she was ready, tomorrow would be the night. Of that Lana was sure.

For now she taught. She showed Moon the paths of Brooklet Hill, the pools water flowed into and from, cascading waterfalls all the way to the bottom. The bottom where the Totem waited. Not yet. Not yet, little Moon.

She taught her to fish. Moon had experimented with the rod Lana had given her, but catching was slow, and so she'd focused on the landbound Pokemon instead. Lana gave pointers, and watched as Moon adapted to it. Caught a little faster. Battled what she fished up – whether Magikarp, Goldeen, or even the occasional Wishiwashi – as well as what was attracted by her fishing. Opportunistic Wingull, aggressive Surskit and Dewpider, even the occasional curious Poliwhag. A banquet of experiences to be had.

Moon indulged in them deeply.

Onwards the two went, Lana slowly driving Moon deeper into Brooklet Hill's grasp. They'd stop short of the gates indicating the Totem's lair, but up to it Moon must prove herself. Stand against these Pokemon at the height of their territorial conflict. Only with that experience, as she battled Pokemon, as others became curious and entered the fight as well, converting it from a one on one to
a grand royale, would she be ready. Lana enjoyed watching her grow.

Soon oh so soon indeed.

The tower of water, a pillar into the sky reaching heights comparable to Brooklet Hill's entrance though it came from its lowest point, alerted Lana to great trouble. The water hung in the air for a second, raised by incredible force, before breaking into a rain of droplets, washing down across the site. Immediately Moon and Lana were soaked through. For Lana, wearing a wetsuit beneath her clothing, this was no issue. For Moon it was far more frustrating. Lana felt that frustration too.

Something was messing with the Totem.

“Let's go let's go move move move!”

The voice reached their ears before the sight of its owner did, a young man soaked to the bone dashing around the path ahead to pull up short at the sight of the Captain staring him down. Lana took a menacing step to the black-clad figure wearing the insignia of Team Skull. That was a mistake they were not about to repeat.

“Hey what's the hold-up-” a second voice, a girl's, followed after as another of Team Skull's members appeared behind the first. Lana felt her battle aura rise. This would be dealt with.

“Doesn't matter go!” Ignoring the threat ahead the girl pushed the back of the boy's shoulders and ordered him forward, continuing to move up the path to where Lana and Moon stood. Lana worked her knuckles against a palm. The girl continued to ignore them. “Go!”

“Alright!” Having enough of being pushed the boy stepped forward and accelerated. The girl held up a Pokeball, but didn't act with it, just kept following after. Lana raised a hand.

“Sure you want that Cap?” Again the girl spoke, this time drawing Lana's attention to her. Though a grin couldn't be seen behind the bandanna she wore over her mouth, the Team Skull member's tone implied it well enough. “You're gonna need to go calm that big one down aren't ya?” As if on cue another pillar of water towered into the sky. Broke apart into another rain that fell upon the area. The girl shook herself as it washed over her as well. But kept moving. “Time's a wastin'.”

Lana bit back an extreme desire to respond. If Team Skull had riled up the Totem Pokemon to that degree it would be dangerous for the environment. She'd need to calm it. Somehow they'd known that.

She'd never given them the credit to be that smart.

Lana walked forward. The girl turned her head, wiping soaked pink hair out of her eyes, and flipped a pair of her fingers toward the Captain. “Gotcha.” Then kept running.

Lana turned and almost went after her. That sort of attitude, it was getting to her in the worst way. The girl, as if sensing that, stopped and turned back. Pointed with both hands this time. “And y'know!” To make absolutely sure she got the last word, she jutted out her hip to show the Pokeball hanging at it, “I got what I came for! So take that! Team Skull wins losers!”

“Yo Riley!” The voice of the other Team Skull member echoed from up the path, “Let's go!” She spent only a moment more in her pose before turning and racing up the hill. Moon too waterlogged to intercede. Lana growled frustration.

But let them go.
There were far more pressing matters to see too.

“Here.” Lana knew the waterways of Akala without peer. Unleashing her Ride Lapras, the Pokemon settled into a heavy flowing stream. She directed Moon to it. “This Lapras will take you back to the Pokemon Rangers' Station. You'll be safe to dry off there. Is that okay?” It wasn't as if Alola were a particularly cold place, but the weather of late had lent enough of a bite to the water that being soaked in it when you weren't ready wasn't a good thing. It'd be best for Moon to change as soon as she could.

Moon nodded and boarded the Pokemon without complaint. Seemed to shiver a little. Lana felt her ire towards the Team Skull pair grow. If she ever caught them again...

“I have to go and calm the Totem.” There were no more of the pillars of water, but Lana had to observe the situation. The worst possibility would be that the two had succeeded in ruining Moon’s Trial. It was up to Lana to ensure that was not the case. “Will you be alright?”

Moon nodded again. The Lapras began to fight against the current, its natural ability to cruise over troubled waters allowing it to make quick progress. Lana spent only a moment more before heading off to the base of Brooklet Hill.

Let no damage have come to pass. Please.

The remainder of the day was a lost cause. Moon succeeded in returning back to the Rangers’ Station, changing back into dry clothing, but stayed there after that. She still felt cold. Jackson, once informed of what had happened, made sure Moon remained close to a heater. Brought a mug of hot soup as well. Cut off any potential concern, that was how Pokemon Rangers prevented danger from spreading.

The truth of Brooklet Hill was that one must always accept the possibility of being soaked should you enter, but even still this was a bit much. That Team Skull, he'd see to them. If he found them.

It sounded like they'd achieved whatever their goal had been though...

Lana returned an hour later. To Jackson she reported, relieved that ultimately all that had passed with the Totem Pokemon was it being incited into a bad mood. It shouldn't affect tomorrow night's Trial. Was everything else ready? Jackson confirmed it was so. The timing was right, just as Lana had predicted.

He hoped she knew what she was doing.

The day passed. Night held sway and the Pokemon Rangers once again ate together and were merry. Their energy, their camaraderie, Moon appreciated it even if it was a little too bombastic for her taste. Lana spoke to her about her own experiences with Team Skull, troublemakers for years. Moon confirmed with her own stories. Each swapped a tale of chasing off Team Skull members who bit off far more than they could chew. Laughed.

They'd get them sooner or later.

“You'd make a good Captain.”

Jackson's casual observation surprised Moon, Lana agreeing to it quickly. The two determined it was almost a guarantee Moon would receive the offer. Discussed where she might take post were she interested. Mina, Illima, and Kiawe were the three closest to their retirement. Poni, Melemele, or Akala then. Their talk segued soon enough into discussing the Captains overall.
Moon would have learned much of the Captains were her thoughts not wrapped in the idea of being one herself.

Would she want to be a Captain? To care for a sacred site of Alola, to help Trainers face its challenge over the years? Was she even allowed to, given she was from Kanto? Unsure. Moon didn’t know how she felt about that. It seemed so distant and overwhelming.

She shook her head and let the thought go. Not something to focus on for now.

She had a Trial coming up.

The next morning was the same as the last. Clouds hung heavy overhead. The Pokemon Rangers ate a fine breakfast together, before spreading out to their work. Some had already deployed to further locations in Alola, while others had returned from their posts. Jackson observed he still had a week at least of paperwork to go.

Maybe if he did his paperwork more often instead of letting it pile up, a subordinate hinted before being scheduled for cleaning duty of the Station. Their friends laughed at them for that. It’s what you get for mouthing off at the Captain.

Moon and Lana smiled through that until the time for the third test came. One more Double Battle to be fought.

Lana gave Moon room. Directed her Pokemon, her Octillery and Cloyster well, but not with the same savagery as before. Left openings where the young girl could think, devise, and act. And succeed.

It was not as if she were just letting Moon win. Lana kept a powerful offensive, and pressured Moon well. But never so intensely that Moon lost her focus and slipped. Never so constantly that Moon couldn’t respond. She still had no grand strategy, nothing more than frankly incredible reactions for her age. Something that would carry her far but never all the way. But it was enough for now. Enough to pit her against this Trial.

So when the battle ended, when Moon lowered her arms from the Z-Pose, her Dartrix the only Pokemon of the four still standing, Moon grinned widely. She’d done it. She’d done it! Lana smiled and congratulated her. It was time.

“Tonight will be your Trial,” Lana spoke in her Captain's voice, the kind where you have to put on a proper show for the Trainers you were overseeing. “Spend the rest of your day resting, think about this battle and the battle to come, and prepare. I will return when it is dark.”

That was the end of their training. Lana spent the day hunting, searching for clues as to Team Skull's actions, while Moon spoke with her team. Her new members she needed to rely on, and so she focused upon them and ensured they held the same will. Victory. Local Rangers observed the young girl and the intense bonds she forged with her allies. There really was something incredible to her, huh?

The day turned. Moon analysed the battle with Lana again and again. She knew it had been different, the Captain approaching it in a different way that let Moon act. She hadn’t even used her Z-Move. But she’d been pleased with Moon’s efforts. Why? Was the initial battle just to show how far there was to go to the top? And those that came after tests appropriate to this level? She didn't know. Didn't understand.

Simply let the day fall to night as the Captain of Brooklet Hill returned.
“Moon.” After ponderous deliberation over the past few days the skies had opened in full, rain falling heavy across the region. Lana’s voice held out only just over the pounding of water upon the station. “Are you ready?”

Moon nodded. The Captain smiled. And held out a gift.

“Here,” Lana watched as Moon opened the box, a black wetsuit of her own nestled within. “You’ll need this to keep your body-heat. No-one is staying dry tonight.”

Jackson, taking a break from paperwork, looked over to Lana. Gave a final expression of 'are you sure?' Lana nodded back. This was what needed to be done. Moon took the new article and changed. Wore clothing over it just as Lana did, but was now ready for the chill. Good. Lana led her out of the building.

“It is time for your Trial.”

Thunder rumbled overhead as Moon and Lana disembarked from the Lapras, the Ride Pokemon having taken them back down into Brooklet Hill's depths. Water fell heavily upon them, but Lana did not mind it and Moon’s wide-brimmed hat was good enough to keep her head dry. For now. It was dark, a pair of lanterns Lana had brought and the flashes of lightning through the clouds all the light there was to see by.

In truth Lana would have preferred a kinder time. A better weather. A million things to be easier. But now was the precise time she had been waiting for. A Trial suited to the one known as Moon. It could only be now.

Lana led the way. Down the path cut through the rock, past the giant pools of water collected from across the island’s north. All the way to where the waterfalls poured, to where the sea crashed over rock walls and washed into the lake, to where the Trial Gates stood awaiting the next challenger to pass their boundary.

To the bottom of Brooklet Hill where the Totem awaited.

“Come.” Once more the Lapras manifested in the water, once more Lana and Moon boarded its back. In the centre of the lake an island lay, the place of Trials. How many Trainers already had Lana ferried across the water to be tested? How many returned victorious, how many felt the sting of defeat?

None to be as memorable as this. She knew that in her heart.

A burst of water surged ahead, an explosion of force from beneath the waves whipped by the wind and the rain. No pillars like before, but a clear sign of readiness. As Lana guided the Lapras through the blasts, the activity beneath the surface of the lake unknown to her passenger, she kept her eyes forward. Navigated the crashing waters with ease.

Upon the island they now stood, Lana directing Moon forward. She could go no further. It was Moon's Trial to face. The island was a crescent and, as Moon approached its inner curve where the water surged upon its shore, the bursts across the greatest lake of Brooklet Hill took notice.

And approached.

Moon stood on guard, lantern raised to the dark. Held in her hand a Pokeball, ready for the battle to come. The Totem of Brooklet Hill. Her second Trial. Another burst of water, droplets scattering across the lake, lost amongst the pounding rain. A crack of lightning and thunder overhead. Roiling clouds illuminated for but a moment.
Then peace. Silence so intense it drowned out the noise. This presence, this intensity, it hid everything else. There was only this one moment of calm.

Calm before the storm.

The surface of the water exploded. With a lunge into the sky high above Moon's head the Pokemon emerged, light glittering amongst manifold scales. Each flash of lightning caught illumination in its grasp, strung between the water binding it together. Binding its countless parts as one.

Moon had been taught of Wishiwashi by Lana. Watched as large Pokemon jumped from step to step of Brooklet Hill, a predator capable of claiming any territory yet formed of individual prey that would flee from any foe. They were powerful, and to be respected for their strategy, Lana had told her. Moon had nodded.

This Wishiwashi was bigger, far bigger, than any of those she'd seen before. Floating in the air, held by the water under its own command, it stared her down, light focusing in its eyes, bright beacons in the darkness illuminating her before it. The aura that wrapped around it was beautiful, and powerful. Moon felt its power. This would be no easy battle. She prepared herself.

It was tim-

The head of the Pokemon exploded, a cutting beam of frost carving through it. The individual components, tiny Wishiwashi, fell and scattered as the Totem thrashed, as the Pokemon it had suppressed within its grasp broke free. Giant legs extended out of the mass of fish Pokemon, each settling uneasily on the shore of the island as the Araquanid hauled itself out of its captor's hold.

Aura hung over it too, light that was hard to ignore. Moon stared at it, the Pokemon freed, as it shook itself loose of the lingering grasp of the Wishiwashi that had faced it. Their battle not yet done.

More lightning. More thunder. The waves rolled and with a crash a surge of Pokemon erupted from them, rejoining the mass they had been cut from. The Totem Wishiwashi rebuilt itself, menacing over its foe. The Totem Araquanid stared back, mandibles clicking, the sound lost in the wind. Moon stared.

And each. Turned. To her.

Lana held her ground. This was the time of conflict for all Pokemon in Brooklet Hill, even those she had raised as Totems. One would take this territory from the other, the dance repeated as the year turned. The time of their final, decisive, battle, she had measured it. And Moon's proximity to it had been far too much to resist.

If she were a Trainer with ability beyond measure, with potential that exceeded all, the one who may stand at the top of the world, then she must be tested as such. Lana watched as the two Totem Pokemon stared Moon down.

Let the Trial begin.

Dartix manifested in an instant, Petilil a moment behind. The second Pokemon, another Grass-type, had taken part in Moon's Melemele Grand Trial and was the second longest serving of her party-members on her. She trusted in it. A Double Battle against two Totems, so that was what this was?

No holding back.

The two Totems attacked. Each breathed streams of water, the air growing so thick with liquid in the storm that it became as if the lake had risen up around them. Moon gave her orders, took steps back
as the mass of water threatened to pull her in, and kept her focus. Don't be thrown out of pace the way Lana had done to her. Measure what you are doing. React accordingly. Follow the plan.

Dartrix's bladed quills scythed the water, cut it clear and opened ways for Petilil to strike. The Bulb Pokemon was an absorption type, and needed clear direction to land its blows. The Wishiwashi was a pure Water-type, while the Araquanid Water and Bug, giving it advantage against two Grass opponents. Paired with that, Moon understood that a Wishiwashi school damaged enough would break apart. She knew who to target first.

Still it proved difficult. Both Totems seemed frustrated by Moon's interference in their fight, and both focused on her over the other. Directing them to clash, and harm one another in their effort to fight her, would be tricky yet needed. Their raw power eclipsed her own. Making use of that was essential.

Moon maintained the strategy.

Dartrix covered. Drew attention, flew quick. The Araquanid had an attack of sparkling frost, a threat as great or even greater than Lana's Cloyster had posed. Moon kept the command, had the Blade Quill Pokemon evade and lure, all the while allowing her Petilil to sap its foes, to loose powder through opened gaps and begin to weaken those it faced. The first step.

The Totem Wishiwashi turned its attention upon the slower of the Grass-types and snapped it up in its watery maw.

Z-Move. Flyinium-Z. Supersonic Skystrike. A flash of lightning illuminated the bolt of energy that was her Dartrix as it sought its target, as it burst through the heavy liquid air.

As it struck the Araquanid distracted by its opponent's success.

The blow was strong and the Water Bubble Pokemon staggered. In that moment of opportunity for the other Totem, aware now its rival was reeling, Dartrix struck again in reverse. More bladed leaves. A hole for Petilil, draining energy to keep itself strong within the storming torrent of the Wishiwashi school's mouth, to escape. It dropped, Dartrix grabbed it, and the two flew back to Moon. Each exhausted.

She returned each and raised two more Pokeballs to continue on.

Mareep, caught in the farmland beyond Paniola. Fomantis, caught in the forest before Brooklet Hill. Each so recent. Each so new to her. But each with a Trainer's Bond connecting them to her and each ready to fight under her command. The battle not yet done.

Moon gave direction. Electric jolts, cutting leaves, they reached the two staggered Totems and drew their attention once again. Never loose your pressure. Never give them room to think. Captain Lana had taught Moon that. No holding back.

The Araquanid staggered forward, more incensed than its opponent Totem at the strikes it had suffered under Moon's command. Moon pulled back further, giving her distance from her Pokemon as the two continued to hammer the charging Totem, doing little to halt its speed. But little added up and Moon observed the twitch of a leg buckling before straightening. A weakness exposed. She directed her Pokemon to it.

Keep fighting.

The Wishiwashi attacked as Moon's two Pokemon held their ground against the Araquanid. Once more the two Totems, in close proximity to one another, became distracted by each other. Their need
to fight for dominance clashing with their desire to chase away this intruder brought pause, pause
Moon exploited with electricity and bladed leaves once more. Open the way. Target the weakened
leg. Strike the gathering in the school's head where the Araquanid had burst from before. Sap at
them. Evade and deflect their attacks. Keep one between her Pokemon and the other. Let them clash.

Fomantis was struck by a frost-laced beam. Return. Eevee. A cautious personality but one with the
willingness to battle as well. Move quickly, allow no rest. No peace. Mareep's electrical attacks still
key. Attention turned to it as it did the most damage of them all.

Moon held up her arms, fitting the Normalium-Z into the Z-Ring she wore.

Time for the next.

Light. Surging Z-Aura. Mareep glowed. Provided power, a glut of energy flowing through the
Trainer's Bond between Moon and the Pokemon, the Pokemon that had already lived years amongst
its herd, chased off intruders, grown on its own. Years more to go further alone. But with Moon at its
side, with Moon giving her energy, how easy it was to grow.

How easy to become strong.

The strike landed and the Araquanid, struck once again upon its head, fell backwards, the pair of Z-
Moves more than it had been prepared to take. The Wishiwashi fell upon it, consumed by the
opportunity presented, and Moon blinked to see the pink Wool Pokemon before her. In receiving
power, in taking part in combat, it had grown to this stage already. The Flaaffy cried its evolution call
and unleashed a surge of electrical energy upon the Wishiwashi submerging the Araquanid.
Electrified them both.

Lana watched, breath held. So this was Moon. She thought she'd been ready for what she would do.

She hadn't.

Moon performed the motion again. Eevee, strike. While Flaaffy continued its electrical assault the
Evolution Pokemon struck with a full-force blow, the attack scattering the Totem Wishiwashi apart.
A tiny fish, now only faintly glowing with Z-Aura, dropped into the water and disappeared. School
broken. Pride shattered.

Its battle over.

No slowing down. No giving them room to think. Eevee return, you are tired after this Z-Move. The
Araquanid staggered in confusion, having taken the Z blows, having been savaged by its Totem foe.
The sixth Pokemon. Bagon. A beam of ice from the Totem would be the end of it, but that beam
would not come. Moon did the motion again. Lana felt her heart seize.

Z-Aura flared around her a fourth and final time.

In the attack's wake, the Araquanid limping back into the water away from the force it could not
overcome, the flash of lightning illuminated Moon as she turned. As the glow of her Pokemon
returning to her lit her red. Perhaps the Aura she had commanded stayed with her too. For to Lana's
eyes she did not see a girl, no eleven-year old taking her Trials.

She saw something in the rain immense and unknowable, so intense it made her look away.

How could anyone be ready for this?

The rumble of the storm faded and the rain came to a close. The second Trial complete.
It was a quiet return. Moon said nothing and Lana did the same. Lapras took the pair once more up
through Brooklet Hill, along the river back to the place where they would stay. A staircase climbed.
Clothing wrung under awning. The door to the Rangers' Station opened.
The loud sound of a party popper being pulled.
“Congratulations!”
It was difficult for Lana to determine how the Pokemon Rangers had known. The party they had
prepared showed they'd expected it. As soon as she and Moon were dried and changed they were
invited to celebrate, and the energy of that night allowed each to relax.
To find peace for the moment.
When the hours faded, when Moon sought sleep and Lana lay in the bed she was given reviewing
everything, every last thing she had seen, her phone lit up, message recently sent responded to.
Good.
Moon's impossible ability would be a topic to discuss every day for the rest of her life, but the other
thing, that was far more pressing. Lana's eyes focused on the screen.
This would have to be dealt with.
Lana posted a message in ~Captain's Chat: Mina please sleep edition~
Lana: Moon completed her Trial
Mallow: Yay! ヽ(゜∇゜)ノ
Ilima: As impressively fast as expected.
Ilima: It is the season of change for your Totems, is it not? Which did Moon face?
Lana: both
Mallow: Nope!
Ilima: Pardon me?
Mallow: Nope!
Mallow: Nuh-uh! Not tonight! Not at this hour! Not dealing with that!
Mallow: Ilima, no more typing
Mallow: Lana, stop typing
Mallow: Lana stop
Mallow: Lana I see you typing no. Do not say another word
Mallow: Lana I know you're just holding down one key to freak me out
Lana: sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss
Lana: :p
Mallow: >:[
Ilima: ...
Ilima: Message me after this please.
Lana: I will
Lana: but that wasn't why I sent this message
Lana: while Moon was training for her Trial I noticed she had something she should not
Mallow: Oh her Key Stone?
Ilima: h
Ilima: her what
Mallow: Yeah! While she was in Heahea City some Kalos researchers found her and gave her a


Key Stone! It was really weird, Kahili got seriously mad about it
Ilma: Just a Key Stone?
Mallow: Nope! A Mega Stone too!
Ilma: which one
Mallow: uhhhh
Mallow: not sure? HexString
Mallow: Kahili seemed freaked out about it though
Ilma: ...
Ilma: hold on
Ilma: please tell me it wasn't this one

Ilma attached file salamencite.png

Mallow: Oh yep! That's the one!
Ilma: and who were these researchers again
Mallow: I think Kahili already killed them :/
Ilma: GOOD
Lana: we've gotten off track
Lana: it's not Moon's Key Stone
Lana: she has a Ride Pager
Mallow: She does???
Ilma: How???
Ilma: I don't see how that's possible.
Ilma: are you sure?
Lana: I saw it with my own eyes. She has a Ride Charizard in there.
Ilma: ...
Ilma: We don't have Ride Charizard? They're not Alolan natives.
Lana: well neither was her Ride Pager
Ilma: what
Lana: It was white.
Mallow: when I banned talking about Moon's Trial so we don't hear anything too wild at this hour I did not mean tell us all something way worse
Ilma: white.
Lana: yep.
Ilma: ...
Ilma: we should talk.

Ilma has started a call

Chapter End Notes

A part of me dearly wishes I had cut at the beginning of the Trial - the following week of you all yelling at me would have been a delight. But the next chapter would have flowed far too awkwardly beginning with the Trial itself, so instead I have brought to you the entirety in one go. Lucky lucky.

Captains test and Kahuna teach. It is a Captain's role to ensure the Trainers they oversee
are growing and so a challenge that allows them to grow is needed. The lucky timing that let Lana do this, it did push Moon. I wonder if Lana is prepared for the ongoing consequences of that. We'll see.

This chapter marked the use of original characters in Eldritch, there is a reason for that but one that will only be understood with time. The vast majority of this cast are Pokemon canon, but in response to a need there will be some who are not as well. Trust in me. I assure you I know what I am doing.

And that's that for this chapter! I will return with the next one next time, as Moon heads on from Brooklet Hill to the next Trial beyond. Thank you all for reading, I'm truly thrilled to still have you with me as Eldritch grows and grows. Please look forward to what comes next. By now you know, there's no stopping this tale. No holding back.
“Watch closely. This is the Z-Pose to use the Waterium-Z!”

Light danced across Moon's face, filtered through the canopy above, reflected from the water below. As the Lapras, Ride-Pokemon of Captain Lana, carried the two south from Brooklet Hill, Moon smiled. Stared at the blue crystal she held up to the sky, enjoying its colour in the morning sun. It was good.

It was hers.

“Although,” Lana had frowned, considering Moon as the two stood outside the Pokemon Rangers' Station, the Trial-goer bid farewell and wished full well by Jackson and his crew, “you don't have a Pokemon that can use it.”

The requirement changed with one's growth. For those just beginning, it could take many weeks to properly establish a bond with their partners that allowed for Z-Moves to function. For those experienced, those like Lana, all she'd need do is spend a few hours with a newly caught Pokemon for it to trust in her enough to receive her Z-Power.

Moon's growth was, in this as in all things, aberrantly fast. She'd successfully performed a Z-Move with four Pokemon the night before - two of which she'd caught within the last week, one of which had evolved in that moment. Plenty of Mareep in the wild herds around Paniola evolved to Flaaffy, it was completely possible Moon had caught one on the cusp, but Lana got the feeling it was more than that.

That thing she saw in the darkness, when the Totems were fleeing and Moon had turned to face her, she couldn't stop thinking about it.

Wondering if the girl she could see standing before her was really what she appeared to be.

However it may be, the truth of the moment was that Moon did not have a Water-type Pokemon capable of performing the Z-Move Hydro Vortex. As Moon remarked the same was true for the Fightinium-Z Kahuna Hala had given her, Lana had perused Moon's Pokedex, the Rotom inhabiting it happy to answer any and all questions about its contents.

“You don't need to use them all, most people choose only one or two Z-Moves to remember. Have you ever seen someone perform the wrong Z-Pose for a Move? It's hilarious.” Lana's fingers stopped scrolling the Pokedex. Hang on. “Now when did you catch this?” Moon observed the Pokemon Lana had stopped on and recalled. Just the day before, while Lana was out. Moon had taken a walk into Brooklet Hill and fished to relax. She'd found it then. Lana smiled.

“Well,” letting the Rotom-dex go, Lana looked at Moon, “pay close attention to that one. It's not easy to raise, but an incredible Pokemon if you can. I'd like to see you do it.” Moon nodded, staring at the Pokemon shown.

Interesting.

“Either way, consider preparing a Water-type if you can. After all, it's Kiawe's Fire Trial next. Your Dartrix won't help you there. Not the way it did for mine.” Those words from Lana earned a hurried
nod from Moon. She would have issues with the Trial ahead if she didn't prepare. She'd need to think.

From then to now Lana and Moon had boarded the Lapras once more, setting off upon the waterways of Akala's north. Following a different path, leaning far closer to Wela Volcano's slope, Lana would bring Moon as far south as she could. As close to Kiawe's next Trial as could be done.

To the road that would take Moon to Royal Avenue and the Battle Royal.

In that time, as Moon sat upon the back of the Lapras, admiring the Waterium-Z and considering what was next to come, Lana guided the Ride Pokemon and thought her own thoughts. About Moon.

The conversation with Ilima last night, Mallow reluctantly joining the call, had been stressful. The concept of Moon possessing the original Ride Pager, a model with none of the safeguards the present version had, was one of great concern. Ilima had strongly suggested Lana make an attempt to retrieve it.

Mallow had sternly told them both that they should not.

With the countless unknowns swirling about Moon, pressuring any part of her could result in disaster. Why did she have a Ride Pager? Where was she going? Those were questions that absolutely should be answered. And they'd make sure they were. But taking the Ride Pager from her? Mallow didn't trust what change would come of that.

Moon was so young, so impossible, and so pressured. They couldn't be part of that pressure.

Mallow was sure it wouldn't end well.

Lana couldn't tell. They didn't even know for sure if this mysterious Ride Pager that Moon possessed was the original Aether model, the version Ilima feared for its potential misuse. Where every existing system of storing Pokemon had safeguards baked so deeply into their foundation that it was impossible to imprison a Pokemon within them – whether Pokeballs allowing the Pokemon within to exit as they pleased or the Storage System's automatic release timer – the original Ride Pager did not. Ilima had obfuscated that in producing the current model, hopefully enough to never be reverse-engineered, though time would tell on that, but the original, that in the hands of the wrong person could end in disaster.

They had to find out if that was what Moon had, and had to get it away from her if she did. That was Ilima's belief.

In the end, Mallow argued him down to this: they would prepare a new Ride Pager, ascertain whether Moon's was the original without causing Moon to fear they were acting upon it, and determine just what she was using it for. Based on those factors, they would openly approach her with the intention to exchange her Ride Pager for a new one. It would not be immediate action, but it would be action they could take. When Kiawe woke the next morning he'd agreed to watch Moon carefully for uses of the Ride Pager and see what he could determine.

That was the solution they settled upon. For now.

The route from Brooklet Hill, or at least the Rangers' Station closest to it, to Royal Avenue by water was fairly intense. Following a curving river, Lapras ascended small steps in the water with shocking ease, but larger climbs required Moon and Lana to dismount, ascend a staircase cut into rock or steep hill, then board the Ride Pokemon once again. In total, from their early morning departure, it was late
in the morning by the time Lana directed the Lapras to a halt. They'd travelled through thick forest, caves full of hanging greenery, and a stone valley caused by the upheaval of the earth so many years ago. A journey that had entranced Moon along the way. Seeing her smile in witnessing Alola's beauty, Lana found relief in that.

That was the kind of person she could trust, no matter what.

“From here,” Lana walked with Moon, steps away from the water along a tree-lined path, “is the road to Royal Avenue. It's completely straight, impossible to get lost on. Just keep going and you'll find it.”

Moon paused. Looked at Lana. Was she not coming? Lana shook her head.

“Team Skull has me worried. They were smart the other day, that's not like them. I want to stay close to Brooklet Hill for a little while.” Oh. Moon nodded. That made sense. Lana gave a smile. “You've done well, and completed my Trial. Good luck with your next, Moon. I'll be cheering for you.”

Moon smiled back. She would.

And there they parted ways.

The road was as Lana had said, unerringly straight to an almost boring degree. Following it, Moon distracted herself by investigating noises of interest, patches of forest, or fields of grass appearing along the way. Other Pokemon Trainers greeted her, some inviting battle, the area a popular one being so close to both Royal Avenue, where Trainers gathered, and also the main road from Heahea City itself.

In battle Moon was relentless. Her defeats at Lana's hands had hammered home how powerful the act of keeping your opponent unbalanced was, and so Moon sought to emulate what the Captain had shown her. Think and act fast, so fast your opponent couldn't keep up. It was difficult, and Moon's commands weren't as sharp, her Pokemon not as prepared, as Lana's had been. But it was effective, and many of the Trainers she fought ended the battle admitting they didn't stand a chance. Complimenting the young girl on her strength. She must have given her all to the single partner she showed each time.

Moon never revealed more than that. Without someone to help, revealing who she was would only result in her being swarmed. She'd been taught that. So she kept herself hidden as best she could.

Some still got the impression that maybe this young girl who crushed them in battle was the mysterious Trainer with that impossible ability all the same.

Thus Moon continued down the main road of Akala, battling Trainers and wild Pokemon both, closing in upon the fork that led to Royal Avenue. And the occupants who had taken it over.

The first thing she heard was the sound, the boombox producing something at a low enough quality that it could only barely be described as music. There was a nostalgia to the noise that reminded Moon of another time, another place, the docks of Hau'oli City almost four weeks ago. She moved faster, determined paces, closing in upon the sound.

She knew exactly what that meant.

The fork that led to Royal Avenue was occupied, one branch barricaded. Seated atop the barricade, next to the loudly playing boombox, was a Team Skull member, the same black clothing, silver pendant, and skull beanie worn. A second member stood before the blockade, moving back and forth to the beat. Then a few steps back, just where the path forked, a small girl and a huge Pokemon
stared them down. Moon approached just in time to hear their conversation repeat.

“An' I'm tellin' ya,“ the Team Skull member that was dancing continued to do so, rarely actually stopping or looking at the girl, “Ain't no-one gettin' through. There's like, a mudslide or somethin', we're doin' our part keepin' Alola safe. Practically Captains ain't we man?”

The second member atop the barricade gave a thumbs up to his fellow below. The one on the ground folded his arms, doing a backwards slide across the path. “So that's that! Get lost!”

“I can assure you,” the small girl's foot was tapping against the ground, not to the music but to her own annoyance, “Mudsdale and I can cross any environment no matter how rough. You are getting in the way. We will be fine.”

“Nope no way,” the one she was arguing with held his arms up as a cross, “rules are rules are rules, y'know. We hear 'no-one gets through' we make sure no-one gets through, ain't that right dude?”

The second member nodded and turned the boombox up, not so much raising the music as the amount of static overlaying it. Moon cringed at the noise as she approached. The Team Skull member saw her and sighed.

“Listen!” Looking over the other girl he pointed at her, “Road's closed yo. That's that. No goin' through. Got it? Get it? Get lost!” Moon frowned. The girl turned to her.

She was small, even smaller than Lana was. Tan skin, very long and bushy black hair hanging past her hips in two tied tails, wearing a tan and purple outfit that reminded Moon somewhat of the clothing the farmers of Paniola wore. A little bit different though.

“Hello Trainer,” she nodded to Moon, who nodded back, before turning to face the blockade before them. “Team Skull appear to be blocking the path, claiming it is protecting travellers from danger. I find it difficult believing they are doing anything out of the goodness of their heart however.” Moon agreed to that quickly. The Team Skull member before them shook his head. Wow.

“Hey that cuts deep, right to the bone yo. You sayin' we ain't got no hearts? Here we are doin' the right thing and y'all get up in our grills about it. Don't they ever teach you not to judge a book by its cover? You even read, yo?”

There was a weird aura to the two girls staring him down, each clearly unimpressed by his clear display of public service. The Team Skull Grunt felt himself take a step back. “Uhh, yo bro, hop down yeah? I think we gotta help these two walk on.” With a groan the other Grunt clambered down the stack of crates, boards, and drums. Took a stand beside his bro ready to turn aside all comers. Feeling a little more backed up now, the first Grunt pointed at the pair. “Alright you kids just get movin' and no-one has to get hurt. Road stays closed.”

The girl pointed in return, the giant Draft Horse Pokemon looming behind her taking a step forward. Moon raised a Pokeball of her own.

“You will be moving.”

And with the small girl's proclamation, she and Moon entered battle.

It ended quickly.

On Moon's end, the Team Skull member's Drowzee attempted to pacify her Bagon who, in response, headbutted it, flipped it into the air, juggled it with multiple jumping headbutts, and then slammed it into the ground with one more. Rock Head Pokemon indeed.
The other girl was even more effective. Moon didn't even see what Pokemon the Team Skull Grunt set against her, just watched as the giant horse, the Mudsdale, calmly barged through the pile of junk that was the barricade erected across the road, leaving it collapsing in its wake. Hands on her hips, the girl blew out a breath. There. That was better.

The Team Skull members stepped back.

“Uh hey, come on, we're just tryin' to help y'know.” The first one's attempted de-escalation came to a halt as his partner rapidly elbowed him in the side. “Sup bro what's wrong? Y'look like you saw a ghost, yo.” The pointing continued. He turned his eyes to the Pokemon indicated. Huh, that's a weird one. Looks kinda dragony don't it? No kid has a Dragon tho. Besides... he raised his eyes, making eye contact with the dark-skinned girl. Black hair? No. Stupid red hat? Nope. But, uh. But... kinda... looked... like...

“Yo hey that's that monster girl ain't it!”

The other girl looked in interest between the Team Skull Grunts and her new ally. Monster girl? Moon took a step forward.

“Well,” taking her own step forward to stand beside Moon, the girl gestured for her Mudsdale to join them, “I was thinking about holding back, but if you're willing to help with cleanup how about you, me, and Mudsdale stomp these scoundrels flat?” Moon nodded. Raised a hand.

That was as far as she needed to go.

“Hey book it!”

Moon's fiery stare didn't abate as the two Team Skull Grunts fled her presence for the third time. Once bitten thrice shy it seemed. Her expression changed into a smile as they left her sight.

She'd enjoyed that.

“Well now,” the small girl beside her held up a hand, Moon turning around to see it and extend her own, “You've certainly lent me a hand, Trainer. I am Hapu, a pleasure to meet you.” Moon spent a single moment considering, before giving her name in return. Hapu didn't feel like the type of person who'd run her down just to know her. Hapu smiled. So she was right. “Moon, you certainly put the fear into those two. I can tell they've crossed you before.”

They'd gotten off easy as far as Moon was concerned.

“Ahaha,” Hapu laughed, amused at Moon's response. Very good. “Well then, it seems the way to Royal Avenue is opened. Were you planning on taking part in a Battle Royal?” The huge Pokemon looming over the pair, far bigger than even Null had been, gave a deep braying noise. Hapu's smile widened. “Mudsdale seems to think you should. She approves of your battling prowess.”

Moon thought. She'd only planned to meet with Hau here, but taking part? Maybe. Hapu continued.

“You are on your Island Challenge, yes?” Moon confirmed. Hapu nodded back. “I would say I am on a kind of my own. Mudsdale and I are on an important journey that much is certain.” Looking at the Draft Horse Pokemon, Moon considered. It seemed incredibly strong. Could someone on an Island Challenge have a Pokemon like that? She didn't know. “Actually,” thinking for a moment, Hapu came to an idea, “would you happen to have met with Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill recently?”

Moon's nod immediately brought a smile to Hapu's face. She reached up and petted the Mudsdale's
shoulder. That was as high as she could reach. “You see, I have been hoping to meet with Captain Lana. Did you know she completed her Island Challenge at one of the youngest ages in Alolan history? I wished to ask her for advice on achieving such a feat.”

Then Hapu wanted to do the same? Complete her Island Challenge as soon as possible? It felt like there was more than that though. Moon didn’t voice that thought however. Just let Hapu know Lana remained around Brooklet Hill.

“Very good,” Hapu nodded, “I was going to check in at Royal Avenue to see if anyone had seen her recently, but confirmation she remains at her Trial Site is enough reason to continue there myself. Thank you, Moon.”

Hapu turned to the Mudsdale, reached a hand up to the saddle over its shoulders and began to pull herself up. Moon’s curiosity peaked.

“Oh?” Hapu looked back down at the question. “This Mudsdale? It belonged to my grandfather. He... passed it on to me. Now we are travelling together.” There was far more to that than Moon could parse. She simply nodded. Hapu smiled. “Good luck with your Island Challenge, Moon. I am sure we will see each other again.”

With heavy footfalls the Draft Horse Pokemon departed, leaving Moon watching it and Hapu go. She was sure that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Mudsdale was a Pokemon of incredible power. She still had a long way to go.

Turning, Moon pointed east, facing the now cleared way. Onwards, to Royal Avenue.

And the Battle Royal.

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Once long ago the four Tapu, Island Guardians of Alola, took part in grand battle against one another. The result of this battle was destruction, widespread ruin across Alola with no clear victor in sight. Recognising the damage they had wrought the four withdrew themselves, becoming rarely seen enigmas instead of ever-present deities.

Yet their competitiveness remained to a degree, and every now and then the four will compete. It is a battle far too measured and controlled to ever reveal a true victor, but it assuages their desire for competition all the same.

From those conflicts, from witnesses of the four Tapu in battle with one another, the Battle Royal was born.

Today the Battle Royal Dome, where these grand free-for-alls take place, exists at the centre of Royal Avenue, a festival of Alola's Trainers held in the middle of Akala Island, built before the southern slope of Wela Volcano.

Festival was the correct word to use – Moon found herself immediately overwhelmed once she was through the gates of the locale; the sheer mass of excited people, Pokemon, stalls, and festivities more than enough to allow most anyone to become just part of the crowd.

A part of it was relaxing, having no-one show her any interest at all, but all too quickly it grew to be too much. Focusing on the reason she was here, Moon made her way through the masses to the Royal Avenue Pokemon Center.
If you were looking for someone, the closest Pokemon Center was the place to go after all.

“Hey!” As soon as Moon was through its threshold the welcoming voice greeted her, the youth it came from rushing to pull her through the crowd. Smiling Moon allowed the tug on her arm, being drawn to a table where another was sitting. She sat down as well.

“Moon, how are you?” Hau's wide smile said how well he was, and if it didn't then the red crystal set into his Z-Ring said it for him. He'd done it. Moon showed her own blue. Hau raised a palm and she met it with her own.

Their first Akalan Trials complete.

“You've both done well.” The third at the table, Captain Kiawe of Wela Volcano, let his eyes roam over the heads of the children. The Pokemon Center was as busy as one could be, and he was a notable enough Trainer that people glanced at him more than enough. Of those people, a good portion could place the Melemele Kahuna's grandson as well. Hau had become a known figure too, mostly by his proximity to Moon. An awkward situation indeed.

And of that subset, those who recognised Kiawe, then Hau, when their eyes drew to the third occupant of the table, a young girl of similar age to the other youth, an obvious conclusion formed.

Kiawe's glare sparked like fire every time anyone's look lingered too long. Try it. They soon looked away.

“So hey,” Hau's energy never faded, uplifting those around him by his presence alone. Moon's travel since Paniola Town had been a joyous experience, but somewhat lonely even with Mallow and Lana's company. Having Hau around was better. If Lillie were here too it would be perfect. She wanted the three to be together again. “Since we're here, we need to have a Battle Royal, Moon!”

Moon didn't precisely understand what a Battle Royal was. She understood it was a competition involving multiple Trainers battling together, but beyond that... Kiawe took over.

“Allow me to explain,” the Captain placed thumbs and index fingers on the table, forming a square. “Four Trainers stand opposite one another, each with a Pokemon before them.” He brought his fingers in slightly to indicate the Pokemon. “Those Pokemon will battle, targeting one of their three opponents, or even all of them should they wish. When a Pokemon is knocked out, the Trainer of the one to do so is awarded points, with less given to those who simply made it through. When a single Trainer has no more Pokemon, that is the end of the Battle Royal. As simple as that.”

Hau took over. “There's teams of one, two, or three Pokemon allowed! So people can battle in any of those groups. Since we both have three Pokemon, we could both join the biggest battle! We totally should!”

Moon nodded. Then thought. What would be the best combination to choose? Hau laughed at her for that. Having to choose.

Wait. Moon frowned. She was meant to keep out of attention. Her disguise had only proved partially useful so far. Going on stage like that, it'd throw it out entirely. She shouldn't do that. Hau frowned too. Awww.

“That,” Kiawe's voice drew both children's eyes back to him. He fumbled a bit with his words, “I may be able to help.” They were staring at him. It was slightly embarrassing now. “It is just... please excuse me. I will return in a few hours.” Kiawe stood, doing his best to avoid the curious eyes focused on him. He knew what needed doing it was just... digging into old boxes of the past could
be embarrassing.

But he was a Captain and it was his duty to help all the Trainers of Alola. Mild embarrassment was an easy trade for helping Moon out. Kiawe shook his head. “Please show patience and await my return.”

Barely was Kiawe out the door to the Pokemon Center before Hau stood back up. “Okay!” He stepped away from the table, Moon standing and following after, “Let's go explore!” And so the two children went, curious figures in the Pokemon Center a few steps too late to ask them their names.

To wonder if the one known as Moon had come to join the Battle Royal.

The hours passed easily for the two. It had been just past the height of midday when Moon entered Royal Avenue, and so Hau's proposal that the two find food was immediately agreed upon. Naturally that meant he led her to, with unerring accuracy, the nearest Malasada shop. He had a gift, Moon told him. He smiled at that.

From there they wandered. Stalls drew Moon's attention and she made purchases – new Pokeballs acquired while ignoring the curious look of the clerk wondering why such a young child needed so many. It was odd.

But life in Royal Avenue was far too busy to dwell.

Onwards they went. Watched people and Pokemon all about, the entire festival city in constant motion, before finding themselves drawn into the Battle Royal Dome itself. After all, they should see what a Battle Royal looks like, right?

Moon, as soon as she was in the crowd and able to watch the arena below, was enraptured.

Moon and Hau, both full of such incredible potential, both with Pokemon far more advanced than their ages would lead most to guess, were still just beginners. Their immense abilities allowed them to push against the Trials of Alola, but in comparison to the best of the best, they were barely different from any other youth.

And that was oh so clear in the Battle Royal Dome.

Oh there were Trainers they felt they could beat. Entire battles they were sure they could stand within. But then there were others who were just so far beyond them. Like the way Lana had crushed her, Moon felt. The Battle Royal Dome held no distinctions. All Trainers may take part.

Moon couldn't help but feel her excitement rise watching the battles play out. She did want to take part in that. But not the way she'd had to battle before. Not measuring herself.

She wanted to go all out.

“Hey isn't that Gladion?”

Moon's thoughts ground to a halt, Hau's observation cutting through her musing. He pointed and she followed, seeing down below in the current matchup a young man with hair of blonde, a huge quadruped Pokemon at his command. That was Null. And that was Gladion too. Yeah.

“Woah, he really is strong!”

Moon couldn't help but agree. Gladion kept his intensity, kept his commands, and the Pokemon known as Null crushed its opponents. His power really was incredible. Moon remembered how their
last battle ended.

Unsatisfactory for them both.

“Hey Moon? Where are you- hey wait up!” Hau caught Moon's leaving of the stands quick enough to chase after her, the two making their way down to the ground floor of the Battle Royal Dome lobby.

She waited. Waited for Gladion to emerge from the floor so she might challenge him again. So they could both put to rest how the last time had gone. Surrounded by fans a nearby figure observed the young pair of Trainers standing in the centre of the lobby. Oh and here he'd just taken the day off to relax and burn some stress, what a thrilling coincidence. The one known as the Masked Royal kept watch for the two to enter the fight.

“What do you think?” Hau was standing by Moon, watching the entrance to the stadium as she was, “Are we going to challenge him?” She nodded to that, determination now alight in her eyes. It was a look Hau had begun to recognise, that intense focus that said she was going all out. The thing he always wanted to see when battling against her. Gladion was lucky indeed.

Though with his sourpuss attitude he wouldn't acknowledge that at all!

“Oh there you are,” Captain Kiawe's voice caused the two to turn, the fiery figure striding through the crowd, ignoring the looks given to his shirtless form. It wasn't the rarest of things for people to eschew upper clothing in Alola, especially during these warmer seasons. The ultimate hero of the Battle Royal did the same anyway. Most people who couldn't recognise Kiawe would just assume he was copying the Royal's look. He held out a hand to Moon.

“It took me a little while to dig this up.” Moon looked at the black mass in Kiawe's hand. Reached out to it. It was soft. Made of fibres. Was this a...? “It's,” Kiawe turned his head, “when I was younger I was into a show, it's from that time. I thought it might help you keep your disguise.”

Moon took it. Turned the wig in her hands. Hair of black, similar to how her own had been. With it, with what was buried at the bottom of the travelling bag she carried, then she could... Moon turned and dashed off, away from the group, leaving Kiawe and Hau behind.

She needed to change.

“We're going to battle someone we know!” Hau chimed in to distract Kiawe from his concern at Moon's reaction, sure she was fine. “Do you want to be our fourth, Captain Kiawe?”

“Well,” Kiawe nodded with a smile, “I'd enjoy that very much indee-”

“If I may!”

A loud voice broke through the bustling of the lobby, a figure striding through the crowd, his head cresting above them. Kiawe immediately stood rigid at the sight. That was... that was!

“Hey!” Other voices in the crowd sounded out now, “Hey Masked Royal!” “You're awesome!”

“Aye! Who are you battling next?” “Will you sign this?” “Go gettem!”

“Pardon my intrusion, yeah,” the man known as the Masked Royal came to a stop before Hau and Kiawe, arms folded over muscular bare chest. A wrestling mask of blue with a face of red flames and a yellow thunderbolt down its middle covered his head, only mouth and closely trimmed beard visible beneath. He smiled. “But I couldn't help but notice you planning to take part in the Battle Royal, young Hau. I would be happy to introduce you to it if you would have me.”
A brief wonder at how the Masked Royal knew his name floated through Hau's head, but it quickly drowned under his excitement at the figure himself. The Masked Royal! Dude!

“Yeah!” Hau jumped, “Okay when Moon gets back let's battle!” Catching himself, Hau turned to Kiawe, who was already stepping back and waving him off. He'd cede this fight to the Masked Royal. How could he not? It would be a good experience for Hau and Moon both.

“Oh hey! Gladion! Over here!”

The way the blonde teen jerked in surprise at hearing his name made it clear how unwelcome it was, a heavy scowl turning to Hau as he waved repeatedly. Gladion made no motion to approach. Hau did so instead.

“Hey when Moon gets back battle with us! We saw you before you were doing great! The Masked Royal is gonna fight with us so you gotta, okay?”

A biting “I don't 'gotta' do anything” died on Gladion's lips as he turned and looked at the shirtless figure standing nearby, the crowd hovering around him but none too close. Real power. A real way to test Null. He turned his head to look back at the entrance to the arena.

“Whatever.”

“Good enough!”

The voices in the lobby surged. Catching them, Hau quickly moved towards the source, the Masked Royal steps faster. Ordering the crowd to break apart. To let the one coming through pass.

To let her be free.

Each sandalled step made noise amongst the quietened muttering of the room. Her eyes, as intensely brown as always, looked ever forward. Black hair fell around her neck, slightly longer than what she'd had before, but able to be tied back into a rough approximation of the ponytail she’d worn. A shirt of bright flowers, the colours she preferred.

And a red, chicken-combed hat fastened securely on her head.

The Trainer Moon, legendary child with six Pokemon, impossible person who could perform Z-Moves without tiring, strode with head held high through the crowd. She didn't err, didn't misstep, and didn't look at anyone else besides those that mattered. At Hau. At Gladion beyond him. And at the third who'd appeared. She tilted her head, looking at him.

What was Professor Kukui doing here dressed like that?

“Greetings Moon!” The voice of the Royal echoed, the room almost silent now. This was about to be everything. “I take it you've come to take part in the Battle Royal?” She nodded. He smiled. “Then allow me, the Masked Royal, to welcome you! It would appear we have gathered four Trainers, yeah, so let us take part, woo! In the grand battle passed down for generations! In the Battle Royal! Woo!”

The crowd parted. The way cleared. Moon walked clearly into the entrance to the arena, Hau following behind. A scoff and Gladion followed them. And the Masked Royal went last. Three youths of such potential.

He'd give them all a fine lesson indeed.
Stage lights blared. The voice of the crowd roared, lurching through the stands surrounding the ring the four Trainers stood at the corners of. Each held a Pokeball, each held intent. For Moon she wanted to go all out. For Hau he wanted to feel excitement in battle. For Gladion he wanted to face strength. And the Royal, the Royal wanted all these children to see what they really needed to. To feel the power of their partners and how best to fight alongside them.

A lesson often taught by providing a wall that wouldn't break alone.

“Presenting!” The voice came from the speakers above, an announcer surveying the battle, “A Battle Royal to shake the heart! The Masked Royal has returned to battle, to teach three of Alola's brightest new stars what heights they aspire to! Against him stands Gladion and Type: Null, regulars of the Battle Royal, a fierce power that stands alone!” Cheers from those who'd watched Gladion's strength. He was standoffish but genuinely talented. And that mysterious Pokemon, it was a sight. He had his fans.

“Against them stands Hau, grandson of Kahuna Hala, a Trainer on his Island Challenge!” More cheers. Hau waved. People waved back. He grinned widely.

“Against them stands Moon!” Immediately a wave of noise. Moon ignored it and kept her eyes forward. “The mysterious Trainer who's said to have no limits! But how will she fare in a Battle Royal? This match will have one Pokemon per Trainer, so we'll see how well she's trained her best!” She raised the hand holding her Pokeball. The other three did the same.

“When a Pokemon is defeated, this Battle Royal will end! Trainers, on your marks... begin!”

Four Pokeballs flew. From Gladion came Null, a Pokemon of power so great it made the young boy's muscles shake as soon as it emerged. But he stomped a foot down and quelled his weakness with force of will alone. He wouldn't accept the same result as before. He wasn't going to be bested by this power.

He was going to win.

From Moon came Dartrix, her partner from the beginning. The voices of the crowd, seeing the evolution of a starter Pokemon, were full of excitement. She really had raised something that strong that fast. Incredible.

From Hau came Brionne. The Masked Royal, smiling so far, felt surprise shape his face instead. Oh, he hadn't heard about that at all! Neither had the crowd, neither had the announcer, who quickly launched into a spiel lauding Hau for raising his starter Pokemon to its second stage. Proof he was an incredible young Trainer indeed. Hau blushed. Gladion stared.

The fourth Pokemon became manifest.

From the Masked Royal came a Litten, Fire Cat Pokemon, third of Alola's three starters. He'd kept it with him since its fellows went to two new Trainers, and begun raising the Pokemon when he wasn't busy with work. It had already proven its name in the Battle Royal, young and far weaker than Pokemon with years behind them, but intense under the Royal's commands. It had grown quick.

The Litten's eyes locked onto two of its three opponents. They'd grown. The three had always been raised to keep pace with one another, to always rough-house and tumble. Sparks danced across its fur, will dragging as much power from its Trainer as it could. Falling behind? Absolutely not.

The Royal felt the tug, the sudden hunger as the Bond between him and the Fire Cat surged. It was assumed theory, difficult to test, but he considered this fine evidence. The competitiveness between
Pokemon raised together could help them grow. Could fuel their power. Could drive them to evolution.

The crowd went wild, the announcer's words coming a mile a minute. Moon, Hau, and Gladion all stared as the light faded and the larger Fire Cat, the Torracat, evolution of Litten, stretched and yowled. Dartrix and Brionne both made celebratory noises.

A bell rung.

“Null go!”

“Get em Brionne!”

“Let's go wild, Torracat, yeah!”

Moon spoke the same intent. The battle began.

Dartrix's flying kick, propelled by its speedy flight, landed squarely upon the helmet of Null, who barely acknowledged the blow. But its counter-attack, the upwards swing of its helmet and the horn emerging from it, missed completely as Dartrix flew upwards, dodging a jet of water shot from Brionne. Burning fangs bit down just below where the helmet of Null ended, the Torracat having raced in and jumped upon the much larger Pokemon, yet it could do little damage, the larger creature thrashing and sending the Fire Cat flying across the stage with ease.

All four changed target.

Dartrix rained down leaves where Brionne was, the Pop Star Pokemon disappearing in a surge of water, using the speedy technique to evade yet again. Breaking out of the jet it fired bubbles that impacted with Null, yet the powerful Pokemon ignored them and continued its charge, catching Torracat as it recovered from the fireball it had shot at the flying Dartrix above, the Blade Quill Pokemon blowing out the flames with a gust of black wind.

The crowd cheered wildly. This was exactly what they'd wished for. Hearing their voices, the Masked Royal grinned. Let the show continue!

Torracat intercepted Dartrix when it swept down on Null, its heavy charge knocking the Grass-type to the ground. Brionne followed that advantage, yet was intercepted by a far more powerful tackle from Null, being sent flying into Dartrix as a projectile rather than an attacker. Moon and Hau both gave the same order, their two Pokemon targeting the ground and sending up a storm of bubbles and leaves, before each burst out in the opposite direction, Brionne slamming Torracat and Dartrix slipping by Null and slashing along its side. Aware of its weakness compared to Brionne the Royal ordered his Pokemon to get closer to Null, while Gladion directed Null not to let Dartrix slip by it again. He clutched his wrist, steadying the shake, and forced his focus.

This was everything he'd wanted. To be forced to be strong. He wasn't backing down.

Torracat slid under Null's great height, Brionne following after as Dartrix circled overhead. The two grounded starters launched fire and water up at the third, both attacks hitting and being ignored by Null as it jumped too, a raised claw catching Dartrix and closing tight, pulling the Blade Quill Pokemon down to the ground. Pinning Moon's Pokemon in its grip, Null stood poised for victory, Hau and the Royal both aware of that. Both changing to that one target alone.

Fire washed over Null, the burst enough to let Torracat get close and jump on its back, clawing and kicking repeatedly. Brionne sung a song laced with power, its sonorous waves washing over the
three Pokemon grouped together. Dartrix struggled, razor sharp leaves raised to encourage Null to release it. Moon had her Flyinium-Z held, waiting for an opportunity.

As soon as she saw it she'd take it and win. No holding back.

Hau kept his command. If even one of the three clumped together were knocked out by Brionne it was his win. Null though, it still seemed fine, despite taking the most beating of them all. What an incredible Pokemon.

Gladion, opposite him, was clutching his shoulder hard. Hau watched as the blonde Trainer shook his head. Was he okay?

The Royal took his shot.

“Torracat, win it, yeah!”

The announcement created the window he expected. Gladion ordered Null to be careful, fearing a secret technique from the hero of the Battle Royal, and so the Pokemon was distracted from Dartrix. Moon caught that moment and ordered her partner to break free, the Blade Quill Pokemon finally escaping Null's grasp and fluttering up. It had taken the second-most damage after Null, and possessed far less resilience than that Pokemon did.

The Royal smiled widely just in time for Moon and Gladion to realise their mistakes. His victory.

“Fire Fang!”

Decided by elemental matchup, as so many battles were. Null had proved too powerful for the three starters, even in their evolved forms, and so the Royal had chosen to take victory in one clean strike. Dartrix was stronger than Torracat, had experienced more than that Pokemon, but the power of its fiery bite, especially with the damage the Grass-type had accumulated, was enough. The Fire Cat pinned the Blade Quill Pokemon to the ground and yowled victory.

Battle Royal complete.

“The Battle Royal is over!” The voice of the announcer drew a frustrated noise from Gladion, displeased at the battle ending before he was done. But a moment later a leg gave out and he sunk to a knee, the adrenaline fading and so his body no longer able to support Null. He called the Pokemon back as Hau approached.

“Hey are you okay?”

“I'm fine.” Gladion refused to look at the boy. “I don't need your help.” Forcing himself to stand, Gladion wavered but walked. Left the arena in silence. Hau watched him go. Unsure what he could say or do. Just feeling bad about it.

He wished he could help.

Moon called back Dartrix and acknowledged Professor Kukui's victory. He suddenly looked extremely awkward hearing her address him. “It's the Masked Royal, young Moon,” he refused to meet her eyes, “Thank you for battling with me. It was a fine experience and a fine show. Good luck with your next Trial.”

Moon continued to give Kukui an odd look, but nonetheless turned and moved for the exit as well, Hau joining her as the crowd kept up its roar.
The Masked Royal remained behind.

Before Moon and Hau could leave his voice echoed across the Battle Royal Dome, a microphone brought into the ring for him to use. To speak to the populace watching, whether now in person, or through recordings later of this grand battle fought. To give his message.

“That was a fine battle, yeah, proving the children of Alola are shining stars and bright futures for the region!” Hau grinned at Moon. She smiled back. “But what’s important about stars is not blocking them out!” Moon's smile fell and she turned to look back, back to the ring behind them as the Royal continued. “So I have something to say!” The voices of the crowd were confused now. What was on the Masked Royal's mind?

“I've been watching for this last week as everyone in the world has decided they want to know about Alola's new stars! Pursuing them! Overwhelming them! Giving them no freedom or peace!” Moon's cheeks warmed. Was he really? “Do you believe that's fair? That it's right? That your curiosity and interest justifies harassing these children so?” Voices in the crowd began to mutter. Some agreeing. Some shamed. The message spread.

“It's wrong!” The Masked Royal's declaration echoed. “The way they are treated is wrong! And I want each and every last one of you to know that! To think about it the next time you decide it's worth chasing these young stars down! The next time you see someone else choosing to hassle them! In the Alola Region we live supporting one another! We help the children of this region take on their Trials and grow! So there'll be no holding them back! No holding them down! Let them be free! That is my decree!”

His was a voice of charisma. In his speech there was a command and that command settled in the hearts of those who heard it, now and later. What had they been doing? Harassing children so? Letting their interest consume their sense?

It had been wrong.

Moon had already left, Hau following alongside her. He could see the tinge to her cheeks, having such a speech made in her name. But...

“He's pretty cool, isn't he?”

She paused. Looked back at the Battle Royal Dome behind them. And considered.

Yeah, he really was.

Chapter End Notes

I never spent a lot of time at the Battle Royal, in truth before going into this chapter I was unsure as to the exact specifics of how it worked. Now I know though, though in the end it didn't matter. The one mandatory Battle Royal in the game is decided by a single knockout. I decided for that to be the case here.

It would be a fun battle to write a three Pokemon round, but goodness it would last a while too, huh?

Moon's journey across Akala continues. Thanks to the Captains lending their aid, she's
travelled far faster than most would. The vast majority of people who finished their Water Trial would have to continue around the coast of Akala, whether west back to Paniola and through the Royal Avenue to Wela Volcano, or east - with both Lush Jungle close by and Wela Volcano further away. Going straight through the dense northern forest? That's a path only the really knowledgeable walk. Or guide others on.

Lots of nice setup in this chapter. We meet Hapu, who's on a unique challenge of her own. A little more Gladion, showing Moon and Hau's perceptions of him. Some Masked Royal, mysterious new figure who it's just Professor Kukui. I wrote that entire last section with the words "GET EM DAD" echoing in my head. Good job Kukui. I'm probably going to be nicer to you now. Maybe. We'll see.

Next chapter is the fire Trial at Wela Volcano! Please look forward to it, I have a plan and I don't know if I'll be able to make my weekly schedule so far but we'll find out. I didn't think I was going to make this one and then I just did it anyway. Strong.

My thanks to all readers, knowing that what I'm creating is entertaining others motivates me to keep at it. Your comments are always appreciated and if you ever recommend this fic to others, know that I'm so incredibly thankful indeed. Please look forward to what comes next, for there's no stopping here.

So much more still lies ahead.
“You both did well!”

Captain Kiawe of Wela Volcano stood before the entrance to the Battle Royal Dome, waiting for the two youths he was watching over to emerge. Hau who had completed his Trial two days prior, and Moon who was to make her first attempt at it tomorrow. A young boy who pushed the limits of sense, whose growth hinted he would be one of Alola’s strongest Trainers without fail.

And a young girl who defied sense entirely. Moon who had been acknowledged directly by a Tapu. Moon who kept six Pokemon with her without ever once showing their demands. Moon who had fought against two Totem Pokemon and won, bested them with four Z-Moves in a row. Kiawe wondered how she would fare with his Trial.

After all, its challenge was based on none of the factors that had carried her thus far.

“For now, let us heal your Pokemon.”

Hau was excited to discuss the Battle Royal as the three returned to the Pokemon Center of Royal Avenue, thrilled at having battled the legendary Masked Royal. Kiawe lamented his missed opportunity, having yet to face the strongest Trainer of the Battle Royal himself. But even just watching, studying the way that man commanded his Pokemon, the freshly evolved Torracat, was astounding. That Pokemon should have been the weakest of the four to fight, yet the Royal’s directions were more than sharp enough for it to keep pace with its opponents. He was truly worthy of Kiawe’s respect.

Moon’s focus was more on Gladion, his Pokemon specifically. Type: Null, that was the name the announcer had said. Rotom-dex didn't recognise it, couldn't give any more information than it had observed. No weaknesses shown or noted. Just incredible power, resilience, and ferocity behind it. A mystery.

“It's a worry,” Kiawe shook his head, standing near the two children as they had their Pokemon healed from the battle, “that Gladion, he was showing clear signs of Bond Strain. That Pokemon is far too much for him. It won't end well.”

Moon and Hau both looked at Kiawe when he said that. Both thought. Bond Strain, Moon understood the concept. It was when a Trainer pushed their limits too far, supported Pokemon who took more from them than they could provide. A Trainer would grow lethargic, requiring more food and sleep each day, until even that wasn't enough and their health would begin to deteriorate. Only at that point would the Bonds between them and their Pokemon decay, but the damage by then would still be done. Gladion already looked unwell.

Moon wondered if he’d be okay.

Hau, who specifically had and continued to feel a demand upon him that he powered through with lively energy alone, really wished he'd gotten the chance to talk to the blonde-haired boy. He hoped he was alright.

“So hey, Captain Kiawe,” when Hau changed the topic he did so with a happier tone, the smile on his face one he always wore, “what's the deal with that wig you got for Moon anyway? Where'd you
get it?” Caught in the headlights of the question, Kiawe blinked. Moon thanked the Pokemon Center nurse for healing her Dardtrix before turning to him with a questioning look too. As soon as he parsed his own silence the Captain jolted back to life.

“Oh, it's...” he took a step away from the counter as other Trainers approached, Moon and Hau following after him, “it's from a show that I... liked when I was younger. I collected lots of its memorabilia and... dressed as my favourite characters at times.” Thinking back on it Kiawe found the thought embarrassing, how wildly obsessed he had been at the time. The indulgence of his parents had been appreciated then, but now... he shook his head. “I remembered it when we were talking about needing to hide Moon's appearance. Believed it would help her look the way that she's known.”

It had, and Moon appreciated that. Hau continued to press the point. “What show?”

“Just-” it had ended a few years before his own Pokemon journey, Kiawe was sure neither Hau nor Moon would know it, “it was a cartoon, a fictional retelling of the Warring States Period. Very overblown but... a lot of fun. I enjoyed it. The wig was from a Dragon-type using character. That's all.”

Dragon-type Pokemon were considered the most mysterious of all – their incredible power and scarcity combining with thousands of years of myth to create a concept that captured the heart. No other type of Pokemon demanded as much from their Trainers, drew such an obscene amount of power through their Bonds. Without a specific bias to the type, any Trainer with a Dragon likely only had the one – raised with them over many years.

And even then it was an unlikely Trainer with the raw potential to do so.

Of the seven current Captains of Alola, Kiawe understood the demands of the Dragon-type best. He'd caught one such during his Island Challenge, confident his Fire-type bias would allow him to handle the dual-typed Pokemon's demands, only to discover that he absolutely could not. Even with his other Pokemon stored it still took too much, his own stubbornness the only thing keeping him going some days. Eventually it had taken the intervention of his friends to convince him to seek help.

To seek the Dragon Tamers of Ula'ula Island.

Today Kiawe could handle the Pokemon. Could withdraw it from the Storage System and command it in battle. But the demand was significant enough he had to pace himself all the same. It wasn't a Pokemon he could keep with him all the time. There was still far more growth for him to reach the level he needed to be.

To be a worthy partner to a Dragon.

But then there was Moon. Kiawe caught himself staring absenty at her as he mentioned the Dragon-type user, recalling the Pokemon she had. A Bagon. Eleven years old and she had a Dragon-type without issue. Of course it seemed it was impossible for her to feel any of her Bonds' strain at all, that she had an unending reserve of energy she could supply to her Pokemon. But even still it struck him.

She really was so much.

“For now!” Shaking himself past those preoccupying thoughts Kiawe spoke up, moving the topic along, “I am afraid tonight I have work here in Royal Avenue, I will not be able to continue on with you. It is up to you whether you stay the night at the Pokemon Center here or...”

“Or!” Hau shot up a hand, startling Moon with the movement, “Moon!” He turned to her, “I can take
you to the Wela Volcano lodge! You'll be staying there while you're doing your Trial anyway!” The
barest moment of consideration, really just the length of time it took her to understand what was said,

“Very well,” Kiawe nodded as well, “it is not a long ride from Royal Avenue – you will have no
issue making it there before nightfall.”

“Yeah!” Hau threw up both hands now, “Moon we can get some Ride Tauros! It's been way too
long since we raced!”

Swept up in the prospect, Moon and Hau quickly worked themselves into determination to get going
right away. Kiawe smiled at that. Hau always wore a happy smile, but he seemed more energetic
around Moon. Honestly, with the way the young boy was going through his Trials, Kiawe had
worried he might be pushing himself too hard. But here he seemed fine. Maybe it was nothing.
He'd still advise Mallow and Lana to keep their eyes open though. He wasn't so irresponsible as to
doubt his initial instincts after all.

Moon took a moment. Disappeared and returned a few minutes later dressed as she had been before.
Caramel-blonde hair tied in two tails, her clothing darker colours with less vibrant designs, red hat no
longer in sight. She held out a hand, offering the black wig back to Kiawe. Hau frowned. Kiawe did
too.

“Are you sure?”

Moon continued to offer the wig to be taken. It had helped for the moment but... outside of the battle
she was too aware of it. And even still... Moon only had to turn her head to watch people in the
Pokemon Center catch her gaze and look away. The Masked Royal's words may have helped but...

Kiawe accepted the wig and gave a much harsher stare out over the crowd. For a child to think and
act in such a way... it infuriated him.

Something would have to be done.

For the moment that was where it ended. Kiawe had his job, changing into a far meeker outfit –
constantly bared chest now covered by a shirt bearing the logo of the Thrifty Megamart – and Moon
and Hau took their leave. Claimed Tauros at the edge of Royal Avenue – the Ride Pokemon stall
one of a number curving around the eastern coast of Akala – and took off.

Set themselves upon the road to Wela Volcano Park.

“Man,” once slowing from their initial race, a dead heat sprint between the two, to enjoy the ride,
Hau voiced his thoughts, “that Masked Royal was so strong though! I wanna go back and battle him
all out one day! When we complete our Island Challenges let's go back and make sure we win!”

Moon's moment of agreeing came to a halt as she realised Hau was speaking about the Masked
Royal as a stranger. Did he really not know him?

“I mean,” Hau shrugged, “he's on tv all the time, so everyone kind of knows him but...” Moon's stare
didn't communicate her disbelief, “it's so much cooler seeing him up close!”

She really didn't know what to say about that.

“Okay, so,” regularly responsible for keeping conversations going, Hau found a new topic, “how'd
your Trial go, Moon? Tell me about it!” Moon spent a moment before giving a small smile and the
question in return. How did his Trial go? Hau grinned wide. A momentary stare. Then they laughed. Revealing anything of their Trials would spoil the surprise! They couldn't do that! In her thoughts, Moon considered it was unlikely Hau would experience the same Trial she had anyway. She didn't tell him that though.

Kept it to herself.

“The next one...” Hau spoke again after a while, “I'm a little worried though, since it's a Grass-type Trial. Brionne and Pikachu won't do well with it.” Moon nodded agreement. Her Dartrix stood no chance against the Fire-type Trial either. Still, Hau had shown off the Firium-Z. If he was able to-

“We thought about evolving my Eevee to a Flareon, me and Captain Kiawe.” Moon made a noise of interest at Hau's words. She'd still come to no conclusion on an evolution for her own. “But if it evolves we're both pretty sure I won't be able to keep it with me. Still gotta get stronger y'know?” The way he said it was so relaxed. So unbothered by it. Moon missed any undercurrent and simply nodded. She understood the theory.

“I caught a Fletchling.” Moon immediately looked up when Hau said that. He did? “Captain Kiawe helped, he picked out one just ready to evolve. So I was training it after completing my Trial. I have to swap out some of the others to keep it with me, but we both think it’ll help with Captain Mallow's Trial.” Another concept Moon understood. Trainers who could not support all of their Pokemon swapping between them through the Pokemon Storage System. It was the core use of it.

“Anyway,” Hau smiled at Moon with that same unworried expression, “even if that'll help, I might still ask Captain Mallow if I can do Captain Lana's Trial first. Since I know Pikachu will do really well with it, and Brionne will be fine too! Then with Fletchinder and the others we can do the Grass Trial! I'll just have to figure out who I can keep with me. We'll get it though! Swapping Pokemon is normal, right?”

It was, something many Trainers did. Even Moon, though her reasoning was due to the six Pokemon limit more than any personal limitations. For Hau it was different, having to balance the allocation of energy he could supply to his Pokemon through their Bonds. Still, Moon was confident it would work out. And at least Hau wasn't going to be catching so many the auto-release timer would get him.

He laughed at Moon's suggestion of that. Then gave her a curious look. Immediately she realised what was coming. “So how're you doing with that?” The question was direct, Hau interested to hear, “Since you've caught so many Pokemon and all. Have you been releasing them?”

She hadn't, and found herself unwilling to lie to Hau and say she had. Yet further questions would risk revealing the Poke Pelago, and that was something Moon was not prepared to do. Hau was the type who'd want to see it as soon as he heard about it. And if he did, if he saw the Pokemon there, he'd know they were still connected to her. Know the way she differed from everyone else yet again. She didn't want him to know that. She didn't want him to see her any differently than he already did. She didn't want that.

So Moon deflected. Gave little in the way of answer until the topic faded. She didn't regret catching those Pokemon, she didn't regret forming Bonds with them. She just... didn't want people to realise the extent of how she was different.

What she'd shown so far had already done too much.

Hau rambled and Moon nodded absently as they rode on, heading ever north and east.
On to Wela Volcano Park.

The curving road beyond Royal Avenue led past light forest and plains until the green paths gave way to rock, a location of hardened volcanic residue from an eruption centuries ago. This marked a divide, the way beyond continuing on to the entrance of the Wela Volcano Park, and then further still to the northern coast of Akala Island itself. A long journey for Hau to find his way to the Trial Sites beyond. Scenic though, he announced. Moon described the environments she had seen in her travels, something Hau was thrilled to hear. It was easy to discuss how beautiful Alola was and how much they enjoyed travelling it. That didn't require either to think of the things they'd rather not.

“Wela Volcano Park is really cool too!” Hau paused for a moment before sticking a tongue out and bonking a fist to his head. “Okay it's not ‘cool’ cool but it's super awesome! You'll really like it!”

As the sun set in the west the eastern side of Akala cooled quickly, the rock-face the two were travelling over losing heat moment by moment. By the time the two did pass the gates of the national park it was dark enough to feel like night already, the volcanic peak that towered above them hiding the sun away. Hau pointed out the Ride Pokemon station they were heading for. There they dismounted.

And continued on to the awaiting lodge.

Much like the Pokemon Centers outside Verdant Cavern and Brooklet Hill the lodge was quiet. A few travellers, those visiting the park to explore, and the two young Island Challengers. A Pokemon nurse could be seen behind a recovery machine – confusing Moon as to how this lodge was anything but a Pokemon Center in all but name – and rooms were available for free to Island Challengers. Hau helped her by showing off everything of note in the building. He'd been here for a few days already after all.

As the night wore on the two rested from their day. Ate a good meal, Hau teased by the lodge cook for continuing to empty the kitchen’s stocks with his hunger. And relaxed. Discussed the prospect of Mallow's Trial, which would be difficult for Hau, and how he could best face it. The opportunity of Lana's for him to train. The Trial Moon had ahead, and how she would fare with her Pokemon. She had a few catches from Brooklet Hill with her for it. She felt confident.

Hau yawned, tired sooner than she was. He wore out faster, after all.

“Presenting!” The sound of the television blaring jolted Hau from his sleepy state, he and Moon turning to it as one of the other guests of the lodge turned up the replay from today's Battle Royal. “A Battle Royal to shake the heart!” Watching themselves on the television, seeing them taking part, both Moon and Hau felt weird at that. The video of their Trials online had been one thing, but seeing themselves on television was another entirely. Hau blinked when he met eyes with one of the patrons of the lodge, whose own widened as they flicked from him to Moon. He sat back down facing away from the television. Moon did too.

“Maybe I need a cool disguise too,” Hau gave Moon a grin, “we can both go incognito.” Moon shook her head quickly in response. Don't hide yourself to escape from others. It hurts more than it helps.

So the night came to a close. Moon and Hau slept, the first fitful, the second deep from his exhaustion. The moon and stars turned overhead. And the sun rose once more in the east, illuminating Wela Volcano with its light.

Captain Kiawe was there by the time Moon and Hau awoke, jovially greeting the pair, a clear
morning person. As the two children shared breakfast Kiawe helped Hau plot his course, Mallow's Trial Site close enough to Lana's that Hau wouldn't have trouble going between them. Most people preferred to do those two Trials together, as they were so close by.

Or attempt to, at least. Captain Lana and Captain Mallow both took the need to test the Trainers taking their Trials very seriously. Not that Captain Kiawe didn't but... he paused, before nodding at Hau who winked back. Moon, with no idea of what that meant at all, huffed at them. Hau laughed at her for that.

It wasn't long beyond that until Hau set out. Moon and Kiawe saw him off, wished him well, and the two young Trial-goers discussed how next they'd meet up. If they didn't find one another themselves the Captains would know where they were. That was enough. Good luck, from one to the other. Still two Trials ahead for each. No holding back, right? No slowing down.

They were going all the way.

And so the two separated once more, the same journey but momentarily divergent paths. Kiawe had enjoyed company for a strong portion of his own Island Challenge, appreciated it greatly, and saw in Moon and Hau similar. The intense challenges one faces in their Trials, having another to share the experience with helped recover from them. He suspected the ridiculous progress of the pair was driven because they were a pair. Neither would have made it this far this fast alone.

Well... Kiawe paused on the thought, attempting to be fair while also being honest. He couldn't evaluate for sure. In one direction that was definitely true though. Without a doubt. As for the other...

“Well then Moon,” when he turned to her she looked at him with an expression of determination. She was ready. He nodded in response. “Let us climb the Path of Trials.”

Wela Volcano Park held a beauty different to anywhere else in Alola. In place of vibrant and lush landscapes sheer rock and hardy grasses filled the area, vents in the earth releasing heat and steam into the sky overhead. For most visitors the lower levels would be explored, before a gondola lift was used to travel to the peaks to enjoy the views out over Akala.

But for Trial-goers there was an important journey to take. To follow the Path of Trials, a way cut through the rock that scaled the massive volcano that towered over Akala Island, and to reach the peak by their own merit alone. Even just beginning it, Moon quickly understood why Kiawe was the way he was. Travelling this path even more than once would result in such an appearance.

Kiawe followed Moon on her climb. Watched as she crossed paths with the wild Pokemon of Wela Volcano, battled against them and claimed her victory. Her team was different still, new members obviously caught around Brooklet Hill. Those Pokemon, so freshly caught.

So responsive to her commands.

Pokemon gained strength through a Trainer's Bond. Over time they would grow faster than their wild contemporaries, evolving far sooner than they would alone. Those Bonds, they evolved too, becoming stronger as Pokemon and Trainer grew to trust in one another. The stronger the Bond, the more power would flow through it, and the greater the demand there would be upon the Trainer. The greater strength a Pokemon could draw from them.

Here too Moon was ridiculous. These Pokemon barely knew her, yet they followed her orders without question and shone under the power they drew. Was that part of her impossible ability? Or did Moon share another paired with her limitless reserve, a gift for raising Pokemon that exceeded belief? It was difficult to see the two apart.
Even still, Kiawe watched closely to see if he could. If he could learn just what it was that let Moon raise Pokémon the way she did – whether it was the power that she gave, or the way that she approached them. In the end he couldn't tell where one aspect ended and the other began. Just acknowledged Moon's ability and followed her along the path.

Rest-stops Moon made use of. Her reserve for her Pokémon was limitless, but as a human was exactly what Kiawe expected. She tired as anyone else did when active. Honestly, she wore out sooner than Hau in this way. It was relieving. Kiawe found himself surprised by just how much it was so.

Hours turned. The sun followed overhead. Moon walked the path climbing the volcano, the heat at its peak building, the girl relieved she'd followed Kiawe's advice to dress as light as she could for the day. With shorts and tee baring most of her arms and legs, she savoured when the wind blew against the mountain's side. The warmth coming from the rock, combined with the heat built by the climb, had her breathing heavy. This wasn't easy. Not at all.

Kiawe reassured her. There was water at each rest point, and he kept the bottles they carried filled. Watched Moon's condition while motivating her climb. Overcoming Alola's Trials was something both Trainer and Pokémon needed to do together. She would not learn this land without experiencing it in such a manner.

Moon was sure she'd appreciate that thought more when not mid-climb.

The day went on. Moon climbed, youthful energy converting to raw determination as she continued upon the path, Kiawe always a step behind. She was sure that the Pokémon Journey of Kanto wouldn't have nearly the same mountain-climbing demands but... she didn't specifically dislike it. Turned and looked, high enough now to see out over Akala. In the distance Heahea City sparkled in the light of the day. She liked that sight.

Turned back to the path and continued on.

The Trial Site of Wela Volcano was small, a raised stone platform at the peak of the path set just beyond the Trial Gates. As Moon passed through them, sat down heavily upon the rock and drained the last of the bottle she carried, greedily accepting the second Kiawe passed to her, she recovered. Rested enough to look around. There wasn't much here. Just the ring of stone surrounding them. What sort of Trial was there to have here? She looked to Kiawe. What was next?

"You have climbed the Path of Trials," Kiawe congratulated Moon for overcoming this challenge of Alola, "future returns to this Trial Site may be done via the gondola lift, you have proven yourself thus far." That... was more relieving than she'd expected it to be. Moon nodded. And? "Now," Kiawe stepped onto the platform, walking across it to stand opposite Moon. And raised his voice.

"Come, Marowak!"

Captain Kiawe's voice boomed in a way no other's did, echoed over the rocky ring surrounding the Trial Site and down the slopes of Wela. In return the cries of Pokémon answered, their jumping movements swift as they bounced from outcropping to outcropping, travelling from their resting places to join the Captain who called them. In moments from his announcement Kiawe stood before Moon with three Pokémon before him, Pokémon with ash black hides, white skull masks streaked with the same colour, and long bones grasped in their hands burning with green fire. Moon stared. Marowak? He called those Marowak?

She hadn't heard about this at all.
Rotom-dex was quick to make its announcements. To describe the Alolan Marowak, Ghost and Fire-type, as being just that. Special Alolan Variants. Moon nodded. She hadn't expected this, but didn't mind it all the same. Ghost and Fire? She could face that.

She was ready for her Trial.

“Now then!” Kiawe held out a hand, the one Marowak carrying two bones handing one to him, “watch closely, Moon!” Raising the bone Kiawe spun it, the bone travelling from hand to hand, around his body as he continued to move. It was an elegant dance, one Moon hadn't expected from him. One the Marowak mirrored.

Spin the bone. Fire dances. Trails and flows. Flame entrances.

Moon watched. The dance continued, beautiful but beautiful alone. She applauded when Kiawe came to a stop. He and the Marowak bowed. Then waited. A moment of silence.

Where was the Trial?

“And that,” Kiawe stepped forward, the Marowak falling back as he did so, “was the Trial you must take.” Moon stared. What? Kiawe explained. “The connection between people and Pokemon, between you and the land, there is a rhythm to it. A pulse you can feel in the shifting of the earth, the flow of the air, and,” raising a hand the Captain tossed the bone he carried, the item spinning in the air until he caught it again, “the dance I have show you. Here in Wela Volcano it is loudest, and that is the reason here is where this Trial takes place. Only when you can hear this rhythm, Moon, only when you and your Pokemon can follow it, will the Totem Pokemon appear. And that is the challenge of my Trial.”

Moon didn't understand.

“Call forth your closest Pokemon.” Kiawe's instruction was direct. Moon's hand went to the Pokeball of her Dartrix, a Pokemon she could not bring herself to leave at the Poke Pelago no matter how poorly it would fare here. She unleashed it without a second thought. “Now watch,” Kiawe took a stance again, raising the bone, “and listen. Whether in the movement of the dance, the feeling of the earth beneath your feet, or the secret song Alola sings, you must find the rhythm and direct your Pokemon to follow it. Are you ready?”

She wasn't but she nodded anyway. She didn't understand, but that didn't mean she couldn't figure it out. She’d made it this far, right? She wasn't going to stop here. Kiawe nodded and began his dance.

Moon watched.

Listened.

And felt nothing.

“Let us return to the lodge.” Kiawe's words shocked Moon from her silence, her whirring thoughts seeking the answer to this question she didn't understand. Return? Wasn't she here to do her Trial? She had to take it. Let her take it! Kiawe shook his head. “You cannot take my Trial until you are able to hear the rhythm of Alola. You should rest for today.”

She complained. It was a most eleven-year old reaction, a stark difference to the usual quiet manner with which she acted. But not unsurprising. As Captain of Wela Volcano, Kiawe had weathered the complaints of many Trial-goers confused by the challenge he gave them. Insisting all they had to do was defeat the Totem to move on. Completely missing the point.
Moon was strong. Beyond strong, thanks to her gift. With the ability to use Z-Moves without restriction, Kiawe was sure that in a calm state of mind she would best his Totem without trouble at all. But first she must obtain that calm state of mind. Must not focus on battling and seeing the Trials of Alola as opponents. They were experiences for the children of Alola to contemplate, to understand this world they were part of. Ilima and Lana were gifted Trainers but each too battle-focused. Kiawe firmly believed that a Trial focused more on a Trainer's heart than power was essential to determine who could continue on their Island Challenge.

Moon asked for the dance again. She'd hear it this time, she was sure. But Kiawe saw in her only the intention to win. To overcome a challenge. No thought beyond the desire to fight. She was so young, a few more months, if not a year, should have passed before she'd be tasked to understand. New Pokemon Trainers, they understood battling and that was it. Not the world they were part of.

As long as she could only think of defeating this Trial she never would.

“We will return.” Kiawe's firm statement broke Moon's insistence down. She stared, shocked, realisation coming to her that she would not pass her Trial this day. A defeat. A failure. She didn't understand. Followed in silence. Posture tense.

Kiawe watched her closely as the gondola lift carried them back down to the base of Wela Volcano. Since Moon's journey began her only true defeats had come at the hands of Tapu Koko and Captain Lana, both opponents of such power it was the expected result. Failing to overcome a task due to her own inability however, that was a new experience for her. She was still a girl of eleven. Defeat wasn't an easy thing to accept.

“Moon.” She looked at him when he spoke to her and her expression was cool. No smiles. No relaxation or appreciation for the world around her. The exact wrong state to hear Alola's song. “Hearing the rhythm is not about battling Pokemon. It is about listening to the world around you. The more you try to force it, the harder it will be to grasp. Rest. It will come to you in time.”

A significant amount of the day had been taken by this journey, Kiawe left with only a short while to rest before leaving for his job. In that time he watched over Moon, who ate at the lodge and then wandered out into the fields around Wela Volcano's base, nodding absently at his advice not to push herself. Unfortunately that was as long as he could spend, his own work demanding attention now. As Kiawe took his leave, riding a Tauros back to Royal Avenue and occupied with his thoughts, he did not look back.

Missed the Charizard coursing through the air, heading north-east with unerring focus.

Returning to the Poke Pelago.

Mohn welcomed Moon back, excitedly showing her the developments – the bridge to the next island now completed, its rich fields promising even greater harvests than those of the first – before catching on to just what her mood was. She was upset. But resistant to explaining why. Still, just watching her, she seemed to struggle with remaining in a poor mood when surrounded by her Pokemon. So Mohn let her go and prepared food for the evening.

Moon stayed the night surrounded by her Pokemon and left when she awoke the next day. Captain Kiawe, a natural early-riser, watched as the Flame Pokemon soared overhead, coming from the north-east. The same direction Lana had reported before.

Moon returned to the lodge to find Kiawe awaiting her. Made an excuse of taking a morning walk. Appreciated that he accepted it immediately. Didn't think further of it.
The gondola lift brought the two back to the Trial Site far faster than the climb of the day before. It was still early in the morning, the full day still ahead. Kiawe took position once more upon the stage, Moon watching intently. She would hear it. She wouldn't be beaten. The competitive nature within her flared.

Deafened her.

“Come, my fine Hikers!”

Loud calls, a repeated “hup hup hup hup”, followed the trio of figures emerging from the rocks, quickly taking place on the stage without delay. Stunned by this sudden appearance, Moon stared blankly, momentarily forgetting herself. What just happened?

“Now watch our dance and look for the rhythm of Alola's song!”

Step and turn. Watch closely. Our fine dance, done joyously.

Moon watched. The three dancing figures, all similar in appearance, weathered men who'd clearly spent years wandering such environments, ended the show in a pose. It was exceptionally strange, made all the more so as the three departed without a word in the wake of their dance. It was just Moon and Kiawe again now.

Immediately she began to question if anything she'd just seen had actually happened.

Kiawe looked her over. She was still staring blankly. The strangeness of this moment hadn't unlocked her intense focus. Unfortunate. “Moon,” he gave a new option, “call forth your Dartrix again. The two of you, listen for the steps to follow. Give commands as you hear them.” She nodded and released the Blade Quill Pokemon once more, the Dartrix stretching in the warmth of morning, the hour far earlier today than it had been the day before. Kiawe stepped aside and left the stage to Moon and her Pokemon.

And waited.

Moon struggled. Closed her eyes, listened, and heard nothing of note. No rhythm in the wind. No feeling in the earth beneath her feet. Just silence. A minute passed and then another, her Pokemon waiting for her command, swaying on its own from side to side. It could already hear, Kiawe observed. Simply needed its Trainer to as well. She'd raised it well, another sign of her exceptional ability. The only thing holding her back now was the way she saw the Trial she faced. It wouldn't be too long though, now he was sure.

“My advice,” when Kiawe spoke Moon opened her eyes, frustration clear that no progress had been made, “is to spend the day around Wela Volcano in peace. The Island Challenge requires Trainers to become a part of Alola. Forget battling and listen to the land, then you will hear it. I have full confidence in you.”

Confidence or not, Moon had now failed to meet this challenge twice. It weighed heavy upon her. Kiawe watched her leave disheartened. Wondered what advice he could give. Some Trainers never heard the song. Insisted Kiawe was pretending, that he was specifically keeping them from going forward. Became consumed by their frustration. Moon was in that state now, unable to parse her own inability. But she was also gifted. And held a love for Alola that Kiawe had both heard of and seen. Her moments of appreciation during their climb the day before, he'd been sure of it then. She understood.

Not as fast as Hau, who had grasped the song immediately, needed a second attempt only to defeat
the Totem Pokemon, but Moon would not be held here for long. He was sure.

Moon spent the day in battle. The Captain's advice to pace herself lasted only a short while, the frustration at her inability driving Moon to accept the challenges of any Trainer or wild Pokemon to cross her path. Her Pokemon, especially those she had caught recently to help her face the Totem of Wela Volcano, needed more strength, wouldn't be able to overcome the opponent they would face. So she trained them and they grew under her orders and as Kiawe observed this aspect of her, he knew it was incredible. She was incredible.

But she couldn't hear the song.

The day continued the same as the last. Moon left Wela Volcano and returned to the Poke Pelago, Kiawe seeing her go this time. Mohn could see her frustrations remained, slackened only by the presence of the Pokemon around her. Night turned to day. Moon returned from the north-east. Kiawe greeted her. And led her back to the site.

It was the Marowak again, the surprise of the Hikers one that couldn't be relied upon twice. Moon watched them with laser-focus, the exact wrong state of mind to hear the song. Kiawe sighed, unable to advise her to relax. Telling someone they were not calm was the fastest way to make things worse.

Still, he tried. Repeated the dance, allowed Moon's Pokemon to join it, watched as the Dartrix fluttered about to the same rhythm he could feel. With Moon's will it would follow it perfectly, call the Totem without fail. But Moon couldn't guide it. Couldn't even tell that her Pokemon could already hear. Simply grew more and more despondent as she realised today would be no different to the last.

She asked what she could do but there was little Kiawe could tell her. He had found the rhythm in his dance. Others in simply remaining at peace. Some in battle, though the number Moon had taken part in hinted she would not. Hau had looked out from Wela Volcano as he climbed it and heard it then. Understood what he was climbing to do.

Hearing that affected Moon. Hau had heard it immediately? How long then had it taken him to complete his Trial? Faster... than this? Kiawe felt warning in the question, yet found himself unwilling to tell a falsehood. Told Moon that Hau had heard the song immediately, called up the Totem, been bested by it and then overcame it the day to follow.

It hit harder than she expected. Being unable to overcome this Trial, this challenge, was affecting her but the thought she was falling behind Hau, that he was leaving her behind, that was so much worse. She had to hear the song. She had to pass the Trial. She couldn't stop here.

She had to keep up.

Kiawe saw a fire in Moon but it was a fire that burned its host. Her struggle to overcome was wearing upon her. She'd grown more sullen, more tense, as the days passed by. Her perceived failures were stacking heavy upon her shoulders. Advice to pace herself, to relax and take things easily, would not be well received. He was unsure what to tell her.

Just that he should say something.

“Come with me.”

The Trial Site was set high up Wela Volcano's peak, but not at the peak itself. It was a further walk to reach that height, and Kiawe led Moon on it while distracting her from her thoughts. “My dance, I found it when I did my Trial here, the Captain before me teaching me to hear the rhythm of this
place. She did so by taking me to the peak, and telling me to meditate on the sight of Alola before me. It... didn't work.”

Moon focused on that. Someone else experiencing the same difficulty she faced.

“It was the Marowak who taught me – they dance with their bones, and I joined them on a whim. Only then did I hear it. Only then did I understand.” Should Moon dance then? She asked him that. Kiawe shook his head. “I can't answer that. Only Alola can.” An enigmatic answer for an enigmatic Trial. Moon frowned.

“From there,” Kiawe continued to climb the path, Moon following behind, “I fell in love with the art of dance. I've practised it every day since. And am working hard to study abroad when my Captainship ends.” He turned and smiled back at Moon. She was still feeling down, but listening intently all the same. “By the time that happens, you'll probably be ready to become a Captain yourself. What do you say, would you like to take on the task of teaching this rhythm to the Trial-goers of the future?”

Moon stopped walking. She still struggled to imagine herself as a Captain. But here, teaching this thing she couldn't understand, that was far too much. Just trying to picture it resulted in her head being filled with blank noise. Kiawe stopped as well, seeing Moon deep in thought. Almost. Almost...

She shook her head and moved on. She'd think about that after her Island Challenge. For now she had to reach the peak, hear the song, and beat the Totem. Kiawe's face fell as she moved past him. She still didn't understand.

The opponent holding her back was her own drive to fight and win.

The peak of Wela Volcano, a grand view out over Akala Island's south, even the far distant hills containing the Ruins of Life, did nothing for Moon. She stared and waited for the flash of inspiration, of understanding, and got nothing. Turned and left without a word.

The next day was different, Moon watching as her Dartix fluttered about the dancing Marowak, bouncing to the tune. The Pokemon was acting independently, caught in the dance all on its own. Moon didn't even acknowledge that, didn't pay attention to how her Pokemon was moving. Just waited for that moment of realisation that wasn't coming.

Didn't notice until it was far too late the giant Pokemon that had crawled over the rocks and risen over the dancing group.

“Salazzle!” Rotom-dex announced as it rose up in reaction to the new Pokemon, “Toxic Lizard Pokemon, evolution of Salandit.” Moon had encountered Salandit over the past few days here, the territorial lizards quick to battle, and quicker still to be bested by the Pokemon she had brought to take this Trial. An evolution of them, that made sense.

All she had to do now was win.

The Z-Aura of a Totem flowed around the black lizard as the Marowak scattered, as Kiawe stepped back, as Dartix fluttered before the Pokemon highlighted by lines of pink. Moon didn't fully understand how this battle had begun, but knew at least she was prepared to win it. Dartix return.

Dartix didn't return.

Kiawe observed. The dancing of Moon's Pokemon had lured his Totem Salazzle, but caught in the rhythm that Moon could not hear the Dartix was unable to obey her commands. Simply fluttered
Moon stared. It had been there. The opponent she needed to beat. And she'd done nothing. Been unable to direct her Dartrix back and... why hadn't she called out another Pokemon? Why hadn't she done anything? She didn't understand. She didn't understan-

“You heard it.” Kiawe's voice cut through Moon's thoughts. She stared at him. “Or rather, you heard the absence of it. The space where the rhythm should be, the song that will let you face the Totem. You are close. Your Pokemon has already found it. You will complete your Trial soon. Have faith.”

Moon didn't understand. She hadn't heard anything. She couldn't picture at all what she was looking for. Didn't get it. It didn't make sense! She called back her Dartrix with a sharp order, breaking through its dance and causing it to look at her with surprise at her tone. Moon didn't note her own frustration. Turned and left.

She couldn't handle this.

Kiawe caught her on the slopes of Wela, embroiled in battle with local Pokemon. She was venting, and continuing to miss what it was she had to find. But his advice, his suggestion she stop battling for the day, went ignored once more. She wasn't ready to listen. To him or the song. So competitive, so driven, she reminded Kiawe of Gladion. Of how the young man pushed himself to win until it hurt.

He watched over her as best he could, but when he turned his back she was gone, a Charizard soaring through the sky above. He watched it go. Had reported the details enough to be confident of where it was heading, cross-referenced with others along the way. Lana had told him she'd take care of it. He didn't know what that meant, but left it to her all the same. She was sharp.

She'd do what was best.

Moon didn't expect it. When the Charizard circled over the Poke Pelago, she didn't notice the way her Pokemon were grouped around Mohn's residence, his little shack by the sea, to be any different. Didn't feel their curiosity. Was too deep in her thoughts to grasp even that.

The Charizard landed. Roared its arrival as Moon dismounted before taking off to settle upon the great vine trees of the island until it was needed again. Moon's Pokemon turned to her. Mohn emerged from the house to greet her.

Lana followed behind.

“Well,” Lana's casual look, her glance at the Pokemon surrounding Moon, confirmed everything she had been sure of when she'd arrived and seen the Pokemon here. All those someone who'd completed the Melemele and Brooklet Hill legs of an Island Challenge would find. “I'd say this explains a lot.”

Moon had an impossible ability, able to sustain Pokemon without any sign of strain. At this point the Captains observing her were sure: she simply had no limit to the power she could provide her Pokemon. They'd accepted that conclusion. But still missed the second impossible step that came with it.

With nothing able to drain her, with no limits to what she could maintain, why should Moon follow the limitation of six Bonds? Because that was the raw limit for humans, or at least it was believed to be so, Lana supposed. No-one had ever maintained seven. It wasn't even understood why, seemingly arbitrary. But that was the truth.
Except for Moon.

Twenty easily, thirty? Lana began counting before focusing back on the girl standing stock-still before her. She'd frozen up. The Captain sighed and approached.

Raised a hand to poke Moon's forehead.

“Moon,” the girl jolted from the combination of touch and name, “it's fine.”

Moon unloaded. It wasn't fine! Not the way everyone treated her. Not the way it would be worse now that Lana knew. And not the way she couldn't hear the song! The small smile that formed on the Captain's face broke through Moon's rant. She stared at it. Lana shook her head. Beckoned for Moon to follow her as she walked to the water's edge. Moon did so.

“I couldn't stand that Trial.” When Lana said it Moon stopped. Really? “It took me months to hear it, I was so sure every time but it just wouldn't come to me. I actually left Wela Volcano and stayed at Brooklet Hill after the first week. Visited every now and again but couldn't get it any time.”

Months? Moon shuddered at the thought. Hau would be long gone from Akala in that time. And Lillie would follow the Professor on his path. Moon couldn’t be left behind by them. She couldn't!

“You know when I heard it?” Lana asked this and Moon shook her head. She wanted to know. If anything could help her... “It was at Brooklet Hill. I wasn't even thinking about it, just fishing, watching Pokemon. Counting ripples. I made a tune out of their number. I still remember it. One two three, sea ripples. Splish and splash! Catch Tentacools.” Moon stared. Lana grinned and stuck out her tongue.

“Wela Volcano is terrible.” She said it with such a deadpan that Moon laughed. She couldn't even help it. “Honestly, it's so hot and dry and the air has that acrid taste it's awful!” Lana put her hands on her hips, having delivered similar speeches to Kiawe more than once. “Hearing the song is best done where you're happiest, not where it's loudest. Where are you happy, Moon?”

Moon stopped and thought. With her Pokemon. With Hau and Lillie. No place. Just those around her. Lana smiled at that. It was a good answer.

“How about staying here then? Spending time with your Pokemon? Try to focus on them, not on your thoughts. Then you might hear it. That's my advice.”

Kiawe's focus was always on teaching calm, peace, and acceptance of the world around you to hear its song. But Moon was like Lana, the type who always needed to be moving forward. She couldn't take it easy and enter a trance like Kiawe could with his dance wherever he was. She needed the right place.

Maybe the Poke Pelago was it.

“Moon.” Lana spoke again. Moon looked to her. “I'm going to tell the other Captains about this.” Moon's expression fell. “And that's it. Not the Kahuna. Not the Professor. Just them. Will you trust us?” The role of the Captains was to help guide and test Trainers. But there was another important aspect to them. Their youth. They remembered so clearly being young Island Challengers themselves. They could understand better than most. And as a team they had their own secrets only they knew.

Moon didn't understand.

“This place helps you, doesn't it?”
It did.

“Then you should have it safe. There's just one thing.”

What was it?

“When we have it, we'd like to trade a Ride Pager for your own. We can transfer the Charizard to it, it's just the device we'd like to swap.” Now Moon stared, confused once more. Retrieved her Ride Pager and looked at it. What did the Captain want it for? Lana shook her head. “I'll let you know when we have your new one.”

There was little more to Lana's visit. She spoke more to Mohn, instructing him that the maintainer of the Pokemon Storage System in Alola was going to be notified about this system intrusion and that he'd be in touch. Mohn accepted that he was probably getting off lightly. Beyond that, Lana took her leave. She'd have to tell the others everything, and they'd figure out where to go forward from there. Ilima would know best, he was the one to work with the Aether Foundation in creating the Ride Pager anyway.

He might know who Mohn was and why he had the original with him, before he'd given it to Moon at least.

As for Moon, Lana watched her with her Pokemon, all bound to her, and understood why she saw something far more than any other Trainer in the girl. That many Bonds, it made the strange sensation Moon gave so obvious now.

And it was only going to grow more intense with time.

Moon watched Lana leave, the Captain's Lapras happily surfing over the waves. That had been more than she'd been prepared for, the secret she was keeping discovered, and she found herself exhausted by it. An emotional toll had been taken. She needed to rest.

So Moon rested, the day turning, morning passing to afternoon. She was tired. Watched her Pokemon, some at work, some at play. It had been too much: the Totem appearing, her failure in facing it, her continued failures to hear the song, and then Lana's appearance. In the warmth of the sun Moon nodded off surrounded by her Pokemon. And dreamed.

Their sounds shaped her subconscious thoughts. Pokemon dancing about her, a whole world of them she was a part of. How long had she wanted this as a child, how long had she been looking forward to the day she would receive her first Pokemon and go out on her journey? And now here she was. Beyond her wildest dreams. And now...

In her dreams, a rhythm. Wake and feel, this momentum.

Moon was on her feet in moments.

The setting sun cast orange across the Poke Pelago, night beginning its approach. Some would be tired at this time, a full day spent however it may be. But Moon was not tired. Moon was not prepared to stop. Her Pokemon, at work, play, and rest, looked to her and the way they moved continued what she heard.

The rhythm of Alola's song.

Mohn didn't have the chance to catch her before she was gone, the time between Moon's awakening and calling the Ride Charizard to return her to Wela Volcano less than a minute. She'd called back the Pokemon she would need. Those who could follow the tune.
She had to go. Now. Before she lost it.

She had a Trial to take.

Captain Kiawe of Wela Volcano entered the lodge at the mountain’s base with a glum expression. Hard work, determination to succeed, didn’t always end up going his way. He’d been sure that working at the Thrifty Megamart, while managing his role as Captain and his practise of dance, would be the way to go. That he’d make the savings necessary to follow his dreams.

But those dreams were a little further off now. He didn’t know what he’d do next. Find somewhere else that would take him, that would accept he had a duty to serve Alola and it’s youth whenever they called? That wasn't so easy a thing.

He sighed.

Moon called out his name.

He didn’t need to ask. It was obvious. The way she swayed from side to side. The way her foot tapped at the ground when she came to a stop. The brightness in her eyes and the smile on her face. He shelved his own concerns in an instant. This was far too important to feel down. Moon had heard the song. Kiawe nodded in response.

“Then it’s time.”

Upon the stage of stone set within the Trial Site of Wela Volcano two figures stood. The first was Captain Kiawe, tasked with overseeing this Trial. One who guided Trainers to hear Alola in their hearts, to understand that the Island Challenge was not solely about raising strong Pokemon who could fight.

It was about growing into the kind of person who could feel and care for the world around them.

Before him stood Moon. She moved a hand, her Dartrix appearing before her, swaying in the same manner she did. To hear the song was to be in sync with one’s Pokemon. As long as Moon remembered this, she would be a greater Trainer than ever before. Completing this Trial first, Hau had a strong advantage going to face his next. The flames of Wela Volcano forged Trainers stronger than they arrived to this place.

“Come, my fine dancers!”

Just one of the Hikers this time, three Marowak joining him. Kiawe called them to dance.

To begin Moon’s next Trial.

In the earth, a movement. Flames rise up, in announcement. Rhythms pulse, partners dance, summon forth, opponents. Marowak spin and dance and sway, Dartrix flies, hunts, and preys. With Aura flowing in command Moon’s given order scattered foes, clearing way, calling to, Totem Trial, Salazzle.

Pokemon dance, change place on stage, battle start, new song made. Poison and fire, to water bows, flow and pulse, overpowers. Poliwag new, fierce and brave, feels Aura shine and forms a wave. Z-Aura, Z-Power. Hydro Vortex, mountain drenched, Totem wrenched from feet, poison arcing overhead, Moon’s calm heart complete. No shaking but for dance. No quaking but for trance. In
rhythm caught in Alola's hold her spoken words, heard as told. Partners change and water rains from Z-Move's wake and sustains the fish, Pokemon caught in Brooklet Hill, Small Fry calling up allies. Schooling Wishiwashi towers over Totem foe, eyes glowering, bold intimidation answered back, each unleashing their attack there's steam. Fire water mix, clouds now hanging thick. Poison seeps and saps away at Moon's choice as she says the words, calls a change of tack, their next act.

Distance taken intent unshaken, from water drawn, shield and sword, attacks blocked, power stocked, a single strike that splits the night. Steam parts, light cuts, shines on the dance under the dark. Totem strength resisting blows, weathering strikes from countless foes but her light, shining brighter through the water takes its toll, visage fearful to them all. Another wave, Kiawe looks to see the one who does this, whose endless self lets her use abilities that make her news. His Totem staggers, a prideful dancer, no time for laughter, Moon's attack continuing. Third choice Eevee with confidence astounding. Aura so bright that his heart is pounding.

In the rhythm she found the flow that gave her even more control and now she speaks commands that rend sky and earth, light spreading forth, Breakneck Blitz third of three no dance can stop, Salazzle toppling and falling, caught and dragged through the song swirling, one true blow through the attacks that had held back so many foes but not this one. Not this one.

Light shone bright, around them. Silence spoke, astounding. Kiawe's stare, Moon's unshaken.

And she bowed with victory taken.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter can really be described as a master class in biting off more than I can chew.

When I started Eldritch, the goal was that abstract layer of separation that made Moon like the protagonist, difficult to understand. No direct dialogue, and more witnesses of her than her itself. But I'm a firm believer in following the flow of one's writing and as the chapters continued, we slowly got more and more of a look inside the mind of Moon. Even without her speaking, we know a lot about how she thinks now. Is that good or bad to the initial pitch vs overall fic? It's hard for me to evaluate that. That's up to each individual reading it.

However it may be, this chapter started introspection on Moon's own faults, the difficulties she faces from both herself and her environment. Hau too, to an extent. Neither is perfect, and they both have their own troubles and struggles. It was going into that that slowed this chapter's production down - I had to rewrite a large amount of it a few times to keep what I believe is the "feeling" of Eldritch. I feel that I did though, so I hope you agree.

Of course the real hardest part was the sections of Alola's song, though I feel I got into a pretty good flow for the finale. Did you hear it? I hope so.

As always, my thanks to all readers. With this chapter my "once a week by the skin of my teeth" schedule is broken, and tbh I don't think it's coming back easily. I'm starting a d&d campaign this week and so I have to manage that in addition to another online campaign I handle, and Eldritch. So yeah, chapters are probably going to slow down now. I'm not a huge fan of that but we do what we must. Nonetheless please look forward to chapter 17 when the time comes. One Trial and one Grand Trial remain in
Akala.

Still so much left to experience.
Darkness gave way to light as the Tauros Moon rode emerged from the Dividing Peak Tunnel, the passage defining a border between the north and east sides of Akala. Under the sun once more she looked down to her left wrist, the red crystal set within the Z-Ring she wore glittering brightly. She smiled.

The victory of the night before had been a freeing thing, releasing Moon from the struggle that had consumed her in seeking the song of Alola, allowing her to hear it clearly at last. Even in the breaking of the dawn the next day, the sound of birdsong from Fletchling that nested across the Wela Volcano Park echoing, she could hear it. Even in the stomping of the Tauros carrying her onwards to the north, she could hear it.

Even in the movements of Kiawe's dance as he taught her the pose to unleash the power of the Firium-Z, she could hear it.

Next was the third of Akala’s three Trials: the Grass Trial of Captain Mallow, held in Lush Jungle to the north. With the Firium-Z in hand, the dance to perform the Z-Move Inferno Overdrive in mind, and a Ride Tauros to carry her the way, Moon continued on, bound for Akala’s northern coast and distant Wahiola Town beyond – the gateway to Lush Jungle.

Having promised to meet Moon before her Third Trial was complete, Kiawe had gone west, first to return to Paniola Town, and from there continue north around the western coast of Akala, eventually reaching the Trial Site of Captain Mallow from the opposite direction. Left on her own for the moment Moon travelled along the road, cars and other Ride Pokemon passing her by in either direction as the stone landscape surrounding Wela Volcano led on to the Dividing Peak Tunnel. And then through to its other side.

The difference was as night and day, made all the moreso by the brightness of the sun after the long ride through the dark and lengthy tunnel. Here light glittered off the ocean, waves crashing against the shore, roadside thick with grass and trees. Wingull soared overhead, flocks of Trumbeak and Pikipek wheeled closer to the mountain slopes to the south, and the water frequently broke as sea-faring Pokemon jumped about in play. The air was thick with the smell of nature and completely clear of any of the fumes and heated rock that coated Wela Volcano. Moon found herself stunned by the difference.

It was beautiful.

So beautiful, in fact, that Moon immediately made a decision. Guided the Tauros she rode to a station up ahead, a Ride Pokemon outlet, and made a return. “Ohhh,” the attendant gave Moon a grin, “going on foot to Wahiola? It’s a wonderful day for it!” Moon nodded, turning as she did to look at all the Ride Pokemon at rest. Some looked impatient. She queried it. “I was just thinking the same!” The woman she was speaking to nodded, “I’ll have my second take over when they get here and take these Tauros out for a roam in the fields!” Moon smiled at that and patted one that had approached her on the snout. It was good that it would have the chance to get out and about.

No-one should be inside today.

From there Moon set out on foot, the rhythm of Alola rich in her ears; the sound of the waves a beat,
the punctuation of Pokemon calls notes above it. Even her own footsteps, whether in steady pace or sudden burst of movement, played into it all. Without a second thought Moon brought out a Pokemon, her Eevee, who immediately raced circles around her before clambering up onto her shoulders. It was a timid one on its own, but even it had difficulty worrying in such a pleasing warmth as this. Moon raised a hand and ran it through the fur around her Pokemon's neck. It leaned into her touch happily. The finest of days.

“You there!”

A loud voice entered the song and ground it to a close, a screeching stop to Moon's pace as she came to an immediate halt. The call repeated, her head turning to see a man across the road waving enthusiastically. Lessons about showing politeness to others warred with Moon's desire to return to her warm morning walk, ultimately winning out as she crossed the road to see the one who had called out to her. The Alolan way was to hear one another out, and Moon had found her love for Alola far greater than she had ever thought of Kanto. So she would listen.

To a point.

The man had the look of a scientist, grey coat worn over black clothing, what looked like computer panels built into his sleeves. His glasses were alight with changing symbols, results of the constant typing he was performing with one gloved hand atop the panel on the other arm. Moon found herself transfixed by the strange sight. She'd never seen anyone like this before. The neatly brushed blonde hair of the man should be the least notable part of him, but the large blue crest curving out from it and then around his head made even that strange. He was a figure of most confusing design. She didn't know quite what to make of him.

“Greetings, greetings, oh please excuse me,” he bobbed his head to Moon, who had to look up at him to make eye contact. He was tall. “I am a scientist, my name is Colress.” He spoke fast enough that Moon didn't feel obligated to pause and introduce herself. It was easier that way. “I am here in Alola studying the means by which the full potential of Pokemon can be brought out. Have you ever considered the topic before?” Moon shook her head, Colress reacting to that with a smile. “Of course, of course,” he nodded readily, “most Trainers move forward on pure instinct – some lessons from their youth inherited from previous generations but most of their experience gained by just that: experience! But I am a man of science and it is my drive to fully understand how Pokemon gain power from people, and just how that power grows!”

Reaching forward a hand, Colress extended it to the Eevee at Moon's shoulder, who pulled back from the stranger immediately. Colress stopped his movement before leaning back up.

“Pokemon gain power from a Trainer's Bond, of course, but there is so much more to it than that! Have you ever considered how a Trainer's Bond grows, how it becomes able to give more power to a Pokemon so that Pokemon might grow stronger still?” At this point Moon noted Colress wasn’t even looking at her, caught in his own speech. But it was interesting. She stayed put. “It is my belief,” Colress pointed at Moon's left wrist, indicating the Z-Ring she wore, “that the Z-Ring is key! Through it and Z-Crystals, Trainers can provide even more power to their Pokemon! With each successive Z-Move, your Pokemon gains more from you! Have you felt that? Detected that growth that helps them become strong far faster than they would without? That pace here in Alola that is one of the fastest in the world?”

Z-Moves... Moon thought. From her first with Rowlet against Tapu Koko, to her latest with Eevee against the Totem Salazzle. Was each helping her Pokemon grow more? Was that the key? She looked back up at Colress and he saw the interest sparkle in her eyes. He smiled.

“Yes, perhaps even more than the Mega Ring, it is the Z-Ring that may lead to the discovery of a
Pokemon's ultimate potential! And now, because I have told you this, I wish to ask you something.”

The look in Colress's eyes was intent enough that Moon felt her interest momentarily pause. What... did he want with her? “I ask you, Trainer, to continue using Z-Moves with your Pokemon!” With that declaration Colress spread his arms wide. “By continuing to transfer power to them, more and more, the Bonds between you will grow and they will become stronger! As the Pokemon League forms here in Alola, the greatest of Alolan Trainers will appear, and I wish to see the power they have forged with their Bonds! So, young Trainer, continue to grow and make it to that stage, and show the world the potential you and your Pokemon have found! That is what I ask!”

Moon nodded and agreed, but stepped back in the same moment. The intensity in Colress now was starting to overwhelm her interest in his topic. He was looking at her like she was the solution to all his troubles and the thought of people putting such upon her weighed heavy. She didn't need such expectations. Excusing herself, bid farewell by the scientist, Moon turned. Began to make her way past a nearby building, a white cuboid structure on stilts, intent on moving on. Of returning to the song.

A loud crash and yell from inside the building stopped her cold. Then another and a cry that sounded like a Pokemon's. Once again, the belief that in Alola you should never turn your back on another surfaced. Moon turned and took steps back to the building's entrance, climbing the few stairs to its front door. And opened it wide.

“Nuiiiiiii!”

“Block it!”

Within the building was a lab-like interior, white decor branding with golden symbols that Moon would place as soon as she focused on them, and similarly white clad people running about. The reason being due to the thrashing Pokemon that had already broken through a table, and was continuing to flail about as the pair of individuals inside tried and failed to calm it. Rotom-dex quickly emerged from Moon's bag to identify the pink, black, and white tiny bear-like Pokemon tearing the place apart.

“Stufful, zzt, Flailing Pokemon! Normal and Fighting-type, a Pokemon that hates physical contact from anyone but those it trusts! Zzt!”

The heads of the two people in the building, both women wearing white outfits branded with the same gold symbols, turned at the voice. The one closest to Moon held out an arm. “Be careful!” She took a step forward to guide Moon back, “It's not safe while it's rampaging!” Moon looked past her at the Pokemon thoroughly trashing the area around it. She felt bad looking at it, like it wasn't well. With a quiet word to her Eevee the Evolution Pokemon jumped down to the ground and approached.

Stufful paused at the sight of the Pokemon, who was calling lightly to it, keeping space as even with Moon behind it there were nerves. Yet as Moon knelt down beside her Eevee, holding out a closed fist to the Pokemon, the Stufful reacted. Took careful steps forward, head tilting to make sure no-one else was approaching, before bonking its skull against Moon's outstretched fist. Then standing still.

“Oh, amazing!” Both women in the room applauded, Moon keeping her focus on the Flailing Pokemon. It still looked unwell. One of the two women knelt down beside her.

“We have to give this Stufful a shot to treat its illness, but it refused to be held for it. We didn't know what to do – thank you so much!” Moon thought on that, aware now that the way the Stufful moved, swaying slightly before catching itself, ran against the song. It was out of pace due to its sickness. She changed her hand, from fist to palm, and held it out to the wary Pokemon's side, Eevee chirping from beside her to help keep the Pokemon calm.
Pacified for the moment it consented as the other woman in the room knelt down as well, raising a syringe to its back leg. The Flailing Pokemon jerked slightly at the injection, but Moon's touch to its side and whispered praise kept its stance steady. After a moment the woman leaned back and withdrew the needle, the Pokemon stepping away to bury itself in the rubble it had created. Moon, along with the two women, stood back up. They breathed out a sigh.

"Thank you, seriously," the one next to Moon held out a hand, waiting for Moon's so she could shake it. "Our best Pokemon handler went back to the Paradise yesterday, and we're not so good with the really wild ones yet. You seriously saved us." Moon found the shake continuing for quite longer than normal as the woman thanked her, needing to pull a little to get her hand back. It was then that her eyes settled on the golden symbols throughout the room. Wait.

"We're with the Aether Foundation," the second woman was watching over the Stufful, but turned to face Moon after observing the Pokemon start to sleep. "Pokemon Conservationists, have you heard of us?" Moon had, was aware of the Aether Foundation that operated around Alola, working to help protect Pokemon in the wild. She liked what she'd heard. But right now, looking at the symbols around her, knowing the exact same was emblazoned on the Ride Pager she kept, she felt strange. Like she'd suddenly discovered enough pieces of a puzzle to realise there was a puzzle at all.

"People like Team Skull," the woman was continuing as Moon fixated on the Aether symbol, "cause harm wherever they go! But as long as there are good people in Alola, there'll still be places for Pokemon to be safe! That's what we're working towards. Would you... be willing to help us out until we find our feet?"

Moon paused, broken now from her thoughts. What did they want? The other woman, who'd been staring at the young girl with the Eevee, had a sudden realisation. Pulled the first aside. Moon stared at them, a whispered conversation not low enough to avoid hearing her own name. She took a step back. Both Aether members turned to her.

"Sorry, sorry," the one to have made the invitation bowed her head, "you're on an Island Challenge, of course you're too busy for that. But please, if you get the chance, lend a hand to those of us you find along the way? Oh! And visit the Aether Paradise some time! I'd love for you to see what we do there!"

Moon nodded. Waved. Appreciated that knowing her name was apparently where it stopped for those two. Seriously appreciated. She was tired of being known. Stepping back out, planning to return to the path, Moon heard Colress's loud voice in the air, looking to see him talking enthusiastically to what looked like another Trainer passing by.

"Well then Trainer, I believe it is you, yes you, who is the key to unlocking Pokemon potential! So then, what I must ask is for you to-"

Moon shook her head and moved on with a smile. It was good to not be recognised after all.

Travel was easy from there, returning to the warmth of the sun and the sound of the waves and the rhythm that pulsed in the back of her head. The northern coast of Akala was active, as such a beautiful place should be, and Moon enjoyed meetings with wild Pokemon and wandering Trainers both. Her Eevee took the lead today, doing well in battles, many Trainers either asking Moon what plans she had for the Evolution Pokemon, or giving their own advice on what form they believed was best. Moon still didn't know. Maybe she'd stumble upon an unknown evolution just by doing nothing.

Probably not though. Everyone was trying to find the next of Eevee's evolutions already. Reaching
that... wasn’t about to happen without reason.

That was how the day continued, wandering the path, meeting people and Pokemon, breaking for lunch at a small place along the way. Small settlements could be found along this northern coast, some higher up in the mountains, some lower down by the water. The largest would be Wahiola, but even it was tiny compared to the number of people who lived in the towns along the west, and that a meagre total when facing Heahea City itself. Yes, the north coast, despite being vibrant with life, was quiet too. Moon found herself very taken with it.

As far as rewards for completing the Fire Trial could go, this was as good as she could imagine it got.

Wahiola Town greeted her as only it could, with a calming energy that embraced Moon, welcoming her to a place of rest. Set overlooking the shore and northern sea, it reminded her of a smaller version of Wai’oli, perhaps crossed with Iki Town itself. Like Iki Town in spirit, a small and old place, but Wai’oli in design, spread out over a large area from mountain to sea. The thought of coming back here, after her Island Challenge was done, immediately settled in Moon’s mind. She liked it here. She liked it very much indeed.

“Oh hey! Moon!”

The voice of Hau came from up the road, the young Trainer racing down it to greet his friend. Moon waved back as Hau approached, the red Z-Crystal set into the Z-Ring around her wrist as obvious as the blue one in his. The sound of their palms meeting one another, both greeting and victory cry, was loud. Each immediately had to shake their hands after that – it had stung!

“Nice!” Hau was as bouncy and energetic as ever, but now Moon could see more to it. The way he moved was in tune to the song, and she was quick to realise it always had been. Even before being told of the song Hau had been part of it. No wonder he’d been able to understand right away. He really was incredible. “Come on, come on!” Wasting no time Hau gestured for Moon to follow him, “the Pokemon Center is up this way so we can stay there! Captain Mallow told me you’d be getting here today, and that she’d come get us tomorrow morning for our Trial!”

Moon followed, questioning. Our Trial? Was it possible for she and Hau to do a Trial at the same time? Hau shrugged. “I dunno, that’s just what she said! She and Captain Lana have been talking since they got here, I think they’re planning something big.” Now that Moon thought about it, Captain Kiawe had mentioned he’d be here too. Hau reacted to her saying that with a whistle. “I think we're in for the long haul, Moon. Hope you're ready.” Only a moment's pause before she grinned widely at him and he returned it. If they were being challenged together then...

It was definitely the three Captains who weren't ready for what came next.

“Oh okay okay okay,” as they neared the Pokemon Center Hau walked past it, Moon following after. He set to stand in an open lot before a row of buildings, a motel for travellers staying in the area unable to use the Pokemon Center itself. Being a popular destination for visiting, it saw frequent use. “You gotta tell me how it went, Moon! You did the Fire Trial! You heard the song, yeah?”

Moon nodded. It hadn't been easy, it had taken her a long time actually. But she'd heard it. Called up the Totem then defeated it in battle. Hau whistled again. “Daaaaang,” he held onto the word, “I was able to call up the Totem quick but when I fought it she kicked my butt! All that fire and poison is crazy – even Brionne couldn't keep up! I had to train super-hard to figure out what to do about it!”

To beat it the very next day, Moon pointed out. Hau smiled and rubbed the back of his head. “Well, yeah, but that's nothing compared to beating it right away! I bet it didn't even give you any trouble
either, you just went for it! Hearing the song, Moon, you must be suuuuper strong right now! I bet
you could beat anyone!” High praise, and Moon found herself doubting it. Lana, at least, would still
 crush her – as the Captain too could hear the song, and no doubt had used it to coordinate their
double battle before. Maybe the way she let Moon win while still not appearing to have thrown the
battle outright had simply been slowing down her pace within the rhythm. Moon shook her head.
There was still a long way to go.

Anyway, change of topic, how had Hau's Water Trial gone? Hau grinned and held up his arm again,
showing the Waterium-Z off. A Z-Move his Brionne would excel with. Moon was excited to obtain
the Grass-based Z-Crystal for her Dartrix. “It was really really hard!” Hau's exclamation sat right
with Moon, Lana was the type to put a heavy challenge on people. “The Totem was so strong, it
took me three tries before I won! Captain Lana still said I was a really strong Trainer though, so I bet
it beats everyone at least once! How did you do with it?”

Moon paused, having baited out the topic without preparation. She didn't want to tell a lie, she didn't
want to make something up, but neither did she want to describe the battle she had fought, the
struggle with two Totems that she won with the power of four Z-Moves combined. Hau hadn't even
said the Totem's name. She didn't even know which of the two he'd faced.

Salvation came in the form of the click of a door, the entrance to one of the motel rooms opening so
its occupant could step outside. Hau and Moon both turned to the noise, more reacting to the
presence of sound than out of any interest, then stopped and stared. The figure to emerge stared back.
Slowly Gladion stepped back inside the room and closed the door.

“Hey!” It didn't take more than a moment for Hau to cross the open lot before the motel rooms,
bound up to the door Gladion was behind, and begin hammering a fist upon it. “Hey Gladion!
Gladion hey!” Moon followed behind, her own interest piqued. She and Hau, for different reasons,
had business with Gladion still. She stood behind Hau as he knocked. It quickly grew unbearable.

“Go away.” Gladion's command came from a crack in the doorway, Hau's push against the door
finding a chain keeping it from opening any further. Not discouraged, the cheery boy leaned to the
side to get a better look in. A fierce green eye stared back at him.

“Hey let us in!”

“Absolutely not.”

“We're just gonna keep making noise at your door!” Hau's continued banging against the wooden
door persisted even after it shut again. Moon looked from side to side, wondering if anyone would
come and yell at them for this, but none of the other rooms were opening. Perhaps at this hour
everyone in the area was still out and about. A minute passed. Hau didn't slow down his barrage.

The door opened.

“Fine,” Gladion stepped away from the opened door, retreating further into the room. Hau
immediately entered, Moon excusing her entry a moment after. The room was simple, a bed at the
back, an occupied pet bed next to it. Definitely not fitting into the small foam and fabric construct,
Type: Null lay across the sea-green mat. Moon crossed the room and knelt down before it. It
observed her but did not rise.

“Hey Gladion!” Hau's volume didn't change, even now that he was inside, “Are you doing okay? I
didn't get to ask you at the Royal Dome before! You did great though, for a minute I really thought
you were gonna win! Did you? The Masked Royal sure was tough though huh? Was that your first
time fighting him? Are you going back? Are you sure you're okay? Hey what are you doing up in Wahiola anyway? Hey Gladion? Is- is that a Pokemon egg?"

 Barely listening to the barrage of questions, having extended a hand to Type: Null's mask, the Pokemon moving in no way to avoid Moon's touch, Moon stopped when she heard Hau's last. Pokemon egg? She stood up and swept her eyes over the room, settling on a round object swaddled in a blanket next to the pillow on the bed. So it was...

 That lady at the Pokemon Daycare had mentioned she'd given the egg to a young blonde man.

 “It's nothing.” Gladion looked away, “don't be so loud.”

 "Are you sure?" Hau now had a worried expression. “Isn't Null there wearing you out already? You can't hatch a Pokemon and care for it too, you're gonna get hurt!”

 "I don't need your advice!” Gladion's snap pushed Hau a step back, but only a step, the boy finding resolution to stand firm. Narrowed eyes glared at him for that. Of all the times to find a mote of strength. Moon knelt back down to Type: Null, touching a hand to its helmet, before lowering it to where there was fur protruding. A deep rumbling sound came from the great beast as she ran her hand along it. It was enjoying her care.

 “Tch,” turning his eyes upon the sound, Gladion stared at Moon fiercely, who looked up to see his displeased gaze. “I shouldn't be surprised that Null likes you, there isn't a Pokemon that doesn't, is there?” Moon stared back now, a frown on her face. Gladion didn't budge. “You have everything don't you, all that power, nothing holding you back. You wouldn't feel it at all if Null was your partner, would you?” His voice had disgust. Hau frowned.

 “Hey-"

 "No matter how hard I'm trying, looking at you, who could do this without even feeling it, it really annoys me. Get out. I don't have words for someone like you who has everything without a care.”

 "Hey!” Hau's yell now was angry, a tone Moon had rarely heard from him and one Gladion never had. The blonde boy turned to stare at Hau. Hau stepped up to him. “Moon doesn't have it easy either you know!” Moon stopped still. Hau shook his head. “Sure she's able to form Bonds that don't tire her, but look at what that got her! Everyone keeps pressuring her, seeking her out, look at her! She had to change everything about how she looks just so she can do her Island Challenge! You call that having everything? Do you?”

 Moon's beating heart did not slow as Gladion stepped back from Hau, turning to look at her again. He didn't have that scornful look now. He looked away.

 “Sorry.” His voice lacked all the edge now, intensity broken by Hau's admonishment. “I spoke without thinking.” Moon shook her head. She didn't particularly know why she was attempting to reject the apology, just that she felt like she had to. Hau saying that for her had rattled her. Null pushed its head against her back for more attention. Gladion sighed. “He's right.” Hau smiled at him when he said that. “You have your own troubles too. We all do. Nothing comes in this world without a price, whether it's Null or your abilities. We all have to suffer for the things we have.”

 “That's not true either!” Hau's voice again, this time back to its chipper usual, drew Moon's and Gladion's eyes to him. He smiled. “There's something that comes without any price! And it makes everything else easier too! It's the best thing in the world and it doesn't cost anything at all!”

 Gladion stared, trying to figure out what Hau could possibly mean. Eventually he had to ask.
“What?” Hau grinned widely.

“Friendship!”

Moon laughed. She laughed a laugh at the purity of just how Hau that statement was, of how much it summed up everything about him. She laughed and Type: Null rumbled as she held a hand against its chest to keep herself steady. That was so good. So so good.

Gladion just stared, unable to even say a thing. What even could he?

In that moment, Moon's laughter, Hau's triumphant grin, Gladion's silent stare, a new noise sounded. A small crack, audible only from its sharpness, as the swaddled egg on the motel bed began to shake.

Immediately Gladion had climbed onto the bed, moved the egg from where it lay by the pillow and begun unwrapping the blankets around it. Moon stood and moved back to where Hau was, the two watching over Gladion as he changed to sitting, settling the egg into his lap. Moment by moment outer parts of its shell cracked and fell away, movement being seen behind the translucent inner layer. Gladion kept his hands to the egg's side, waiting as the Pokemon within struggled and broke more away, eventually forming a crack around the entire egg itself.

Then with a final push the Pokemon shoved upwards and threw the egg casing away, blinking under the motel room light, nestled in Gladion's lap. Hau and Moon both smiled at the sight of it. Gladion lowered a hand to run it over the top of the Pokemon's head.

Across the brown fur of the newborn Eevee.

“Hey,” Hau nudged Moon, lifting a Heal Ball to get her attention. She nodded back in response, retrieving her own Eevee's Pokeball. Quietly each opened them, releasing the two older Evolution Pokemon into the room. Gladion's attention moved to watch as they bounded up onto the bed, each making soft noises at the young child before them. Curious, the newborn Eevee crawled out of Gladion's lap to talk to the others. A first meeting for the three.

“Hey Gladion?” His expression was so much softer now, looking over the newborn Pokemon, that Hau felt no concern in asking the question again. “Are you okay?”

Green eyes lifted to stare at Hau, their owner sighing. Reaching out a hand to the Eevee he had hatched, the Pokemon preening into his touch with a delighted and high-pitched trill. Gladion closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the contact between them. Then opened them and looked up to Hau and Moon.

“Type: Null is a special Pokemon, it's designed to take as much as it can from its partner as they can sustain. With Eevee now, there'll be less it can take from me, and so it won't gain strength the same way as before. But it will ease the strain.”

Special. Designed. The words fell heavy in Moon's head as she looked to Null, who had stood to poke its great masked head closer to the young Eevee, who squeaked and fell back, Moon and Hau's own making noises of encouragement for the younger’s confidence. Mostly Hau's, actually. Moon's was eyeing off Null with concern too.

“Will you be okay?” Hau asked it again and Gladion sighed. Looked away. Then back to him. And nodded.

“I will.”

“Good!” Satisfied by that Hau grinned, stepping forward to now put a hand against Null's helmet,
who reacted to the push by giving a little push back that was more than enough to knock Hau over. He laughed at the giant Pokemon. “I'd be worried if a friend of mine was hurting the way you were before.” The word 'friend' landed heavily enough to make Gladion pause and blink. Hau grinned up at him from the floor. “We're friends now!”

“I'm tired.” Returning to his feet, Gladion reached down and hauled Hau back up to his. “I'm going to rest, keeping Null going still takes a lot. Goodnight.”

“Okay, okay,” Hau held out an arm, his Eevee jumping up to it, Moon stepping forward to pick up her own. Both made noises of farewell to the young Eevee who ventured to leap down from the bed for the first time, staying close by to Gladion's legs. Hau stepped back. “But let's hang out again, okay?” Gladion didn't give a response, but he didn't give a rejection either. Hau would take it. He and Moon stepped out and Gladion locked the door again.

Turned back to Null and the young Eevee chirping up at it.

Friendship, huh.

The afternoon passed easily into night, Hau and Moon wandering Wahiola for a while before settling at the Pokemon Center, eating with their Pokemon, and relaxing until bed. Discussing tactics for the Grass Trial ahead, its challenge unknown, figuring out the best Pokemon for it. Hau would be able to bring out Fletchinder, but it would take storing two of his Pokemon to do so. Moon had a few catches from Wela herself, but none of them were yet trained to the level she'd want to fight a Totem. She and Hau might need to pace each other. Train together until they were both ready.

It was so much easier to manage their intent to win when together. Keeping going at the same speed. It helped.

And so the night passed too, dawn rose over Akala, and the third and final of their Trials here began.

Chapter End Notes

And so we move on to the third Trial of Akala. A truly beautiful and relaxed place, route 8 of Alola attracts many people, both day-trippers from larger towns and tourists looking to spend the night. Being so busy a thoroughfare, the Aether Foundation set up a base to help care for local Pokemon, and those with interest in observing trainers such as Colress settled in the area to see what's what. It's a place for meetings.

Wahiola as a town name is a combination of Wahipana and Paniola, the region in Hawaii mirroring where we are right now considered Wahipana, so I took that and mixed it up with Paniola to get a name - similar to how Wa'i'oli took the second half of Hau'oli for its own. It's a real nice area though. Would visit.

Finally we have Gladion. Using a fair amount of the anime, I'm taking him off-road from the games, all for the better I assure you. He's an important character too, even if he isn't part of the main trio. I'm glad to focus more on him. We'll see him again, in time.

This ended up being a nice and contained chapter, not overly long, and I'm pleased with
it. By contrast the notes for the next two chapters terrify me. I have no idea how big it's going to explode, but that's part of the fun! So let's go to it. Thank you all for reading, your comments continue to inspire me to keep giving it my all. Please look forward to the next chapter, it's certainly a special one.

I'll see you all then.
“Good morning!” With bright and cheery energy Captain Mallow of Lush Jungle greeted the Pokemon Center of Wahiola Town, drawing all eyes to her as she entered the building. Despite its small size in the grand scheme of things, Wahiola Town was still the central gathering hub of the northern coast of Akala, and so the Pokemon Center within was quite filled – in stark opposition to those of Verdant Cavern and Brooklet Hill. Mallow's bright energy didn't flicker in the least as she walked through the room, up to where Moon and Hau were sitting, the two just finishing their own breakfast. It was still fairly early. The fully dressed and fully awake Captain beamed at them. “Are you two ready?”

It took roughly two more minutes for the pair to get through the last of their food before nodding, standing up prepared to go. In response to that Mallow smiled and set off, expecting the two young Trial-goers to follow behind. Today was going to be a busy one! And the days after it too! These little ones, they'd finally reached a level where it was time for a real Trial of Alola to be put to them.

It was time for the Captains to take the kiddy gloves off.

The path from Wahiola to Lush Jungle was scenic, yet demanding. It was uphill, reminiscent of the road to Paniola Town which Mallow had led Moon and Hau upon just eleven days ago. It felt far longer to the pair. Still, they enjoyed it, the tree-line growing thicker with each minute passed, the sounds of Pokemon calls changing to the species dwelling in the jungle, the humidity rising just as fast as the heat did. Lush Jungle was a cooking environment, one Mallow knew well how to read. Time to throw these fresh ingredients in and make something incredible.

Her cooking metaphors often put others off as being a little morbid. She just grinned further.

“Good morning, Hau and Moon!”

“Good – ahhhh – morning.”

Two more voices greeted the trio climbing the road, two more figures standing by the gateposts that marked the official entrance to Lush Jungle, largest nature reserve of Akala. Moon and Hau both waved to greet them, Kiawe and Lana waving back. Kiawe had energy to his motions, as much a morning person as ever, while Lana stifled a yawn. Moon wondered where the two had come from – not having seen any of the three Captains at the Pokemon Center last night or this morning. Mallow came to a stop between her fellow Captains, standing by the gateposts, before spinning around to face the two Trial Challengers. Hands on her hips, chest puffed out, she made a big show of this being important. Because it was!

“So, Hau, Moon,” though Mallow took the lead, Kiawe and Lana both moved to stand properly by her, all three Captains looking over the two. Moon considered the sight. “The two of you really did it, huh? Blitzed through two of your Trials here without a problem!” That wasn't entirely true from the perspective of either, but for the Captains it was all too much. A normal Trainer didn't complete two Trials within the span of a week, especially not within two weeks of arriving on a new island! Even the best would be hard-pressed by that. “So the three of us, me, Lana, and Kiawe here, have come up with something special for you. A real Trial to make sure you're really ready for what comes next! Kahuna Olivia won't go easy on you and Ula'ula Island won't either, but to make it to either you've gotta pass our last challenge first! It's not gonna be easy, in fact it's gonna be crazy
hard! But the two of you are ready for that, right?” The pair nodded, excitement in their eyes, Mallow grinning back. Such cute little saplings.

Time to put them through the works.

“So then!” Stepping aside, Mallow waved an arm to indicate the now clear entrance to Lush Jungle, Lana and Kiawe moving with her out of the way, “your first challenge: go catch a new Pokemon!” The silent pause, the stare from the two as they parsed just what Mallow had said, made her smile. Good. Gotta keep them on their toes. “Though that's not gonna be easy either.”

“It's not a normal catch.” Lana spoke next, continuing to outline the Trial the three Captains had devised. For the sake of Hau and Moon, who had talent and abilities that defied all expectations, they'd come up with something truly special. Something that would help these two incredible Trainers truly understand the Alola they were becoming part of. Something to really test them. “You can't use your Pokemon for it.”

As Lana’s words drew the stares of the two, trying to understand what she meant, Mallow took back over. “You've gotta befriend them!” Their attention back to her, she clapped her hands. “That's the only way! Find a Pokemon to be your new partner, ask it to come with you, and when it does you'll have passed the first stage of this Trial! You'll have the Pokemon you'll be fighting the Totem with!”

Again the two stopped, the wave of details flowing over them. Moon asked it. What did Mallow mean by 'the Pokemon you'll be fighting the Totem with'? Mallow grinned. Kiawe spoke next. “The two of you,” even when just speaking his voice had that boom, that volume that really reached you, “will be fighting the Totem Pokemon together with the two Pokemon you catch in Lush Jungle.” Understanding settled. Moon nodded as Kiawe completed his statement. “And only those two.”

Silence. Moon and Hau stared. Mallow stepped out from the three Captains.

“That's the gist of it,” she spoke with such a light and airy tone, as if the weight of the requirements she'd just put upon the two meant nothing to her. “The two of you are going to catch two new Pokemon, and then have a Double Battle against the Totem with them. Make sense?”

The silence continued, Hau and Moon looking to each other. Hau voiced his concern. “Isn't that... kind of unfair?” They'd raised such strong Pokemon so far. Partners they trusted. Being told not to use them was... wasn't that wrong? Mallow shook her head.

“If we just let the two of you at the Totem, it wouldn't be a Trial, just a fight.” Mallow wagged a finger, as if admonishing a student. “The Lush Jungle Trial is about being able to reach out to others! You need to reach out to the Pokemon of the Jungle! You need to reach out to each other! And you need to learn to work alongside all of Alola, even those you've just met! Turning new encounters into strong friendships, working together to overcome an impossible task, that's the Alolan spirit! Just going along with the Pokemon you already have, not reaching any further than you already have, that's not how we do things! So that's the challenge! Reach out! Make a new friend! And share power that will let you do something none of you can do alone! That's the Trial of Lush Jungle's Captain Mallow!”

Moon and Hau stared at her. The words made sense, they could understand the logic just... it was a lot. The thought of catching just one Pokemon, the amount of work it would take them to reach the level to fight a Totem, even together, was daunting. Moon realised in a flash that with only one Pokemon she'd only be afforded a single Z-Move. The playing field evened. She passed her eyes over the three Captains, wondering if that had been part of their intent. None of them focused on her. Hmm.
Kiawe and Lana stepped forward.

“The two of us,” Kiawe indicated Lana, who waved simply, “will follow after you and observe. Ensure that the catches you make are by word and action alone. You will only be catching one Pokemon, so make sure it is the one you wish to ally yourself with. It is an important choice.”

“Take as long as you need!” Mallow chirped as the two Captains moved to the gates framing the Lush Jungle entrance, “It doesn't have to be today, just keep looking until you feel the call! Since you can hear the song, you'll hear the Pokemon who harmonises with your own! Maybe that's a little complex though...” It was for Moon, who hadn't even considered her own unique place in the song. Hau didn't seem to think too hard about it. “Okay then!” Satisfied she'd said all she needed to, Mallow waved with a hand, “it's time for the two of you to begin your Trial! Get going and meet your new partner! Good luck!”

And that was that. Mallow stepped back and hummed a tune under her breath, watching the two young Trial-goers consider. Then begin to move. She smiled. Good. This would be a good Trial. Maybe the best one yet.

She couldn't wait to see what they'd do next.

Stretching from the slopes of Wela Volcano to the northern sea, barring a small coastal strip of roads and homes, the nature preserve Lush Jungle was the largest forest of Akala and indeed Alola itself, its only competition in the form of its sister site, the Melemele National Park. But where the Melemele National Park was a well spaced region, wide paths, trees and other foliage spread apart, in Lush Jungle was a thickness – of environment, flora, and even the air itself – that couldn't be beat. Even just beginning upon the path leading into it, the widest and most well kept of all the trails within the park, Moon and Hau could feel it. Could feel the weight of this place bearing down upon them.

Brooklet Hill, Wela Volcano, and Lush Jungle were, in the end, all the same. Places that made you feel them and know they were alive and around you. You could not help but feel small within them. Hau turned to Moon with a grin. “So what's the plan?”

Moon thought on that. The knowledge she'd only have a single Pokemon, a single Z-Move, had thrown her – given that her strategy over the past two Totem battles had been to land Z-Moves in openings as soon as she saw them. Even if she landed a direct Z-Move, the hit wasn't something she could rely on this time. Her usual strategies needed refinement to go further here.

Lana and Kiawe, following behind the pair but leaving the discussion entirely to them, shared a look to hear Moon admit that. Good. Despite having the power to unleash a Z-Move from each of her partners, Moon had still yet to begin truly considering those partners in the act of unleashing said Z-Moves. This lesson would go a long way to better her teamwork with them. And also develop her already terrifying skillset further, but at this point the seven Captains of Alola had decided to go all in. If Moon was going to be a power without compare then... they'd help her get there. And see how the world changed around her.

“Yeah,” Hau nodded at Moon's thoughts, “even if we both land a Z-Move, I don't think it'd take the Totem out. And once we use a Z-Move that's kinda it for our Pokemon too – they won't be up for keeping going after doing one, y'know?” Moon agreed. There was no way their partners would be able to recover from performing a Z-Move quickly enough to keep fighting against the Totem. When they used their Z-Moves, that was their admitting they were leaving the fight. They'd need as good a strategy as they could get.

Ideally, Moon mused, she'd find a partner that could use the Firium-Z or Flyinium-Z, given those
would be the most effective moves against whatever the Grass Totem might be. Providing it wouldn't be resistant to either, as was the risk. Hau, who'd also begun thinking about the best type of Pokemon to seek out, laughed at that. Fire and Flying huh? “Man,” he turned and looked back at Kiawe, who seemed surprised to gain the attention, “raising that Fletchinder really didn't help, huh? I feel kind of bad for it, since it won't be fighting here and I can't keep it with me if I want to have both Brionne and Pikachu too.”

“Oh,” Kiawe glanced down, “that's...”

“Not his fault,” Lana shrugged, “we only locked down the plan last night. Preparing a Fletchinder was the right idea – and if you'd done Mallow's Trial second instead of choosing to come to mine, you would've used it then.” Seeing Kiawe's discomfort at the unintentional implication the Captain had misled him, Hau attempted to apologise. Lana made eye-contact with Moon. “I'm glad though,” the Captain moved up as Hau convinced Kiawe he wasn't blaming him, “having the two of you together for your third Trial, it let us be really mean.” The Captain of Brooklet Hill skipped the usual expression she gave when revealing she was telling a joke. Just smiled a dangerous smile. “But that's just because we believe you can do it.” Then she kept on walking. Kiawe noticed her go.

“Ah Lana! We're meant to follow them, not lead the way!”

Hau and Moon watched as Lana came to a stop, Kiawe moving up to remind her of their tasking. Hau glanced at Moon. “What about a Bug-type?” His question drew Moon's eyes back to him. “They're usually quick and easy to raise, and strong against Grass-types too! Plus I bet there's a ton of Bug Pokemon in here. Maybe even some really rare ones! Hey Rotom-dex!” As Moon was nodding in agreement to Hau's thoughts her bag shifted at his call, the Rotom-inhabited Pokedex hauling itself out to float in the air with a 'zzzt!'. “What kind of Bug Pokemon live in the Lush Jungle?”

“Zzt!” With a salute the screen of the floating Pokedex flashed. “Scanning records for Lush Jungle Pokemon, subcategory: Bug-type Pokemon!” Moon and Hau both watched, Lana and Kiawe a few steps away doing the same, as the Rotom-dex listed out what could be found within the Lush Jungle's environs. “Scan complete! Lush Jungle Pokemon Records indicate large numbers of Butterfree, as well as previous evolutions Caterpie and Metapod. Large numbers of Parasect, previous evolution Paras. Medium numbers of Ledian and Ariados, previous evolutions Ledyba and Spinarak. Small numbers of Masquerain and Surskit, Araquanid and Dewpider, to the far west bordering Brooklet Hill. Seasonal emergence of Grubbin and Charjabug presently occurring during night cycles. Rarer species including-”

Halfway through the Rotom-dex's spiel, Hau's attention had already left it. He shrugged at Moon. “Maybe we should just go look?” He was the type to do things, not make plans. Moon nodded and agreed. The two set off.

“Zzt wait for me!”

Movement proved challenging. The dense pressure in the air, heat and humidity swirling, caused Moon and Hau to need a break after a while, settling on a fallen tree trunk while the Captains stood nearby. Lana, who practically lived in liquid environments, and Kiawe, who climbed Wela Volcano on the regular and thrived in its heat, were both doing far better. Mostly focused on watching over these two young ones. And seeing what they'd do next.

The two of them, along with Mallow, had placed bets that morning. Mallow, who knew Lush Jungle far better than the both of them combined, had bet on Moon crossing paths with and befriending a Scyther, which would result in Hau, who always tried to keep pace with her, acquiring a Pinsir. Lana had made the prediction that Moon, following Hau's lead, would find a flock of Fletchling and
Fletchinder nesting on the north side of Wela, and befriend their boss. Hau, who'd done well around Brooklet Hill, would make his way to its border against the jungle and choose a Surskit.

Kiawe, whose primary choices had already been claimed by the other two, decided to take a long shot and gamble. One of them would find a Pokemon none of them knew was in Lush Jungle at all. Despite the outlandish statement, it had still taken a moment of solid thought from the other two before Mallow laughed Kiawe off. To be honest that was as good of a win as he could imagine. Just knowing these two young Trial-goers were so ridiculous that the thought of something so impossible was still possible.

He wondered what they would find.

The morning wore on into day. Following the paths of Lush Jungle, not entering the untamed forest proper, kept Moon and Hau's experiences thin – hearing Pokemon along the way, sometimes seeing some running about, but never feeling the tug upon their hearts that would lead them to their new partner. The two were holding themselves back from just running ahead, looking for what felt right. Showing the sort of sense and care that some Trainers even twice their age would not. They were doing well just going along with the song. Kiawe was proud of them for that. They'd done so well indeed.

“Oh hey check it out!” Hau's point broke Kiawe from his thoughts, stepping up to see what the young boy was pointing out to Moon. Lana pointed it out too. A small stream, flowing over rocks, cascading down-hill. Hau grinned at the others. “That looks nice!” That was all he needed to say before taking off, breaking from the path and racing to the stream's edge. Removing his shoes, Hau sunk his feet into the water, letting out a delighted “ahhhhh” at the feeling. He smiled. “That's good stuff.”

“Alright,” removing her own shoes to sit at the water's edge, Lana stretched out, “break time.” Watching Hau stepping through the stream, bending down to pick up a smoothed rock from the waters, Lana looked up at Kiawe and Moon, the pair standing nearby. Tilted her head. “The two of you?”

Moon shook her head. This task, this search, she couldn't imagine standing still right now. Needed to keep moving. She was exactly that type, Lana nodded. “Then the two of you go ahead while I watch over Hau.”

“Hey Moon!” Hau's voice from where he was standing in the stream, water flowing over his feet, drew her eyes. He smiled at her. “Make sure to find something super cool, okay? We're working together after all!” Moon smiled back and nodded. Same to Hau. She'd be relying on him just like he would her. He really smiled at that.

The two parted ways, a Captain watching over each. Further into the jungle they went, each now beyond the path, moving on instinct alone. Moon pushed past trees and bushes, eyeing off the Pokemon around her, whether identified by sight or sound, and continued on. Hau walked down the stream, down the slopes Lush Jungle spanned over, Lana following behind. Wondering just what he'd find.

They were still too far from the Brooklet Hill territory to likely find a Surskit or Dewpider, but there was a chance. She'd see. They'd all see soon enough.

Kiawe followed Moon. She was not talkative, said nothing to him, simply pushed through the path only she could see. Curved out further east, back towards where the road to Wahiola was, but they were a good hour from it still. Then north as well, down the slopes. Searching without knowing what she was looking for. Simply moving. Lost in the flow of the rhythm that pulsed throughout Alola.
The song that would carry her to the destination she sought. Kiawe believed in her fully. She'd find something incredible. Of that he was sure.

“Woah check it out!” Hau's excited yell at the pool the stream ended in filled the clearing it created. Though the canopy was still dense overhead there was far more space at ground-level, thanks to the water-filled hollow he'd discovered. Lana, keeping a step behind, looked over the environment. It was nice. Hau's eyes caught movement entering the water. “Hey look!”

Moon felt the vine she'd wrapped her hand around give way. Caught herself on another against the rock wall, keeping from falling, before it tore too. Kiawe reached her in time to keep her from tumbling, the slope they were on steep enough she'd have difficulty catching herself, though littered with enough foliage she'd have hit something before going too far all the same. Still, best not to. Moon stared over his shoulder, back at the rock wall formed by the jutting out of earth from the slope. And at the hole she could now see behind the layer of greenery. A cave in the jungle. She moved to it, following the song.

“That's...” Lana paused, watching Hau step around the water's edge, eyes locked on to the Pokemon keeping its distance from him under the water. They were a sort that preferred to be closer to the sea; this one had gone pretty far out of its normal territory to end up here. But it was quiet here. And they were the type of Pokemon to prefer the quiet. “Hau, come back here.”

“Huh?” Hau questioned but obeyed all the same, stepping back to where Lana was. The concerned Pokemon in the water eyed the two humans, keeping a distance away at all times. “What's up?”

“That's...” Lana considered how best to phrase this. It wasn't exactly fair no matter what she came up with. “That's not a common Pokemon, finding one, here especially, is unexpected. I'm surprised.” Hau's face lit up immediately, thrilled to hear he'd stumbled upon a rare Pokemon. “But... Hau, it's not an easy path. They're incredibly strong when evolved but until then... very weak. And you won't be able to evolve it before facing the Totem. I won't tell you not to but... think about it. That's my advice.” In truth she shouldn't even be giving that advice, but Lana understood well how intent Mallow was on making Hau and Moon give everything they had. Hau would be taking a hard road choosing this one.

As hard a path as choosing to keep pace with someone like Moon would be. Hau turned back to the water, and crouched down at its edge.

“Hey,” his voice called out through the clearing formed by the pool, “what do you think?” Knowing he was not asking her, Lana stepped back. This was in Hau's hands now. Hau's, and the Pokemon he'd found's. “What I think...” for a moment Hau paused on it, before shaking his head and continuing, “is that I'm gonna do my best. No matter what, no matter how hard it is, I'm still gonna try. I've got someone super strong to beat one day too. And someone super strong to challenge all the way until I get there. Already the two of us have come so far. And all my team too. We're giving it our best every day out there. No holding back.”

A shift in the waters. Lana watched, silence held, as the small Pokemon began to crawl up to where Hau sat. Hau smiled at it. “So if you wanna, let's go together. And we're gonna fight people way stronger than us, and we're gonna do our best every day no matter what. What do you think? That sound fun?”

It broke the water, tiny legs carrying its scuttling form forward, up to where Hau was crouched. Little legs grabbing onto his own, the Pokemon crawled up his side, over his arm, and onto his shoulder to sit there of its own accord. Slowly Hau raised to a stand. A small bubbling noise came from the purple and silver-plated bug. Hau grinned.
“Then let's go together.”

With a happy clicking sound the Wimpod agreed.

Light filtered in from the entrance of the tunnel, more and more as Kiawe cleared the vines to let Moon go safely forward. Part of a Pokemon Journey was exploring small hidden places across the world, learning secrets only you would know. They were experiences to be tempered by care – Kiawe had already heard the story of Moon being lost in the caverns of Melemele – but experiences to be had all the same. He hadn't known about this cave. Lana hadn't known about that pool. Those places had just been found, likely only possible by Moon and Hau's own intent. Little secrets waiting just for them.

Moon frowned. Something was wrong. Her request to Kiawe, to cover the entrance again, came as a surprise. He double-checked if she was sure. She was. He pulled the vines over again as best he could, muting the light. Plunging the cave into darkness.

Except not.

Moon stared at the light, the faint glow further ahead, just around the corner. Moving to it she felt no fear, no concern, simply a curiosity driving her. Even the thought of why she was here, following Mallow's tasking to catch a Pokemon, faded away. Her own natural wonder and interest brought her to this point. To round that corner and see the light.

It wasn't a small Pokemon, as large as a Butterfree, more than half her own height. Latched onto the inside of the cave wall, a faint red glow emitting from its body as it rose and fell in its sleep, the Bug Pokemon – she was sure it was a Bug-type – simply remained there. A voice called out in the darkness.

"Is everything alright, Moon?"

Kiawe's voice did it, woke the Bug which immediately glowed brighter, a warning to threats to back away. Moon did so but only a step, calling out to it at the same time. Her voice, it gave the Pokemon a moment's pause, before it scuttled further up the rock walls of the cave. Turned around only when it reached the ceiling to look down at the figure which had intruded upon its sleep. To stare at her with bright blue eyes.

Kiawe, moving into the darkness to find out what was the source of the glow he too now saw, stopped as he heard Moon's voice. As he heard her speaking. He couldn't see the Pokemon, couldn't know what Moon had found, but listened all the same. She was telling it about the world she'd seen in Alola. The great battles she'd fought. The friends she'd made. And how there was still so much further to go. How she wanted to give this Pokemon – whatever it was – the chance to come with her. Kiawe waited there, in the darkness lit only by that faint glow from around the corner, in silence. Then a new glow, a Pokeball's light, and darkness truly fell. Footsteps, and Moon's voice calling for light. Kiawe shifted the vines and once more allowed sunlight to enter the cave, illuminating the smile on Moon’s face. So she'd found her partner, he asked. She nodded.

She was ready for what came next.

With a fine lunch prepared Mallow waited, her own Pokemon bustling about the entrance to Lush
Jungle. Knowing the environment well they were easily able to hear the return of the others, to let Mallow know in advance, and so when Hau and Lana emerged from the path she greeted them with thrill. The look on Hau's face, he'd found a partner he could rely on! Hau grinned. Lana nodded, though looked more contemplative. Ohhh? Well Mallow couldn't know until Moon got back too! That would ruin the fun.

Oh but what could it be?

Moon and Kiawe followed barely half an hour later. First a Talonflame swept overhead, cried out its sighting of the entrance, before flying back into the jungle. Shortly after Moon and Kiawe emerged, Moon's smile just the same as Hau's. Immediately she and Hau celebrated, their partners for the Trial chosen. Mallow shook her head. In only a few hours. These kids refused to take anything slow.

She didn't dislike that at all.

“Okay!” Holding out a plate of food, Mallow addressed Moon, “Get something to eat, then the two of you can show off your catches! I can't wait to see them!” Moon took to the food with great intent, the exercise of the day, combined with the heat and humidity of the jungle, having driven her hunger to a great height. Hau found a second wind and Mallow offered him another plate too. Always good to have people enjoying her cooking! Some people said her style was a little too eclectic, that she cooked best when working with someone else, but she said bah to that! She was just forging her own path! And look, Moon and Hau were enjoying it!

Moon and Hau, who'd both had a grand adventure in jungle exploration, the second of whom was now shouldering the weight of a new Bond – though at least from a non-demanding Pokemon – would have eaten most anything put before them at this point, truth be told.

“Okay!” When the plates were clear, when the two were satiated, Mallow pulled back Kiawe and Lana, set her hands on her hips, and cast her eyes over the pair of Island Challengers. Good good good! “Let's see what you've got!”

Sparing only a moment to glance at each other and nod, Moon and Hau each retrieved a Pokeball. Specifically, for Moon it was a Premier Ball – a white dominated Pokeball given as part of bulk purchases, something she was one of only few likely to do – and for Hau a Friend Ball, green coloured and ideal for helping calm stressed Pokemon. Oh what could it be, what could it be? Mallow barely resisted rubbing her hands together as she waited for the two to reveal what they had caught. The seconds were straining at her patience. Come on come on come on!

Then they revealed their successes. Two Pokemon materialised side-by-side, each sounding a cry, before each noting the other beside them. Their Trainer behind. An unknown Trainer at their side. Yet there was something, a degree of comfortableness between Moon and Hau, that allowed the two Pokemon to find similar.

To help the Wimpod of Hau and Larvesta of Moon acknowledge one another as allies from this day forward. To go together as far as they could go.

Kiawe, who hadn't seen the catch Moon had found, been unable to extract it from her or figure out what was glowing in that cave, struggled not to yell his shock. Lana stared too. Mallow's eyes were wide. No. Way.

“Are you serious?” Her delighted yelp caused Hau and Moon to both jump, Mallow almost slamming down onto her knees before the two Pokemon, reaching a hand out to each. Both Pokemon that preferred their own space, the Wimpod wishing to retreat, the Larvesta to scare off intruders to its territory, the two may have complained in some way were it not for the obvious joy
the figure before them was radiating. It was hard to feel concerned in such a powerful presence. Mallow immediately began to coo.

“A Wimpod? I didn't even know you could find them in Lush Jungle! It must've come up all the way from the coast! Lucky lucky Hau!” Hau grinned, rubbing the back of his head, looking over to Moon. She smiled back as she fished Rotom-dex out of her bag, requesting information on the two Pokemon caught. It was quick to provide. Mallow spoke over it.

“A Larvesta, Moon, you need to stop blowing our minds like this you know? That's one of the rarest of all Pokemon in Lush Jungle where did you find it?” Moon's mentions of a cave went mostly unfocused on as Mallow, without a second thought, picked up the Torch Pokemon and buried her face in its white fur, making delighted noises all the while, the Torch Pokemon itself unsure what to make of this. It was all very strange.

Moon, who had tried and failed to pick up the Pokemon after it agreed to go with her, noted Mallow didn't seem to have any trouble holding it. That was notable to her. The Captain set the Pokemon back down and beamed at the two Trial-goers. Un. Be. Lievable.

“Alright,” Mallow nodded, then nodded again, “Alright alright alright. The two of you have found your partners for the Totem Battle. The next stage is getting used to each other and learning to work together! I'm not gonna tell you anything more today, just the four of you, go out and get in some Pokemon battles. Try working together! Test your Pokemon against each other and beside each other! Get started on thinking about how the four of you are going to be one team! Okay?” Moon and Hau nodded back. Hau reached down to pick up the Wimpod, which clambered up his arm onto a shoulder and then his head, while Moon ran a hand over the white fur of the Larvesta before returning it to the Premier Ball. Then they turned to each other, nodded one more time, and turned again to face Lush Jungle before them.

Back to it.

And as Mallow watched the two walk off with a big smile and a floaty feeling causing her to bounce back to her feet, a cough from nearby drew her eyes. Kiawe gave a grin of his own, tilting his head to express his victory.

“A Pokemon none of us knew was in Lush Jungle’,” he repeated his words from earlier that day. Mallow blinked. Lana started laughing immediately. Mallow realised.

And raised her hands to her face. “Oh nooooo!”

By the time Moon and Hau returned to Wahiola Town each was so tired as to be ready to sit down and not stand up again for the rest of the day. Evening light was beginning to form, the sun approaching the horizon, the day ready to come to a close. Mallow, Lana, and Kiawe followed behind discussing what they'd seen so far, and what was next to come. Moon and Hau's relentless march of progress, it had infected them with impatience too. They couldn't wait to see what those two would do next. How could they?

Hau took a moment, a break from the group to walk from the entrance of the Pokemon Center to the motel built just next to it. Moon watched as he knocked on the door Gladion had been behind, time passing and no response even after Hau's call. It was late enough in the day this time that, after making enough noise, Hau was answered by another door opening, the resident behind it speaking with him before Hau returned to the group. He shrugged to Moon. “Apparently Gladion checked
out?” He frowned a little, “Guess we’ll run into him later on.” Moon nodded. They would. She was sure of it. Hau smiled at her confidence. Yeah. They'd see him again. Until then they'd just have to get stronger. No holding back, right? That was the promise between the two of them, after all. Moon nodded again. No holding back.

“A friend?” Mallow asked this, curious as to who Hau had been looking for. He confirmed it – another Trainer, the one he and Moon had battled at the Battle Royal actually. Kiawe seemed surprised.

“Is he alright?” When he asked that Lana and Mallow looked at him in confusion. Kiawe focused on Hau. “I was sure that Type: Null Pokemon was pushing him too far.”

“Type: Null?” Mallow, who'd never once heard the name before, asked. Kiawe shook his head. He didn't know what it was either. Hau shrugged.

“He's fine,” he reassured with just those two words, “it's okay.” Kiawe showed surprise. Was it really?

“So he's your friend then?” Lana glanced from Hau to Moon. Hau nodded enthusiastically. Moon paused. Friend? Hau and Lillie were her friends. Gladion was... if she had to come up with a word... probably she'd call him a rival. Someone she wanted to fight. Someone she wanted to beat all out in a fair battle. That was what he was. Not a friend but a rival. Lana nodded at the expression. She got that. She got that really well.

“Someone can be both,” Hau was quick to point that out. “It's cool to have someone who's a friend and a rival!” Moon agreed with that. That was true. The Pokemon Center doors opened for them. Mallow didn't miss the expression on Hau's face.

The evening passed, the Captains staying this time at the Pokemon Center. They'd camped at Lush Jungle the previous night, something they'd done plenty of times before, to surprise the two young ones that morning, but with the surprise over they'd enjoy some relative luxury for tonight. There was room for them. Time to take it easy.

From there night fell, all slept, dawn broke, and the day began again. Mallow and Kiawe woke early, greeting Moon and Hau when they arose, and then hassled Lana to join them once the two Trial-goers were ready to continue. Time for the next step. Back up the steep road to Lush Jungle's entrance. And for today...

“Today you're hunting for ingredients!” Hands once more on her hips Mallow made the declaration, Moon and Hau standing before her awaiting further context. Mallow let just long enough pass for the two to show slight impatience before continuing with a smile. Gotta keep them on their toes. “To summon the Totem Pokemon from the depths of Lush Jungle, we need the Mallow Special! Once it's made the Totem will come running, so to complete my Trial, the two of you are going to have to go collect all the ingredients to make it! Are you ready?” She didn't even need to ask. They were already nodding. Good good good. “Okay then! First of all we need Mago Berries! Fomantis living in Lush Jungle love them, so if you follow a Fomantis you'll find them! So get to it, I'll follow behind! Go go go!”

She didn't need to give a single word more, Hau and Moon took off with intent. They'd be testing their new partners against the aggressive defenders of Mago Berries, and upon overcoming them have the first of the ingredients they'd need to gather. From there, well, the next challenge would be when they were ready. For now Mallow observed, Kiawe and Lana along for the ride but leaving the lead to her. It was her Trial, after all. Mallow smiled at them as they went.
This was as good as it got.

Overhead, the sky blocked by the heavy canopy of Lush Jungle, clouds drifted in from the sea.

The day passed with all the success Mallow had come to expect of the two. After a while of exploring Lush Jungle they’d stumbled upon a Fomantis, tracked it across the Jungle into the depths of the Sickle Grass Pokemon’s territory, and been forced to defend themselves against the territorial Grass-type Pokemon protecting their favourite food. A bush of Mago Berries claimed by their Bug Pokemon partners, the Wimpod and Larvesta proudly feasting on a Mago Berry each, Moon and Hau plucked as many more as Mallow requested. The first ingredient down. How wonderful indeed.

From there, more training! Mallow knew that these two knew they weren't strong enough yet, so keep at it! She watched this time, giving what pointers she could, though Lana and Kiawe proved better able to advise for the training of the Water and Fire-typed Pokemon respectively. That was how the day went, and once more the five returned to Wahiola Town after long hours in Lush Jungle’s embrace.

Another day well spent.

In the depths of that night the mounting clouds reached breaking point and the heavens opened, rain falling so heavily upon Wahiola that the sound woke Moon from her sleep. In darkness she listened to the beat upon the rooftop of the Pokemon Center, even in this the rhythm clear. Sleep found her again and she dreamed a pattern of colour in darkness, searching for light. Remembered nothing of it when she woke the next day. The next day of their Trial.

The rain did not let up.

“Well,” Mallow put a finger to her lip, frowning as Moon and Hau greeted her the next morning, “no Trial today, sorry.” Both were shocked by that. Mallow shrugged. “With how heavy this rain is, it's no good going into Lush Jungle. Let's take it easy. Part of a Trial is being able to pace yourself, to face things at the right time. Patience is important too you know!”

A raincoat over her swimsuit, Lana strode past the group, fishing rod over her shoulder. She nodded. “I'm heading out.” Mallow stuck out her tongue as Lana undermined her point about letting the rain be. Lana did the same in response.

Kiawe, who rose far later without the sun to greet him, joined the three by mid-morning, Moon and Hau already growing bored. The Pokemon Center was at about half-capacity today, and there wasn't much of anything going on. They'd need something to occupy themselves. Mallow fixated on a recreation corner. “Hey what games do you think they have?” And immediately wandered over while the others followed behind.

“Oh hey!” Having yet to examine the games on offer in the Pokemon Center's recreation corner – a proper living environment for all Trainers stopping by – Mallow lifted one up to show Kiawe. “Check it out, Kiawe – it's Conquest of the Warring States!” With enthusiasm Kiawe accepted the game pack, immediately raving about the game to Moon and Hau, his excitement enough to motivate them to set it up and play. Hau took the lead while Moon gave opinions on direction. The two Captains oversaw. Enjoyed.

And discussed other topics on the side.

“So Mina's out in... a year, right?” Mallow's question piqued Moon's attention, who began to focus
less on the game Hau was playing and more on the conversation of the two Captains. “Honestly I thought Tapu Fini was going to make her Kahuna by now.”

“She hasn't mentioned anything,” Kiawe, sitting by Mallow, frowned. “About preparing a successor or about what Tapu Fini is doing. It is strange though. I wonder what is going on.”

“She always keeps to herself about that stuff,” Mallow pouted, leaning back into her chair, “she never says she dislikes it but I think she does.” Kiawe didn't reply to that. Mina's relationship to the Tapu was such an overwhelming thing to consider – the thought that one might drop in to visit her at any time. He'd seen Tapu Lele properly only once before, and it had only been present to seek out the Kahuna. It was sometimes too much to think about.

Moon couldn't help it. She had to know. Mallow and Kiawe turned to her question.

“Mina's the Captain of Poni Island,” Mallow was the one to explain. “She's only going to be Captain for a year more though, so you're going to have to work hard to meet her. You'll probably be able to though. She's cool. You'll like her.” Moon nodded at that. But what about the Tapu?

“Captain Mina has a unique relationship with the Tapu of Alola,” Kiawe explained that. “They seek her out for... honestly we're not sure. She's never explained it. They just seem to like her attention.” Moon sympathised. Saying that out loud caused Kiawe and Mallow to both laugh loudly. Mallow got out her phone.

“Hang on,” she held up a hand, “I have to tell Mina you said that, that's amazing.” Moon didn't quite know if it was, but Mallow and Kiawe seemed happy. Kiawe shook his head.

“Maybe she'll ask you to be her successor as Captain and fellow interest of the Tapu.” Moon didn't know about that either. She still didn't like thinking about the thought of being a Captain. She didn't say that though. Mallow put her phone away and smiled. That had been good. She liked that.

“Next after Mina is...” turning to Kiawe, Mallow pointed then shook her head. “No, Ilima first, then you, right?” Kiawe nodded. Mallow smiled at that.

“I can't say I know what Ilima is planning either,” Kiawe shook his head, “I feel bad for him however – spending so much less time as a Captain than any of us.” This very much got Moon's attention – Hau's too, though he was still focusing on the game. Moon asked what Kiawe meant. He nodded. “Ilima actually completed the seven Trials and four Grand Trials of Alola the fastest of us all, even faster than Lana did.” That drew noises of appreciation from the two. Mallow nodded, having felt similar when first hearing of it. Lana, who couldn't help but feel a little bit of pride at finishing her Island Challenge fastest of the Captains, never enjoyed being reminded of that. Lucky she was out fishing today. Kiawe continued. “However before taking his Final Trial, Ilima left for Kalos, spending a number of years overseas. When he returned he completed his Island Challenge and immediately became a Captain. Had it not been for his leaving, he would have been the longest tenured Captain of us all.”

Moon asked. Why had he left? Mallow shrugged, not knowing the answer. Kiawe paused. “I knew of Ilima, but not Ilima himself, when he was doing his Trials.” Weighing how much he should say, the Captain considered. “I do not think I should speak of it.”

Missing any implications, Mallow shrugged. “Maybe his friend with the Aether Foundation would know? He and Ilima both did their Trials at the same time, kind of like how you two are, but then stopped. Ilima went overseas and he... what's his name? joined up with the Aether Foundation. When Ilima came back they worked together on the Ride Pager, they're both super smart! Kiawe what's his name again?”
“Jace,” Kiawe gave the name of the rival and best friend of Captain Ilima, “he’s the one we’ve been expecting to deliver the new Pager.” Mallow nodded, remembering now. Moon focused on the mention of a new Ride Pager. Both Captains caught her focus and nodded as well. But didn't say anything aloud.

Noises from the television showed Hau making game progress, the three focusing back on that. Hau was coming up upon the Dragon Lord's territory. Go go go!

The heavy rains broke overnight, beginning the next day as only a light drizzle, not nearly enough to keep anyone with a shred of determination inside. Once more the three Captains and two Trial-goers returned to Lush Jungle, but today was different again. Mallow made sure they knew.

“Lush Jungle changes with the weather – it's completely different after rain, so today's about seeing that! No ingredients just explore and meet with new Pokemon and get a feeling for the place! It'll help you better understand it for ingredient hunting tomorrow, alright?”

At least with room to get out and explore, Moon and Hau were happy even without the promise of progress. Their new Pokemon, Larvesta and Wimpod, needed to stretch – being stuck inside yesterday as frustrating for them as their Trainers. Even spending the day with all their Trainer's other Pokemon, greeted by Moon's five and Hau's three, still by the end they'd all begun to get stir-crazy. So yeah, getting out was good.

Mallow, taking the lead, speaking about how Lush Jungle changed in rain, how Pokemon presence varied, how some plants soaked up water and swelled, changing the paths, and brooklets and streams overflowed. With heavy enough rain the earth would soften and shift, and the entire Jungle could remodel itself if it came to it. In her time as a Captain, Mallow had watched this place change as if a single living entity. It was always amazing to see. She loved it. Gave the tour with pride in this place.

Until the sound of music made her pause.

“Seas and stars and shining paths, to walk and seek a distant peak, the journey made upon the waves, the shore that calls our feet to fall.”

Moon took off from the group at a run.

Pushing through the dense foliage of Lush Jungle, the air thick with water dripping from the canopy above, Moon followed the sound, chasing it all the way to where its creator sat. Following after, calling for her to stop, Mallow remained a step behind, the best of the five at navigating Lush Jungle's shape yet still unable to catch up. Moon raced ahead without pause, following instincts as good as they came.

When she came to the source of the song she stopped, witnessing the figure atop the fallen tree, fingers strumming over guitar strings and surrounded by waving small and round purple Pokemon. Mallow couldn't help but stare at that. She knew they came out in the rain but even still... she'd never seen that many Goomy gathered together at once. The figure, bronzed skin clothed in a fearsome red outfit lined with spikes protruding from it, hair styled to spike upwards in red and downwards in white, looked up at the sound of someone bursting through the undergrowth. Then smiled wide.

“Yo there, Moon!” Standing he lowered the guitar he played, the Dragon Pokemon surrounding him complaining about the end of the song. The man stepped through them as Hau, Kiawe, and Lana pulled themselves through the jungle after Moon and Mallow. All five stared at him. Hau
“Hey Moon isn't that-”

Moon stepped forward and greeted Ryuki with a smile.

“Allrighty then,” taking a step back, Ryuki looked over the girl. She’d come so far already, felt like a shining star to his eyes. She really was everything he’d been sure of when he’d first seen her. Someone who could reach the peak of the world. Awesome. “How’s that little-bitty Bagon of yours doing? Growing up big and strong?”

Moon fussed with a Pokeball, quickly releasing the Rock Head Pokemon for the Dragon Tamer’s evaluation. He crouched down, lifting his free hand to pet the Dragon, who made a loud chirp at the touch. Ryuki grinned.

“He’s getting tougher, I can see that. Still a long way to go til he evolves though – Dragons don’t evolve easy. Keep working at it! I know you can get there! Sound good?” Moon immediately nodded. It did. Ryuki stood back up. “Alrighty then, and you've got more friends today! No little miss Lillie?” Moon shook her head. Quickly explained she and Hau were doing a Trial. Ryuki smiled to hear that. “Right on. Right on.”

“E-Excuse me!” Working through her shock at the number of Goomy still in the clearing, as well as the familiarity with which Ryuki was acting with Moon, Mallow pushed her way forward. “Hi! I'm Captain Mallow of Lush Jungle!” Held out her hand.

“Ryuki Oda,” the Dragon Tamer extended his own, “a shining star come to Alola! Nice to meet you, Captain, I hear you’re all as tough as they come.” Raising his eyes, Ryuki considered Lana and Kiawe, a few steps back, as well. “Sure would love to test that.”

Kiawe paused for a moment, missing the challenge, caught in something else. Then shook his head. No way.

Lana and Mallow didn't miss what was said.

“You're strong then?” Lana stepped up, eyeing off the older man. She didn't exactly have the best sense for another's Bonds yet – that was something that took more years of exposure to powerful Trainers than she or the other Captains had so far had – but his disposition said it all the same. To have that sort of confidence... Ryuki nodded.

“Here for the League,” he announced himself without a missed beat, “here to fight the best of the best. But I'm not against a pre-show, so why don't we have a test of what we can do right here and now? A little showing for these two little ones of what it means to be strong. Sound good?” Lana's eyes lit with her competitive nature. Ryuki smiled the same as her. She nodded. Ryuki stepped back and raised an ornate Pokeball, Goomy clearing away from the man's spirited presence. “Awesome, then let's do this, a Triple Battle, a Pokemon from each of you against three of mine. Let's rock.”

Silence, but for the patter of raindrops dripping from the canopy above.

Equal from the trio came the squawk of surprise from Mallow, the bark of laughter from Lana, and a sound of offence from Kiawe. Each of the three stepped closer together.

“That's rude,” Lana spoke for them, admonishing the smiling man before her, “saying something like that. We may be younger than you but we've all been through a lot too. Talking like you can fight three of us at once, that's too ill-mannered. I don't like it.”
“Forgive me forgive me,” Ryuki raised his hands, one holding the Luxury Ball, the other clutching the neck of his guitar, “I meant no offence. Simply that this was the way to have the most intense battle possible, a challenge that would drive me wild. Such odds, how could I resist that, fighting three of Alola's strongest? Being put on the ropes, having no hope of victory, that's the sort of environment a star needs to shine. I'm not asking the three of you to fight me because I think you're weak, far from it, you're probably way stronger than most people I've fought. I want to fight you like that because you're strong. That sort of desperate battle, that's what I'm here for. I assure you, it'll be an experience. You won't regret it. I don't put on a set I can't rock to. That's not the Ryuki way.”

The three Captains stared the intensely over-confident figure down. Each had their pride rankled now, the insinuation that any one Trainer could face them in a three against one battle insulting. Sure, there were likely some Trainers in this world with the raw ability to do such, but the number could not be large. They were Captains for a reason. Had overcome the Island Challenge of Alola for a reason. Someone challenging three of them was...

Lana stepped forward and raised a Dive Ball in hand. Stared the red-clad man down. “Don't regret this.” Mallow and Kiawe, a step behind, each raised a Pokeball as well – Mallow's Heal and Kiawe's Quick. Ryuki grinned wild.

“Back up folks, let's rock the house.”

Moon and Hau did so, moving away as Ryuki unleashed his three competitors. With each Hau and Moon's amazement rose, the Captains' determination hardened. Maybe the Dragon Tamer's confidence wasn't misplaced.

Maybe this fight would be more than anyone bargained for.

“Serena, let's show off!” The blue-scaled serpentine Dragonair emerged from a Luxury Ball, coiling itself around a tree. “Dazzle, let's dance!” A second Luxury Ball unleashed the similarly huge Drampa, the soggy ground shifting under the Pokemon's weight. “Trixie, it's time to play!” The third Pokemon, this time from an Ultra Ball, thudded upon release, feet actually beginning to sink into the ground until it dropped to all fours, pulling itself out from the soft earth. Kiawe stared at the Pokemon he knew well, the one he'd caught in the past himself. The one he still struggled to bear the weight of and the one this Ryuki seemed to have no trouble with at all.

Manifesting a Dragonair, Drampa, and Turtonator at the same time, Ryuki showed not a single care. Pulled his guitar up and set a hand upon its strings.

“Let's shine.”

From Lana a Cloyster, who Moon had crossed with in her Trial. The Water and Ice-type Pokemon held a key advantage against the Dragons of Ryuki, and would be a core component of the strategy the three Captains forged. From Kiawe a Marowak, Alolan Variant, Fire and Ghost-type. Under his command the dancer would far exceed those Moon had fought upon Wela's stage. From Mallow a Pokemon Moon didn't know, one Rotom-dex was quick to describe. The Fruit Pokemon Tsareena was pure Grass-type, endowed with incredible leg strength and incredible attack. A trio of three powerful Pokemon indeed. Ryuki's grin widened as he started the next song.

“Go!” “Attack!” “Let's go!” Three Captains gave three orders and Ryuki played a tune that shook the treetops. The only way to keep pace.

A song of battle in Alola.

A beam of ice froze the air, raindrops falling through the thick branches overhead causing it to spike
in strange directions. A surge of fire, emitted from the snout of the Turtonator pushing itself up from
the ground, caught the attack of the Cloyster, the two beams eliminating one another, creating a haze
of mist electrical bolts crackled through, lashing out from the Dragonair towards the Water and Ice
Pokemon.

A swinging kick intercepted, the bolt wrapping around the red leg of Tsareena before it stomped into
the earth, grinding the attack against the mud until it dispersed. Over it loomed the shadow of
Drampa, the Placid Pokemon shucking the title under its Trainer's song. A mouth full of fire dripped
liquid flame, steam wreathing its face, glowing eyes ominous within. Mallow called her Pokemon
back, Kiawe his forward.

Bone spinning Marowak intercepted the flames, dispersing them as Dragonair surrounded it, the
Dragon kicked aside by Tsareena. Turtonator breathing out a new stream of flame blocked by the
closed shell of Cloyster. Spikes of ice scattered about the field, a threat to the land-based Pokemon,
as Marowak and Tsareena jumped into the branches, light enough on their feet to move amongst
them while the heavier set Turtonator could not. Blessed with flight Drampa and Dragonair ignored
the threat, leaving it to Turtonator alone. The fight broke above the treetops.

A kick from Tsareena landed upon Dragonair's head once more, pushing it down, Marowak striking
it with a bone from below. A beam of light, raw power from Drampa firing from its mouth,
surrounded the two, Dragonair dodging it by a moment before lashing around to slam its head into
the first, then the second, sending each flying aside. On the ground below Turtonator spun, fire
propelling it, clearing the surroundings of the icy trap laid by the Cloyster, dodging the blasts of
water and ice Lana was directing. Dragonair plunged down from above, wrapping around the
Bivalve Pokemon, spinning it in its grip, and releasing it in perfect time to another burst of fire from
Turtonator. Above Drampa dodged the equal strikes of Tsareena and Marowak. Ryuki played on.

“That's...” Kiawe's shock, realisation of what he was hearing, made him realise just what an
opponent the three Captains had found, “that's the song!” Saying it was enough, Lana and Mallow
understanding as soon as they were told. Ryuki was playing the song of Alola, weaving a tune from
it into a form his Pokemon could follow, the three following it to battle without needing a single
word from their Trainer. He was giving words far faster through his music than he could speak. And
commanding the rhythm leading the Captains' own Pokemon to follow it. To stumble into the pace
of their opponents.

That showed experience, and ability, as a Trainer that could not be beat. The Dragon Tamer Ryuki
Oda's confidence was not misplaced. With renewed intensity the three Captains doubled down. They
weren't losing here.

Convergence. Tsareena and Marowak dove beneath the tree-line, losing the open field that gave
advantage to the Dragons, jumping from branch to branch and circling the three. Turtonator was the
slowest but most resilient, able to shrug off attacks and keep going regardless of how many fell upon
it. Dragonair was likely weakest not being fully-evolved, but thanks to its speed proved difficult to
catch. The Drampa occupied the middle ground, great manoeuvrability in its flight, but slow speed in
the dense jungle environment and softer in body than the Turtonator. All three Captains turned their
attention upon it.

Then away again as Ryuki's song ordered his three to protect the obvious target.

A powerful kick hit the back of Turtonator, Kiawe's command to Tsareena directing it to avoid the
dangerous counter-attack he knew the species to possess. Cloyster closed its shell, cutting off attack,
as Mallow observed Dragonair preparing another electric crack, the attack unable to harm the
Bivalve Pokemon when closed. Lana commanded Marowak to hit the ground, to create as powerful
a boom of mud from the soft earth as it could.

Ryuki, seeing the three Captains working so closely together they could direct one another's Pokemon as well as their own, smiled even wider, pace of the song he played increasing. Let's step it up.

Fire swirled, thunder cracked, light poured from the mouth of Drampa mixing in with the blast of Turtonator and Dragonair. A storm of power that punched through trees, shifting the terrain in the distance where it fell. Marowak ducked below it, Tsareena leaped above, Cloyster diving to the side. Counter-attack. A charging swing with a bone wreathed in darkness. A redirection from a higher branch, jumping off of it, for a falling kick glowing with power. And a body wreathed in ice surging in to the opening the two would create to strike through.

Turtonator intercepted, taking the blow from Marowak. Dragonair let loose a storm of power that whipped up mud and leaves, cutting off Tsareena's strike. Drampa's eyes glowed and a wave of force, a roar with enough strength to push back the charging Cloyster, slowed it down to a stop. Caught in the middle of the three Dragons, it drifted as Turtonator and Dragonair turned to it.

Mallow and Kiawe's commands came fierce, each of their Pokemon leaping into the circle in turn. A pink mist surrounded the three. A glint of light from within it drew the three Dragons to a single point. All three attacks collided as Cloyster dropped from below the obscuring fog and charged once more.

This time made impact.

“Go!”

Drampa reeled back, the ice-infused charge striking true. Tsareena's kick pulled short, the tail of Dragonair wrapping around it. Marowak's bone strike swung overhead, the Pokemon pushed upwards by the pulse of draconic energy Turtonator unleashed. Ryuki played a faster tune.

Cloyster disappeared into the trees, leaving mist in its wake, chilling the air. Tsareena followed after, similarly disappearing, as Marowak lit with bright fire, leading the three as it pulled back and the two others circled them. Each time Marowak struck the ground, unleashed a wave of mud, the Dragons pushed through it, their attacks too strong to be drowned out. But a fine dancer on its own, exceptional with Kiawe's backing, the Bone Keeper Pokemon continued to dodge. To pull them back.

A flipping kick from the treetops with all its power behind it, Tsareena pushed Drampa down. Cloyster struck it again. Dragonair caught the Bivalve Pokemon, held it tight despite its ice, while Turtonator turned on it, Marowak striking its back with accuracy forged from knowledge, Kiawe's understanding of a Turtonator's explosive shell allowing him to direct safe strikes against it. Crushing pressure from Dragonair. Turtonator and Drampa preparing fire and light to strike. Ryuki's tune spiked.

Outrage Outrage Outrage. Three explosions of draconic force blew a hole through the treetops above, pushed the trio of opposing Pokemon in each direction. A triangle formed with three glowing Dragons within it. Unwilling to fall. The battle continued.

A blue crystal glinted as Lana's hands moved. A red crystal shone as Kiawe's reached forward. A green crystal glowed as Mallow's raised to the sky.

“Hydro Vortex!”
“Inferno Overdrive!”

“In Bloom Doom!”

Ryuki voiced orders at last.

Three Z-Moves collided, the position right, the moment come. Moon and Hau, stunned by this battle they’d never seen the likes of before, the sight of Pokemon able to redefine the land around them meeting in battle, felt their skin prickle in the presence of this power. Goosebumps forming watching three Z-Moves from three Captains unleashed. This was the height they aspired to? This power? It struck them. Told them how much further there was to go.

They were still so very small.

In storming light Drampa roared first. Barriers crumbled under raw power, its body blocking a Z-Move it should resist, yet still feeling the raw force of all the same. Z-Moves, especially those from powerful Pokemon and Trainers, could defy sense with ease. This combination attack of the three Captains was far more than its components alone. Turtonator, whose voice was far quieter, grimly bore the weight of the attacks pushing it. Pushing it. Pushing it. Losing its grip.

Light shone. In the midst, pushing out what power it could, reinforcing those around it who were bowing under the wave, the Dragonair gave it all she had. Her name was Serena. She had been named by Ryuki, a shining star, a figure who called to her. Who gave her his wish and will and all the power he could. How far they had come together.

How far they still had to go.

A crack. The air splitting, clouds overhead swirling, surge of power forced up. Three blasts meeting one another, none backing down, each grinding and colliding until their angle changed. In the wake of their strike their three creators slumped, Cloyster, Marowak, and Tsareena tired. In the wake of their strike two Dragons fell. Each had resisted and each had covered and each had borne so much but Z-Moves were simply that. So much.

And in the wake of their strike the three Captains watched as the light cleared, the light mixed of their Z-Moves and another. Another light, of different form. Of power manifesting and transforming. Of a Pokemon driven by competition, by intense pressure, and strength given through song and spirit. Ryuki played its arrival. Welcome, Serena.

Welcome, Dragonite.

“Outrage!”

Evolution gave energy but not all of one's energy, it did not restore a Pokemon to full. As exhausted as the rest by the intensity of the battle, the orange Dragonite moved only by the power still coursing through it. It was tired.

But more tired were the three to face it. Z-Moves, even for Captains, were dangerous things. They took much, and in this battle, this height of their power, it had been their intent to finish it. To bring the battle to a close. Well. Now it was.

A furious tackle, shoulder first, wreathed in power. Marowak flew back from the Dragonite’s strike, hit a tree, and the ground a moment after. Did not rise. A wave of frost fell over the Dragon's back but it was weakened, the time between the Z-Move and its next attack too little for the Cloyster to manifest strength. Dragonite turned and charged it next. It broke through a tree and moved no more.
“Tsareena!”

Two Pokemon, each tired, each holding themselves up by force of will alone, stared one another down. Tsareena stepped forward. The exhausted Dragonite stood and watched it approach. A full metre of height difference between them, the Fruit Pokemon looked up at the Dragon. Swung back a leg and gave it all the force it could muster. As much as it could bring. And swung it round.

It hit. The Dragonite shook. Faltered. Song played behind it. It began to lurch. Then stomped down hard. Held itself a moment.

And raised a glowing hand before bringing it down.

The song complete.

Silence in its wake, no music left to play. Five Pokemon unconscious, one barely holding on. Perhaps only by its surprising evolution had it managed to find this victory. But Ryuki had chosen to be pushed to this edge. Had known only on the border of defeat was true victory found. Serena, who had been with him for so long, had reached a new peak to shine from. Thanks only to these Captains before him.

As mortified as they were by their defeat, as stunned as they were by Ryuki's power, he felt no pride in his victory nor scorn for their loss. Only thankfulness for their strength. The strength that had pushed him and his further still. He bowed.

“When we meet again,” they were still quiet, in shock, as Ryuki spoke, “once again we'll give it everything we have. I will be at the League, and await your challenge. We're looking forward to it. To the battle at the peak of the world.” One by one he returned each of his Pokemon. Hung his guitar over his shoulder once more.

And with measured pace took his leave.

To follow the song driving him forward.

To shine upon the peak of the world.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters ago I foolishly tried to suggest that as long as I kept my chapter word count under 5 digits I'd be okay. Understandably that was a total lie and here we are with something long enough to be two chapters. Honestly, I spent a good while debating whether to split this chapter at all, thinking it might help readability, but in the end I couldn't bring myself to. Everything within this chapter belongs together. And it's not like the next one's gonna be short either. There's still so much more to go.

The Trial of Lush Jungle may have surprised you, that it puts such an impediment on the progress of Moon and Hau, but Trials aren't about just being strong, they're about being in tune with Alola. Developing that ability is actually the core. Lana taught Moon to synchronize with the natural state in Brooklet Hill. Kiawe to hear the song of Alola that is the sound and rhythm of life and land. And Mallow to be able to combine powers with those around you to overcome new challenges. It's all important and it all comes together. Next chapter we'll find out how that works out.
I imagine a lot of people went into this chapter believing they'd be seeing the Totem fight, but instead we had another. It's up to you to decide whether this battle was more hype than Moon's Grand Trial or Double Totem battle, but without question it's the highest level fight we've seen so far. It was fun to write something so above the level Moon and Hau are at right now. To show how much higher there is still to go.

To you, dear readers, thanks for your time. This was a hefty chapter, and I appreciate greatly that you're enjoying enough to keep at it. Please look forward to what comes next, and in the meantime, consider leaving a kudos or comment if you haven't, and recommending to a friend if you know someone who'd enjoy - my goal is to share this fic with everyone I can who will enjoy it. That's something I can only do with your help. Thank you so much.

The Totem Battle comes next.
The Trial of Two Trainers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the wake of the battle with Ryuki it took all of the Captains to hold each other back. Mallow, determined to command her Pokemon to begin repair of their battleground, to patch the environment torn apart by the clash with the Dragon Tamer, had to be forced to admit she was tired by Kiawe and Lana. Had to accept that she needed rest, that she was too shaken to properly lead her other Pokemon in cleaning the wounds of the jungle.

Lana, who intended to train the moment they returned to Wahiola Town, the clouds overhead now free of their liquid burden and lightening by the minute as the sun pushed its way through, was forced to stop by Mallow and Kiawe. Called to stay with them, to do nothing more. Their battle had been intense, and each had used a Z-Move. And they’d lost. They were in the wrong state of mind to train. Just... stop for now.

Kiawe, as the three sat together in the Pokemon Center licking their wounded prides, only stopped going over the battle, trying to see how they could have done better, when Lana and Mallow sternly commanded him to do so. Told him they were going to stop obsessing over it for today.

Only then, after each had stopped the other, did the three breathe out and loose some of the tension from their shoulders. Feel some of the intensity of the battle – intensity they hadn't tasted since their Final Trials – fade away. Allowing them to think again without their heads hurting. Allowing them to move without the tightness in their muscles grinding. Allowing them to talk without the bitter taste in their mouths flavouring their speech.

Each felt a loss more wounding than they'd ever experienced before. A realisation that though they were strong, and they knew they were strong, they still did not amount to the true peaks of the world. Wherever Ryuki factored into the grand scheme, whether he truly stood at the peak of the world or simply dwelled close to it, it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was stronger than them. They still had so much further to go.

Moon and Hau trained. Seeing the three Captains still shaken, still exhausted from their battle, the two took their own time, let Larvesta and Wimpod manifest, and continued to practise combinations and movements that would allow them to best combine their powers. To form ways they might stand against the Totem Pokemon of Lush Jungle. They had a mountain to climb too. Just not the largest one they'd seen that day.

Ryuki Oda, huh?

Of course Moon had assumed Ryuki was strong – when she'd met him he'd had that relaxed nature, that pure calm, that only the very strongest could have. The complete lack of fear and stress that meant nothing could truly reach him. Those were signs of his ability. But seeing signs and seeing reality were two different things entirely. Moon, who had been crushed by Lana during her Trial, knew full well the Captain had held nothing back against Ryuki. Given her commands as fast as she could, and worked perfectly with her fellows – to a degree Moon and Hau could only dream of emulating, discussing whether they could also give directions to the other's Bug Pokemon in battle. Yes, Lana had given everything, just as Kiawe and Mallow had. Three Captains expressing power far beyond Moon and Hau's level. Far beyond their measure. The sort of strength that would crush them in an instant. The sort of strength they dreamed of having for themselves.
And the three Captains lost. Ryuki, without even words, communicating his intent through music alone, directed three Dragon Pokemon to match the three Captains. Commanded fast enough to meet the directions of three others alone. It was almost obscene. Moon knew she wouldn't forget today's sights ever. Hau agreed the same.

They still had so far to go.

The day passed. It had been only morning when the Captains led Moon and Hau to Lush Jungle, the battle with Ryuki concluding still in the early hours of the clouded day. By midday the three Captains ate with the others. By afternoon they were back in sorts, once more giving guidance to the two Trial-goers, helping them refine their abilities. Water and Fire-type specialists, Lana and Kiawe were able to give extra advice to Hau and Moon regarding their Wimpod and Larvesta respectively, hastening the development of those Pokemon's abilities. Mallow simply guided overall. And thought.

They all thought.

Hau admired the Captains' resilience. When telling them that, when being looked at in confusion in return, he reminded them they'd each used a Z-Move after a long and draining battle. They'd just taken it easy after that though! Made it to the night and were still awake. If he'd used a Z-Move he'd have had started fading immediately; those things were exhausting! His praise helped, each of the three remembering how far they'd come from their first days as Trainers, when they were the same age as Hau. Yeah, it was okay.

They knew there was still plenty of time on the road ahead. It was okay. They were okay. Kiawe smiled. “You're doing well yourself.”

“Yeah!” Mallow nodded enthusiastically, beaming with a bright smile, “Wimpod aren't demanding Pokemon, but you're still holding onto it and three others! Four Pokemon in forty days is some crazy stuff you know!” It was, and the three Captains knew it. Hau's abilities, his raw potential, it was a once in a generation occurrence. Stories of other legendary Trainers, masters of Leagues with their only equals one another, existed across the world, and many claimed those Trainers had hit the ground running as fast as Hau himself had. The young boy was on pace to be a champion without compare. It was the sort of start that should have no equal, that would fill such a person with unrestrained confidence and pride. Yet for Hau...

“Well,” Hau smiled at their praise, though seemed unprepared for it as well, “I'm just trying to keep up with Moon. She's the incredible one.” And there it was. Each of the Captains gave a glance to the other. That was what they'd expected. What they'd come to conclude. Remembering Kiawe's words the night before the Trial began.

“They're racing each other.” As the three Captains had stood around the campfire Mallow was tending, cooking the dinner they'd share, Kiawe had outlined his observations from the Fire Trial, and the words Moon and Hau had given him. “Each is trying to keep pace with the other, and from that each pushes the other forward. Neither would have come so far so fast alone. Only because they're driving each other forward.”

“It's more about each other than the Island Challenge,” Lana had added in, well aware that Moon and Hau's eyes were only forward on the road they were sure the other was walking ahead on. “They're so strong and so determined not to slow down and lose to the other. It's out of control.”

“We'll see how my Trial goes!” Mallow chimed from the fire, watching over the food she was preparing. “They're going to have to slow down for that! We can measure how they're feeling then.” Well. They had.
Even tasked to catch two new Pokemon Moon and Hau had exceeded belief. Moon had caught a Larvesta, an incredibly rare Pokemon that was one of the most demanding of its Type, and had immediately taken to its care. The Torch Pokemon was already showing the results of the Bond between it and its Trainer, expressing power and thought at a rate it should take many Trainers weeks or even months to achieve. Her unique nature, it allowed Moon to form Bonds of incredible strength with incredible speed. Even being reset to a new and single Pokemon she'd already made it this far. There really was no way to slow her pace. She'd never stop.

Hau had caught a Wimpod, an act that the Captains were sure could only be fate, the Pokemon's appearance in Lush Jungle a startling surprise. One of the least demanding of the Bug-type and indeed overall, it had allowed the young boy to swell the number of Pokemon he maintained from three to four and still keep going – the Bond Strain he did show only manifesting in the lesser effects many Trainers struggled with until adapting. And his natural talent for raising Pokemon, for establishing friendships and trust, had allowed Hau and the Wimpod to quickly grow to work together based on faith more than Bond. In comparison to Moon he was the more talented Trainer without question. Weaker by far than the Larvesta, the Wimpod kept up by clever tactics and natural ability from its Trainer. Hau's pace mirroring Moon's own. As the two insisted upon.

Except...

“Hau.” Lana's voice was the quietest of the three Captains, but somehow the strongest too. Hau, who'd been light-heartedly speaking with the Captains, Moon enjoying the night air outside with her Pokemon after the clouds had finally cleared, stilled. The three Captains looked at him, each dour, knowing that this moment with him alone was the one for the conversation they'd been needing to have. Lana took command of leading it. “You need to slow down.”

A pause. Hau blinked. “Huh?”

“You've gone so fast,” Mallow shook her head, aware of the harshness of what they needed to say, “so fast it's like you're a Trainer two years older than you are now. One who's caught some Pokemon, worked hard with them, and begun pushing against the next major level they'll reach. The one where they have to stop.” Hau looked at her in confusion. Kiawe continued speaking.

“Your Pokemon are all growing incredibly well,” he'd seen it, observed Hau's trio in his Trial. “But that is the problem. You're pushing at the limits of what you can do every day. Doing absolutely everything you can. That's respectable. But it's about to become unsustainable. You won't be able to do the same on Ula'ula Island. That's the truth.”

“They're going to outpace you.” Lana said it bluntly, the harshest of the three Captains, as well as the most honest. “When you start trying to face Ula'ula's Trials, and they are hard Trials, Hau, your Pokemon are going to need more power than you can give. You won't be able to keep up with them at the speed you've been going so far. You'll need to stop. Spend time, more than just a day or a week, working with them to be okay. You started out so fast, incredibly fast, but you're still a Trainer like the rest of us. You're going to hit the same walls we did. It's not a bad thing. You're not a bad Trainer because of it. Just human. Just like the rest of us.”

It had hurt Mallow to see Hau's face falling as they spoke. He shook his head. She attempted to mitigate the blow. “Hau,” saying his name, calling for him to look to her, she smiled for him. He didn't smile back. “Hau you're doing so well. It's really incredible, you're going to complete the Island Challenge faster than any of us did. Even Lana. Even faster than Ilima would have.” Lana gave Mallow a slight glare for needing to point out Ilima had outsped her for the majority of his Challenge. “Please, we're not trying to convince you to stop just... you're going to need to slow down. Because your Pokemon are going to get stronger and stronger and Trainers always have to try
and keep up with them. Just don't push yourself further than you can go. Please... look after
yourself.”

Hau mumbled something. None of the Captains heard it. Kiawe asked for it again. Hau bit his lip before continuing. “But... to keep up with Moon-”

“You're not Moon.” Lana's immediate and blunt statement caused Mallow and Kiawe to look at her in shock. She was staring at Hau, who wasn't looking up to meet her eyes. “You're you. You need to go at your pace, not at Moon's. You may finish this Trial together, and you may even complete your Grand Trial side-by-side, but Ula'ula Island is different. You can't complete it trying to be someone else. Only by being you.”

“Lana...” Mallow's slight whine of her friend's name didn't get Lana to relent. She kept her eyes locked on Hau. Hau stood.

And left without a word.

Only when he was gone did Lana lean back into the lounge, breathing out a sigh of pent-up stress. Having to talk like that sucked. Even if she'd needed to. Even if the Captains had needed to tell Hau he was about to run face first into a wall, to at least warn him so the impact would hurt less. It had still sucked to see him so down. She didn't like it at all. Mallow and Kiawe shook their heads and breathed out as well.

That really had sucked.

“Driving each other to go further,” Kiawe made the observation, thinking on the stories he'd heard of his fellow Akalan Captains, “they remind me of you two.” Lana and Mallow looked at Kiawe when he said that. Then at each other. Lana's inexhaustible pace motivating Mallow to push through the challenges she felt she could not alone. How it was only wanting to keep up with her friend that allowed Mallow to overcome her own wall. She smiled at Lana. Lana smiled back.

“Then...”

“They'll be okay.”

Hau released his Fletchinder the next day. Discussing it with Kiawe, the young boy acknowledged he wouldn't be able to care for it while managing his other Pokemon, and that he didn't feel comfortable keeping it in storage for the odd possibility he would need it. Better to travel through the forest of Lush Jungle to the slopes of Wela, where other Fletchling and Fletchinder nest, some boss Talonflame amongst them, and allow the one he had caught and evolved to go free. The Pokemon had only spent a short while with him, and they'd achieved no great heights together, but still Hau felt a sting.

A reminder of a way he fell short, and those he let down by doing so.

On the jungled slopes of northern Wela he and Moon completed the next leg of their Trial. Searched for trees with exposed roots, harvesting those Mallow pointed out for the recipe that would summon the Totem Pokemon. Larvesta did well at holding off Pokemon equally interested in the tuberous growths, Wimpod quickly collecting and returning what it found to its Trainer. All the while Hau remained uncharacteristically quiet, usually only speaking up when prompted. Never leading conversation. Moon observed this, and asked once, but received no answer as to his mood. Accepted that it was something he wished to keep to himself. And kept on moving.
She was always moving forward. Hau watched her back as she walked.

The docks of Wahiola Town saw frequent use – between those local to the city heading out to fish, or around the coast to visit other townships, to those visiting from afar by the sea. A new boat was docked at it by the time the three Captains and two Trial-goers returned from Lush Jungle, and the three occupants of that boat had already disembarked and wandered into town. The youngest of them waved when she saw Moon and Hau with a smile.

“Oh Moon! Hau!”

And in return Moon and Hau broke into a run from the Captains to join the voice that called to them. To reunite with their third. To meet with Lillie once more.

“Hey Lillie!” Hau spoke with the energy and excitement Moon was used to hearing from him, and the first of it he'd shown that day. Lillie, with no idea of the boy's mood prior to this moment, just smiled to see he was the same as ever. Greeted him, before turning to Moon. Moon smiled at her. All smiles.

“Well hey there, woo!” Now the voice of Professor Kukui echoed, the man walking calmly up to the group, as usual wearing his lab coat over bare chest. Kiawe, standing with the Captains up the path, nodded at the sight. The best way to experience Alola was with the sun on your skin, after all. Kukui came to a halt before the young three. “So Hau, Moon, how’re you going? Working hard on your Trials, yeah?”

“Yeah!” Hau nodded, pleased to quickly hold up the Firium-Z and Waterium-Z he'd gained. Moon did the same a moment after. Kukui nodded and smiled and wondered whether he was surprised or not that the two of them had completed two Trials already. He honestly couldn't tell at this point.

“Nice work then you two!” With a grin Kukui flicked his eyes up to the pack of three Captains. He'd want to have a talk to them later today as well. “Here I was coming around here with Kahili and Lillie to finish our tour of the northern Akalan settlements, and we run into you as well! Talk about a coincidence, huh?” It was kind of hard to believe in such a coincidence, but Moon nodded all the same. It was good to have Lillie here. Lillie caught her look and smiled at it, before suddenly having to fuss with her bag, noises of complaint coming from within. With Moon and Hau about, Nebby was suddenly very interested in coming out to play. Lillie did her best to talk the Nebula Pokemon down. Moon wasn't sure how long the request for quiet would last.

“Alright then!” As the three Captains drew closer, Kukui addressed them as well, “we've got some meetings to have this afternoon, but let's all meet for dinner later tonight, yeah?” No-one disagreed with that idea. The plan in motion.

Moon, Hau, and Lillie stayed together for the rest of the day.

In the wake of dinner and discussion with the Captains, Kukui decided they'd stay in Wahiola for a few days more. It sounded like Moon and Hau were approaching the end of their Grass Trial – a double battle with two freshly caught Pokemon wild enough of a concept, but a Larvesta and Wimpod? Not to mention Moon and Hau had each caught an Eevee, they really weren't holding back at all – so Kukui had claimed he'd take Moon and Hau back to Heahea City when their Trial
was done. That way they'd be able to head south from Heahea to Konikoni, territory of Kahuna Olivia. And continue on to their Grand Trial.

Kahili and Kukui inspected the Pokemon of Moon and Hau, noting their growth, evaluating their conditions. They discussed the progress of their tour around Akala, the three Captains delighted to hear that the people of Akala Island were all, as a general rule, excited about the Pokemon League. They were too. Couldn't wait to take part. Paused.

Then told the two about Ryuki.

Just hearing the story was enough to shock. Kahili was strong, she knew she was strong, but even she wouldn't try for a Triple Battle against three Captains. Just what was Dragon Tamer Ryuki? She couldn't imagine. Kukui just hoped he'd get the chance to see the Dragon Tamer's moves for himself. The night passed on.

And the dawn of the final ingredient came.

Heavy honey deposits in Lush Jungle were the richest sources of the ingredient, which Mallow insisted had special properties here. That was fine in theory, but in practise the volume of Pokemon attempting to establish territorial dominance around the ingredient was ridiculous. But that was Moon and Hau's final challenge before the Totem Battle. Take dominance in the eternal struggle for the grand honey reserves of Lush Jungle.

So they did. They fought flocks of Butterfree. Chased away curious Comfey and Bounsweet. Fought off Trumbeak and Fletchinder attracted to the buffet of Bug Pokemon gathered. And met with a Pinsir a full size and a half above the average, boss of the area for the moment. Mallow made note of it as a potential Totem candidate. Unlike Lana and Kiawe, she only had one dwelling in Lush Jungle so far. Couldn't hurt to prepare another. She kept it in mind.

As the three Captains watched and discussed.

“So no word from Jace?” Lana's question prompted a shake of Kiawe's head, a shrug of his shoulders.

“I asked Ilima,” the Fire Captain replied, “but he's heard nothing either. The last he heard from Jace was that he would prepare a new Ride Pager for Moon, then deliver it to her. He should know she is here.”

“I thought he was with the Aether Popup out east?” Mallow tilted her head. “I'm sure he was one of the Aether folks set up there.”

“He got called back I think.” Kiawe again. “Maybe something happened, neither I nor Ilima know.” All three Captains blew out a sigh at that. The Ride Pager Moon carried had them nervous – if it truly was the original model that stored Pokemon without any fail-safe at all, it was something none of them felt comfortable with existing. Lana hadn't gained anything useful from Mohn – he'd claimed amnesia and a desire to stay at the Poke Pelago no matter what. She'd just told Ilima, who'd told Jace, and that was where it had ended for the Captains of Alola. Still...

“I hope things end well.” Not one of them disagreed with that sentiment.

With joyous cry, Moon and Hau returned with bottles of Lush Jungle Honey filled. The final ingredient gained. Well, that was that then. One more night to train. To do their best to prepare for what came next. They nodded and agreed. The hours passed. Lillie spent time with them upon their return. The night came and went. Dawn filled the sky once more.
And Moon and Hau climbed the path to Lush Jungle's entrance to take their third and final Trial of Akala.

“Alright!” The path from the entrance to the battleground was one Mallow hadn't taken Moon or Hau on before, and so after the walk they considered the sight of the battlefield, an area thick with trees ringing it yet open enough for a proper fight to take place within. In comparison to the location the Captains had battled Ryuki, it seemed far more prepared to handle intense conflict, which Moon supposed was for the best. Mallow had spent a long time putting to right as best she could the damage that battle had done. The Grass Captain struck a pose. “It's time for your Totem Battle! Moon, Hau, are you ready?” Each of the Challengers stepped up and nodded, Kiawe and Lana standing behind them, ready to witness. Despite the best efforts of the Captains, posing a challenge to these two young ones that would slow them down to a crawl, they'd still overcome in the mere span of a week. Now all that was left was the battle. A formality, in truth.

The real lessons of a Trial were gained in making it to the Totem fight, the fight itself the final test of the Trial to ensure the lessons were learned. Even if Hau and Moon failed today, and not one of the Captains would bet on that result, it would still only be a matter of days before reaching the level to succeed. They'd formed and strengthened a Bond, and partnership, in no time at all. They truly had gifts that let them reach out to Alola for strength.

They were ready to move on.

Mallow set to cooking, the iron cauldron in the middle of the field lined with wood already. Mago Berries, Big Roots, special Lush Jungle Honey, not to mention other ingredients gathered by her and the other Captains. All mixed together, precisely prepared, to create the Mallow Special, her work of art. A powerful, intensely powerful, scent began to waft throughout the clearing. Through the trees. From here, where wind flowed between branches, it would be caught and spread. Reach the senses of the Totem.

And soon enough be answered.

It moved with speed that left a stream of leaves torn from the undergrowth it burst from washing over the field, the towering pink Pokemon, glowing with Totem energy; standing well over the height of Moon and Hau, even of the three Captains; bipedal, long seeming-blades along its arms. It looked like a bug, and for a moment Moon wondered if the Totem Pokemon was even a Grass-type at all. Rotom-dex was quick to answer.

“Lurantis, zzt, Bloom Sickle Pokemon!” The Bloom Sickle Pokemon paced around the cauldron simmering with the mixture Mallow had prepared. Stepping up to it, Mallow ran a ladle through the mixture and poured it into a bowl, holding it up to the Totem. It leaned down, mouth splitting open to consume the offering. Rotom-dex continued. “Grass-type Pokemon – it disguises itself as a Bug-type for its own protection, zzt!”

Moon and Hau took up positions, calling forth their competitors. Larvesta and Wimpod. Mallow quickly put down a bowl of her cooking for each as well, a quick “Just a taste!” given as command. The two Bug Pokemon stepped up, sampled the Mallow Special, and then moved forward. Heat flowed through their bodies lighting determination, the cooking intensifying their readiness for battle. Similarly the Totem moved to oppose them. A moment of silence. Mallow raised a hand. Totem and Trainers looked to her. One more moment. And then...

She dropped it. “Begin!”

Larvesta shone, alight with fire, a burning beacon that drew all eyes to it. Seeing this opponent the Lurantis stepped forward, a menacing sickle raised, as Wimpod disappeared into the undergrowth. A
fast moving Pokemon, the Turn Tail Wimpod made use of that property, combined with the
distraction provided by its ally, to escape detection. That had been the first of the strategies Moon and
Hau had devised.

Lurantis tested its foe. Stepped forward, slashing, pulling its claw back from the bursting flames
reaching out to it. Larvesta, despite being a large enough Pokemon on its own, was still small to the
Totem. But a Totem does not maintain that title by surrendering caution. It observed the danger of
the glowing fiery bug before it. Nodded with its decision. And raised a claw to point to the sky.

Light shone, not just the light of a Totem, but a power from the Totem itself. Energy was gathering,
building, concentrating. Moon, who had watched Pokemon Leagues before, thrilled with the
incredible fights on show, felt herself reminded of Solar Beam. But maybe not the same. The energy
from the Mallow Special still coursing within it, the Lurantis glowed brighter still. A Power Herb in
the mix was just what it needed. The beam spiked and pierced the tree-line above.

Hau's Wimpod, amongst the branches of the canopy covering overhead, jumped as the beam shot up
just by it. But with belief in its Trainer it continued to gnaw away at the wood, weakening and
tearing the branches. Just... a little... more...

Moon gave a command to Larvesta, launch your fire forward. In response the Lurantis swung its
arm, the Solar Blade preparing to cut through any attack and crush the attacker too. Few resisted
such attacks, even those with the type inclination to do so. It was confident. Its blade swung.

A tree branch dislodged from above fell faster, crashing down upon the Lurantis, jolting it, throwing
its swing to the side, the fire from Larvesta washing over it. Mallow, Kiawe, and Lana watched as
the blade of energy cut into the border of the clearing, taking further paces back from the battlefield.
Moon and Hau's strategy, which they'd made sure to avoid learning so as to be surprised, had started
perfectly. But things would only get rougher from here.

Both Kiawe and Lana knew the Totem Lurantis of Lush Jungle was far more aggressive and
resistant to the thought of defeat than any of the Totems they'd raised.

Shaking off the loose flames that clung to it, the Lurantis launched upwards, knowing the attack had
come from above. In a single mighty leap it cleared the treetops, in an elegant single-footed landing it
perched on the branches a moment later. Wimpod, spotted, rapidly scuttled away, flipping around the
branch it was on to crawl underneath it. A swing of Lurantis's arm cut the branch at the trunk of the
tree it connected to, the wooden limb falling with Wimpod still holding on. Moon's command,
another burst of fire, incinerated part of the branch and spun it around, allowing Wimpod to fall
without being crushed. Lurantis landed after, the ground shaking, the difference in how heavy it
moved up to its own devices. An elegant dancer like the Salazzle. A force of pure power like the
Wishiwashi. And a clever tactician like the Araquanid. Spiced up with the Mallow Special, it was
without question the strongest Totem of Akala. Moon and Hau stared it down. They weren't done
yet. Lurantis charged.

Larvesta's flaring of fire, honed by training with Kiawe, continued to help it distract, the puffs of
flame it sent out catching the Totem's attention once more. But this time the Wimpod's attempt to flee
the scene proved unsuccessful, the Totem moving with speed that had to be unnatural, disappearing
from sight before cutting off the Turn Tail Pokemon's escape. Moon gave an order but the Lurantis
was already performing an attack, a sweeping strike that would collect the tiny bug and send it
flying. Larvesta couldn't cover in time. Hau called out.

“Get it!”

On their own Wimpod remained weak. It was the rarest of the rare that found their way to evolution,
the form usually only granted by the assistance of a skilled Trainer. But even just beginning to train, to form a Bond and grow from it, there was potential there. It took outside forces to teach it, to present actions it could learn from, but Hau, with Lana's assistance, had taught the Wimpod a few tricks more. In response to the incoming strike it answered back in a manner no partner-less Wimpod would. Jumped forward onto the Lurantis's leg and bit down hard.

Despite the difference between them, the typing of each allowed the bite to affect the Totem, to make it feel pain from the strike. Being distracted by this, shaking a leg to dislodge its attacker, allowed Moon to command Larvesta to perform its own actions once again. It launched in a stream of fire, slamming into the Totem's chest, before latching on to the midsection, mirroring the bite of the Wimpod. Each held on tight, so close to the Totem it could apply no true power to remove them, and bit hard. Moon and Hau's cheers in their ears, felt in their Bonds. More strength. Don't let go. Win. Win!

The Lurantis leaped. With speed that Moon could not believe it launched above the treetops once again, spinning as it did so, faster and faster, until the force was enough to tear its attackers away. Each disappeared in a different direction, thrown into the woods out of the sight of their Trainers. The Totem landed with another thud.

Then turned and charged into the underbrush.

Neither Moon or Hau knew what to do. They couldn't see where the Lurantis had vanished to, nor which of their Pokemon it was pursuing. Each called out, tried to bring their partners back to them, but received no answer. No idea what to do. Hau took a step towards the direction the Lurantis had gone, to try and catch up. Moon's hand on his shoulder held him back.

She closed her eyes.

Between a Trainer and their Pokemon there is a Bond. Pokemon take from that Bond, receive strength that allows them to grow beyond what they would achieve alone. With that strength came thoughts, receiving the will of their Trainers, which further heightened those Pokemon in battle. Moon kept silent, even with the background noise of the Totem in the jungle beyond, and focused on the feeling of that Bond alone. That connection to her partner. If you need strength take it. If you need thought here it is. Lure it back. Don't lose. Please!

Hau closed his eyes too. Called out to his Pokemon. But the intensity of the connection between him and Wimpod was so much less than that of Moon and Larvesta. Moon could give so much. Hau only a little. He'd made up for it by working hard with his new partner, forming friendship and trust, but it wasn't the same. He couldn't keep up like this. If it were Wimpod instead of Larvesta that the Totem was fighting... it would be over. He shook his head.

Then Moon's exclamation opened his eyes.

Bursting from the underbrush in a swirl of fire came Larvesta, skidding along the ground and burning the soft soil in its wake. After surged the Totem, glowing with energy, its sickle bladed arms alight with that same power as it swung them around into the fire blown against it, cutting through and hitting the Torch Pokemon behind, pushing it back. Moon called to it and its fur rustled, resisting the blow, still willing to fight. Not yet to fall. The Totem bore down upon it.

Where was Wimpod? Hau looked this way and that, unsure as to where his partner could be. He wasn't even in the fight right now. Was it in the trees again? Preparing another branch? Or still yet to return? Or even choosing not to return, unwilling to fight? He questioned it. Looked away as Moon directed her Pokemon, the white-furred bug using bursts of flame from its five horns to jet around the field, dodging the hunting slashes of the Totem. Frustrated, the Lurantis raised a claw once more,
glowing with that same bright energy. But it took longer this time. Moon directed Larvesta in, to latch onto the Totem at the shoulder, a place it could not strike with its most powerful attack. In frustration the Lurantis refocused the glow of energy, from its arm to spread throughout its body, shining with brightness that eclipsed the red glow of Larvesta itself. Moon saw the Totem’s stance straightening as it glowed. It was restoring itself. She quickly raised her Firium-Z. She had to stop it here.

“Wait!” Hau’s hand on her wrist stopped her. He shook his head when she looked to him. “Not before we know it'll end it.” Moon looked back to the two. The Lurantis was healing through her Larvesta's attacks. They couldn't let it continue. Hau looked up. “We won’t.”

Lurantis's wild slashing at Larvesta had damaged the environment. Left deep cuts in the trees around them. Looking at them, Hau had finally seen what he was looking for – the silver-plated carapace of his partner, the Wimpod fighting alongside him in this Trial. Returned from where it had been thrown, it had followed what it had been taught. Looked for weak places to turn the environment against the Totem. Here was a tree ready to fall. Tear this much more from it. Leave only this fragment remaining. Then...

Hau timed it. Moon trusted in his direction. When he said it, when he exclaimed “get back!” she gave that order too. With a burst of fire Larvesta pushed itself off of the Totem, who immediately raised a claw to glow with power so it might strike the Torch Pokemon down. The sound of crackling fire muffled the noise of creaking wood, the Lurantis only noticing when it was already falling. The three Captains stared, the ground they stood on shaking under the impact, as the tree crashed down upon the Totem. That... that had to hurt.

With a slice that projected to the treetops, cut a hole that rained down leaves and branches from above, left sunlight shining upon the forest floor, the Totem Lurantis pushed aside the tree, cut through a moment before it had been crushed. But even cut apart the two halves of the trunk had still slammed against it, and the damage it had taken and recovered from had now returned. Light though, now light was shining on it. It glowed brighter faster. Raised both claws, one for each of its foes. Then brought them down.

Hau had already performed a Z-Pose in that moment and given what power he could, strengthened the move he and Mallow had taught the Turn Tail Pokemon from a surge of Normal-aligned power to a Z-Move itself. A surging tackle that hit the instant before the Totem could bring its claws down. Pushed it back.

But still it remained on its feet.

Moon glowed too, Z-Aura flowing from her into her Larvesta. She and Hau knew that a Z-Move was the only thing strong enough to create an opening for another, and had settled that Hau's would allow her to perform Inferno Overdrive, the Z-Move granted by the Firium-Z. But despite its damage from the fallen tree, and despite the strike of Breakneck Blitz from the attacking Wimpod, now lying at its feet exhausted, the Lurantis still stood. And its arms were still glowing. Into the oncoming fireball it swung its blades down.

Hau's blink was slow, despite himself. He'd used plenty of Z-Moves since learning how to, but every time it was the same. The aftermath where he barely felt awake. Eyes closed. A moment of darkness. Open again. Wimpod twitching, as tired as he was. Lurantis looming over it, black patches on its body showing the Totem had been reached by the flames, yet remaining on its feet all the same. Darkness. Eyes open. Moon staring grimly. Larvesta barely moving as well. Eyes closed. No thoughts. One thought. Oh, we've lost. Eyes open. Lurantis stepped forward, closer to the Torch Pokemon that had harmed it so many times. Eyes closed. Eyes open. The Totem had its back to
Wimpod. Wimpod struggling. The Bond between them was a small thing, but still Hau could feel it in the wake of the Z-Move. For a moment the action had enlarged it.

So then... if we want to win... Hau forced his eyes open and stomped down hard. “Go!”

Lurantis staggered, hit in the back, unaware the threat had remained. It swung around, claws raking off the carapace of the Turn Tail Pokemon biting into it, and for a moment its attention was away. Hau couldn't keep his eyes open. Moon's were wide. Then...

Larvesta shone, bright flames flickering, Moon's intent will mirrored in its form rising back to its feet. They'd agreed to go together. To go forward and never stop. So no stopping, not ever. The flames concentrated. And in a fiery surge Larvesta flew forward, head first, burying into the middle of the Totem once more. It stepped back. Lost balance. Fell. The Pokemon on its back just bit harder, and when the Totem's back hit the ground it only drove the Wimpod's bite deeper. Eyes wide the Totem gasped and reached up, light still pouring from the hole it had cut through the canopy above. A burning bug pushed down heavy on its chest. A small one bit hard into its back. The Totem's claw, in the light from above, began to glow.

Glowed brightly.

Then fell and rose no more.

Hau sat down hard, closed his eyes, and immediately drifted off. Just... a little rest. Wimpod, struggling to get free of the Totem's weight, made it out just in time to curl up as well. It was done. Larvesta, still pressing upon the Lurantis's chest, lifted its head. Gave a loud victory cry.

And announced the third Trial of Akala, the fourth of Alola for Moon and Hau, complete. Their victory.

Their win.

“Congratulations!” And with only a single moment of silence after to process, Moon was surrounded by the three Captains, Kiawe reaching down to lift Hau up before thinking twice and letting the young boy take his moment's rest. Mallow pressed a green crystal into Moon's hands, a second kept for Hau when he was ready. Moon immediately fit the Z-Crystal into her Z-Ring. She'd been waiting for this. Taking steps back, she called out Dartrix, the Blade Quill Pokemon circling the clearing in flight, perching atop the fallen Totem besides its fellow partner of Moon. The Larvesta, tired, clicked at it. Dartrix gave a noise of approval, running a beak over the white ruffled fur of the Torch Pokemon. Moon smiled at the sight. Then called her Larvesta back to her.

Just once, just one time, but she wanted to use the Grassium-Z now. To feel it. To let her partner feel it. Mallow glanced at the other Captains. In the wake of a full and intense Totem battle in which she'd used a Z-Move, Moon wanted to use another. Not for any purpose either. Just to feel it. She really was like nothing else. Lana shrugged. Good enough. Mallow turned back to Moon.

“Then this... is the pose for the Z-Move Bloom Doom, performed with the Grassium-Z!”

She hadn't needed to tell Moon, Moon had already memorised it when seeing the Captains facing Ryuki. But she nodded and called Dartrix to circle away from the unconscious Totem, into the sky above, as Moon performed the pose. As she sent the energy and lit the connection between her and her first partner with power.

As, for a brief moment, a second shining sun hung over the Lush Jungle of Akala.

In the wake of that moment Moon called her Dartrix back, the Pokemon's feathers still glowing in the
after-effects of the move. Using a Z-Move was tiring for any Pokemon, but it was fresh and so consented to remain by Moon's side, cooing for attention as she ran her hands over its shining quills. The Totem staggered to its feet as Mallow picked up the Wimpod by it, acknowledging the Captain's presence before wandering back into the Jungle. It would need a long rest to recover from that. Neither Moon nor Hau had held back an inch. Good. That had been what it had taken to win, after all. Returning to Hau, Mallow set the Wimpod down in his lap. It clicked and curled up within it.

“Oh hey,” kind of wandering around now that the battle was over, Mallow noted the pot she'd been cooking in, “there's still food left, so would you guys like to try it? It's good stuff!”

In curiosity Kiawe and Lana approached. “I've never tried the Mallow Special,” Kiawe tilted his head, “how is it?”

“Really good!” Mallow nodded quickly, preparing a bowl for each of her fellow Captains. With interest, each accepted and took a sip.

“This...” Kiawe paused, considering. “It's so powerful. I feel the flavour shaking me. I- am- am I shaking?”

Lana, with wide eyes, the bowl clutched tight in her hands, was staring at him. Her face was very pink. Kiawe felt sweat dripping from his brow. “That's...”

“It's...”

“SPICY!!!”

Mallow frowned, watching the Captains dash off to find the nearest source of water. Honestly. She took a sip. It wasn't that bad! “Hey Moon, do you want-” turning to check on the Trial-goer, Mallow paused. Moon had booked it half a minute ago.

Chapter End Notes

When I started my planning for this chapter, my initial concept was for it to be a solid chunk longer than it was - with an entire extra full scene after the conclusion of the Grass Trial. Yet as I finished the Trial I really got the "this chapter is done" feeling, which made me reconsider. The original plan for last chapter and this one combined was to reach a specific point, but the pacing on last chapter still feels a little weird to me, and I'm not really comfortable throwing it out further.

So what happens next chapter? Well, ideally I'll make it work out. I've got some ideas. It's an important chapter so having it on a number like 20 will be good to me. As a bonus, having to move the title I planned to it, I got to keep the "The Trial of X Y" format I've been using for Akala, so 3/3 on that I don't have to feel compelled to do it for Ula'ula.

Island Challenges inspire change in those who take them, and as we follow Hau and Moon we see them experience that change as well. Writing and developing each, I'm enjoying it a lot, and hopeful you're having fun with their character journeys as well. That said, I'm also happy to have Lillie back on the scene now. She's going to be around for the rest of Akala, so please enjoy the trio content over the next few chapters.
That's it for this chapter, I hope you enjoyed the final Trial of Akala. Just the Grand Trial left now. Please look forward to it. The final section of the Arcala has me all kinds of excited to share it with you. We're getting into it now.
“Go, Nebby! Use... use Splash!”

The voice of Lillie reached Moon's ears just as she was nearing the exit of Lush Jungle, her quick escape from the threat of the Mallow Special having slowed down to a leisurely stroll once far enough away. By tone and intonation Lillie was imitating Moon herself, and hearing that Moon couldn't help the giggle that escaped her as she came within sight of the gates. Lillie, who had been facing away from the exit, immediately jumped and spun around, catching sight of the approaching Moon. Her cheeks quickly turned pink.

“O-oh, Moon! W-welcome back! How did it go?” Moon's smile spoke clearly of her victory, but the look she was giving Lillie made it hard for Lillie to celebrate it. She could still feel her face flush at having been caught playing Trainer with Nebby. Though Lillie had never truly forgotten what Ryuki had told her, one month ago on the shores of Kala'e Bay, hearing he had been here just the other day had returned that conversation to the forefront of her mind. His words that as long as she was caring for Nebby, as long as Nebby was caring for her, then that made them partners, no matter what – she still didn't know if she believed it. Didn't know if without the power of a Trainer's Bond connecting them – its absent presence a sign of either late development on her part or a destiny to never be a Pokemon Trainer – she and Nebby could ever truly be considered a team. She didn't know.

But...

Sometimes it was nice to think about.

In the past she'd never desired such a thing, disliked the battles that only led Pokemon to harm. But seeing Moon, seeing Hau, the two of them marching forward with heads held high, their Pokemon beside them, it had awoken something within her. A desire to be the same. To walk the way they did. To walk alongside them too. If she could do that, if she could join them, then... she...

Crouching down, Moon called out to Nebby, the Nebula Pokemon happy to float into her outstretched hands. Standing back up with the blue and purple cloud-like being in her arms, Moon ran a hand over it, receiving contented 'pews' in response. She smiled at Lillie. Lillie reached forward and lifted Nebby from Moon's grip.

It hadn't even been intentional on her part. She'd just seen Nebby, held in Moon's arms, and moved without thinking. Only as Moon cocked her head, a slight frown of concern at Lillie's silent action on her face, did Lillie realise just what she had done. Feel, as Nebby nestled into her arms instead, the remnants of the emotion that had driven her to act in that moment. She was... upset? It surprised Lillie herself to realise: the sight of Moon holding Nebby had distressed her. It should not have, she should not feel such but Lillie... a tiny part of her brain whispered that caring for Nebby was her role. Not that of anyone else. Even Moon.

...especially Moon.

Confusing emotions mixing together, Lillie was too caught in them to hear Moon's repeated question of whether she was okay until the touch of Moon's hand upon her shoulder caused her to jump. She stared at Moon blankly, her own thoughts in too many pieces to work together into anything coherent. Moon had a worried expression.
Lillie looked away.

“Is,” she turned her head to face the path Moon had come from, the entrance to Lush Jungle, “is Hau coming as well? The two of you did your Trial together, didn't you?” The change in topic stuck out to Moon, but nonetheless she nodded, before realising Lillie wouldn't see while looking away. Voiced, instead, that after using a Z-Move Hau was taking a rest, would return with the Captains later. Lillie considered that. “A Z-Move...” her words came slowly, forming the question as she thought, “did you use one too?” Moon paused on that. Spent a moment feeling the difference between her, standing here awake and alert, and Hau, who'd collapsed as soon as the tension of battle was done. Then confirmed. She had. Lillie considered that too.

A long moment of awkward silence hung between them, each unsure of what to say to the other. Lillie turned her head to look back down the steep path she had climbed from Wahiola to greet Moon and Hau after their Trial. “When Professor Kukui takes us back to Heahea City,” she spoke looking out over the sea, glittering under the sun's light in the distance beyond, “you'll be meeting Professor Burnet, his wife.” Moon made a noise of interest hearing the name of Professor Burnet for the first time. Lillie turned her eyes upwards to the blue sky overhead. “When I... when Nebby and I met Professor Burnet, she agreed to help me learn more about Nebby... I mean, about the Pokemon Cosmog. She even arranged for Professor Kukui to give me a place to stay, and to help me as well. She's a wonderful person. Like a... a real mother to me.”

Moon nodded at Lillie's words. It had been just under three weeks since leaving Melemele Island, and while Moon had made sure to call home now and again, she'd often been so caught up in her journey it had slipped her mind as well. Still, she knew her mother would be there for her, no matter what, and knowing that helped her go on. Lillie remained silent as Moon mentioned that.

Then started down the path.

“Let's head back.”

The three Captains, Lana, Kiawe, and Mallow, arrived a rough hour after Moon and Lillie's return to Wahiola, a bleary but awake Hau with them. He joined Moon and Lillie with a smile, excited to go over the grand battle he had fought with Moon against the Totem, though often took breaks to rest as well. As the Captains pointed out to Kukui, who was watching over the two on their Island Challenge, Hau's intent to push the very limit of what he could maintain meant every Z-Move would exhaust him. They'd told him he was reaching a wall. That his Pokemon's growth would soon make the number he kept untenable until he himself had grown further. Kukui nodded at that and thanked them for it. For all his incredible talent, Hau would still experience what the rest did. Kukui still remembered his Jangmo-o's evolution, and the slow realisation that there would be no way to keep the majority of his team with him with the drain she was upon his body and mind. An experience every Trainer eventually learns.

Every Trainer, except...

“Four.” Lana said it as the three Captains discussed with Kukui and Kahili, the three young ones keeping each other occupied for the moment. Mostly in sticking close to Hau as he alternated between excitement and weariness. “I watched her perform four Z-Moves in short order.”

“The same,” Kiawe nodded in solidarity, “she used one to clear out the precursor to my Totem and then three against the Totem itself. Two were with Pokemon she clearly caught in Brooklet Hill.”
“It's not even close to rational,” Mallow shook her head. “It's not just her endless limit for connecting to Pokemon, but the speed and intensity with which she does so. The rate at which she can catch a Pokemon, establish a Trainer's Bond, then raise it to the level of power and trust needed to use a Z-Move is...”

“Hau did the same with his Wimpod.” Lana noted this, aware that in this instance Moon was not beyond the measure of anyone else. Kiawe disagreed.

“We all know Wimpod have naturally small demands. Hau's an exceptional Trainer, and that allowed him to forge the trust to use a Z-Move, but it's not the same as being able to build that same relationship with a far stronger Pokemon.” The three Captains frowned. Kahili looked to Kukui.

“What's next then?” They’d discussed this, knew that the two of them, likely with Lillie as well, would soon be heading for Ula'ula Island. The Alola Culture Council was just over a week away, and Kukui needed to be there for that. That was unquestionable.

Yet the children, Kukui and Kahili had been unsure. Moon and Hau had maintained an exceptional pace to travel to Akala Island at the same time they had, but to do the same to make it to Ula'ula within a month's time? That was something else. Beyond that though, what came next was...

“For now we should leave it in their hands,” Kukui answered simply, not so much out of any specific belief in how things would go as simply confidence that everything would work out. “We'll return to Heahea, meet them in Konikoni, then take them on to Ula'ula should they complete their Grand Trial before the due date. We don't need to worry about anything else.” Each of the Captains and Kahili herself gave Kukui a long look for saying that. There was a lot to be worried about at all times. Kukui shook his head. “Things will work out. Have faith in them. They've made it this far, after all.”

“Alright,” standing up, Mallow raised her hands, an admission of surrender, “we'll leave it with you. You're taking them back to Heahea by boat?” Kukui's nod of answer was followed by Mallow turning her head to see the three sitting nearby in the Pokemon Center, still speaking amongst themselves. She looked back to the group before her. “Well I'm going to make you all some food before you go – Moon and Hau need to eat after that Trial.” The momentary glance between Kiawe and Lana did not go missed by the Captain of Lush Jungle. She pouted at them. “Good food.” Not that her Mallow Special should be anything to complain about, but apparently it had been a little too much for some.

She really should have asked Hau if he'd wanted some, instead of letting Lana and Kiawe return in time to shuffle him off back to town.

The kitchen of the Pokemon Center in Wahiola was used to Mallow's intrusions, and so she set to work without concern, whistling a tune and soon setting a meal cooking that the smell wafting from had everyone in the Pokemon Center raising their heads to. It was an early lunch, not quite yet midday, but no-one was about to complain. With a smile to see everyone excited to try her craft, Mallow happily served everyone in the Pokemon Center, making sure an extra-sized plateful went to Hau and Moon. The two Island Challengers dug in. Good.

A small stretch of time spent beyond that meal, letting everyone's stomachs settle, and then the group moved to head out. Lana had occupied Kahili's attention, discussing training methods to improve, a fire lit within her after her defeat at Ryuki's hands. Kiawe had questioned Kukui about the possible need for a lab assistant, regretfully replied to that Lillie was taking care of all Kukui could need one for at the moment. Mallow watched the three young ones, Moon, Hau, and Lillie, and noted that with the other two Moon was louder. More talkative. Smiled more often. Yes, her Grass Trial, bringing Moon and Hau together for it, had been the right idea after all.
She'd finally seen the smile she was looking for.

“Moon.” On the docks of Wahiola, Kukui, Kahili, Lillie, and Hau already on board the boat that would take them south, Mallow bought the young girl's attention for one last moment. There was so much Mallow wanted to say, wishing Moon well, giving her advice as to how to grow on Ula'ula Island, perhaps a forewarning that the Trials there were far harder than what came before. An endless amount Mallow wanted to express. In the end all she could give her was a smile. A smile and... “Do your best, and... don't forget to smile. The Island Challenge is about growing together with your Pokemon and Alola both. It's a happy thing to share. Okay?” Moon nodded. Smiled at Mallow. That was all she could ask for.

She, Kiawe, and Lana waved as the boat pulled away from Wahiola, preparing to circle west around Akala to the awaiting Heahea City. That was the end of their involvement in the Island Challenge of Moon and Hau – direct involvement, at least. They, like Ilima, would take keen interest in assisting however they could the remaining three Captains of the remaining three Trials. How could they not?

As one they breathed out. As one they looked to each other. Lana raised a Dive Ball.

“Shall we train?”

In order to be ready for the League at year's end? Yes. Absolutely.

The boat ride back to Heahea was quiet. With food in his belly and the effects of the day still upon him, Hau lay down in the back of the cabin of Professor Kukui's boat and took a nap. With Kukui helming the ship, and Kahili seated nearby going over the notes they'd prepared for discussing the League in Konikoni City, that left only Moon and Lillie to entertain one another. Each wandered, Moon heading to the front of the boat for a minute before realising it was far less interesting without Hau alongside, before sitting down together as well. With the air rushing over the boat Lillie was resistant to letting Nebby float free, instead keeping the Nebula Pokemon in her bag, and that bag over her lap, strokes of her hand along it helping keep the Cosmog within calm. Moon watched, but kept her hand back from doing the same. She still hadn't understood Lillie's reaction earlier. But it concerned her.

Silently, each sat.

The boat continued on.

Three awaited the arrival of Professor Kukui's boat on the docks of Heahea City, and as the boat's occupants began to disembark two of those waiting were quick to announce themselves. One of each of their hands clutching one of two poles supporting a banner reading 'Congratulations on your Akala Trial completion', the two posed and declared the same as Moon and Hau came within sight. Kahuna Olivia, standing a few steps behind, resisted rolling her eyes at Sina and Dexio's shenanigans.

“Must you?” Kahili was far less reserved in scolding the two, having spent a solid portion of her time in the Kalos Region interacting with them. Sina and Dexio, lab assistants to Professor Sycamore, were infuriating in being the exact perfect mix of incredibly talented and incredibly annoying. They seemed to live for entertaining themselves and one another through loudness, posturing, and light-
hearted troublemaking, but also possessed what could only be described as a mythical talent for helping Trainers grow. Kahili had watched with her own two eyes as their coaching helped young Trainers of Kalos improve in a frankly improbable amount of time. They were far too skilled for their own good.

And for everyone else's too.

“We gotta~” Sina leaned to the side, pulling on the pole she was carrying and forcing Dexio to step quickly with the one he was holding to keep the banner from tearing. “Moon and Hau completed three whole Trials! That's like three Gyms, right? Right?” Glancing from Kahili to Kukui, Sina repeated herself. Kukui looked awkward.

“I'm not really about to compare Gyms to Trials one-to-one, they're a little too different for that.” Kukui had spent a good while now specifically convincing people that the Trials of Alola weren’t going to be treated like Gyms, free for anyone to wander into and rough-house with whenever they wanted. The sacred sites of Alola would continue to be treated as such, even with the developing focus on making a League available to all of Alola's Trainers and beyond. Having visitors from afar loudly calling Trials the same as Gyms would do his cause no good.

“Kukui,” stepping past the two Kalosian Pokemon Researchers, Kahuna Olivia addressed Professor Kukui directly. “Burnet told me to tell you something when you got here. She wants you to come help at her lab. Something capital-S significant apparently.” Kukui, who'd straightened up the moment he'd been told his wife was calling for him, nodded and quickly stepped forward. Olivia raised a hand to catch him just before he could depart. “Come to the Hoku-Hoku Barbecue after – I've arranged a booking for us all tonight. I'll keep an eye on everyone until then.” With a nod and his thanks, Kukui dashed off. He'd, once again, been hoping to finally introduce Moon to his wife, but if what she was calling him for was what he thought it was, then that would have to wait.

Dimensional windows didn't just patiently wait their turn, after all.

Left in charge, Olivia cast her eyes back over the group. Dexio and Sina, who'd caught wind of the group's return and set up shop at the docks with her; Kahili, attempting to wrangle their intense desire to check up on the young Trial-goers; and then the young Trial-goers themselves. Hau and Moon, the grandson of Kahuna Hala and the enigma whom no-one had ever imagined. They were hanging back still, a third child with them. In her time spent in Heahea over the past three weeks, Lillie had only rarely interacted with Olivia, mostly staying with Professor Burnet, or heading to townships around Akala with Kukui. Still, Olivia had made sure to mind her too, her and the mysterious Pokemon with her. For not being a Trainer, Lillie had all the potential to be as much of a surprise as Moon and Hau were. Those three children.

Really it wasn't a matter of if but when they would do something impossible again.

“It's been a while,” ignoring the nearby discussion based mostly around Dexio and Sina aggravating Kahili, Olivia stepped past them to stand before Moon, Hau, and Lillie. “So let me reintroduce myself. I am Olivia, Kahuna of Akala Island. Now that the two of you, Moon and Hau, have completed the three Trials of Akala, I will be orchestrating your Grand Trial. To that end, you will next have to travel south from Heahea City to Konikoni, where I will greet you again. I imagine you will want to do such immediately.”

The words from the Captains had been that Moon and Hau launched themselves into their challenges with fervent abandon. For a moment Olivia had considered stopping them still, before reminding herself that wasn't what she was setting out to do. A Kahuna didn't battle in their Grand Trial to win, they battled to teach. As soon as she knew what lessons Hau and Moon needed, that would be that. She'd pose those challenges and when they overcame they'd be free to head on to Ula'ula. She
already had a few ideas. But... “First though, would the two of you be willing to show me your progress? I would like to invite you to a battling field to see your Pokemon.”

Somehow despite being constantly talking, Dexio and Sina had no problem overhearing Olivia, and quickly agreed that yes, absolutely, the young Trainers should do this, they were excited to see their Pokemon too. Olivia and Kahili, both unprepared for the ridiculous antics of the two researchers, nonetheless only sighed. The two may be inserting themselves into everything to do with Moon and Hau they could, but they were still valuable opinions and observers to be had. For the roughly one percent of the time they chose to be serious, at least. Moon and Hau glanced at each other before nodding, agreeing to follow the Kahuna. Olivia smiled at them.

For as much as she was trying to play the calm and collected Kahuna, she was honestly a little excited too. They were so young and going so fast. She'd been looking forward to experiencing them since the videos from Hala's Grand Trial had gone live. Finally, it was her time to step up. The good Kahuna led the group to a nearby battling field within Heahea and instructed them to show their Pokemon off. And this is what she saw.

Moon and Hau had each been given a starter Pokemon at the beginning of their Island Challenge: a Rowlet for Moon and a Popplio for Hau. Each had then raised that Pokemon to the point of evolution – a Dartrix from Moon within three weeks and a Brionne from Hau within four. Well aware the amount of energy and growth it should take to do such was demanding indeed, Olivia observed that Moon and Hau were still doing fine. Hau was redlining his ability to maintain his Pokemon, but still balancing himself on that razor's edge enough that no-one could scold him for acting unhealthily. His instincts were truly superb. Moon, as the Captains and Kahuna had come to accept, simply showed no effects regardless of the drain upon her. Had a seemingly infinite well her Pokemon could draw from, the only limitation on growth that of her Pokemon themselves.

In that, both Dartrix and Brionne were far more similar than their Trainers might expect.

Dexio and Sina lacked the experience with those specific Pokemon to tell, but both Olivia and Kahili could: those two were still nowhere near their next evolution. This was understandable of course; expert Trainers may be able to raise a third stage Pokemon of such strength in the span of months, but children simply could not. At their current pace, it would still be the majority of this year at least before the appearance of a Decidueye or Primarina was possible. That was, in all honesty, a relief to Olivia. Something resembling sane pace within these children's unreasonable march forward. For now at least.

The secondary partners of Moon and Hau were a Bagon and Pikachu respectively. Each more wilful and proud than the starters to come before, they postured grandly, showing off to those observing. These Pokemon the Kalos Researchers were far better able to assess, noting they seemed quite strong already. Still, evolution wasn't on their cards either. Dragons took an immense amount of power to grow, and it simply wasn't physically possible for a Bagon to draw what it needed from Moon in this amount of time. Not in the environment of the Island Challenge thus far at least. As for the Pikachu, its requirement to evolve was an outside decision. Olivia would offer Hau a Thunderstone when he came to Konikoni, but also make sure he understood it was not to be used until he was ready. Raichu were bigger demands than one who'd raised a Pichu to Pikachu would expect. That jump hit hard. Hau would need to be prepared for it. He'd need to be prepared for a lot.

Next came a pair of Eevee, one for each of these Trainers, the immediate difference in their personalities nervousness for Moon's and confidence from Hau's. Lillie, who was observing as well, smiled at the sight of the Pokemon, a favourite of children around the world, while Dexio and Sina debated evolutionary possibilities. Olivia would make available her collection of Evolutionary Stones to Moon and Hau for their Eevees as well, but only should they desire such. There was a whole
world of options ahead. And, of course, if anyone was going to stumble upon a new form...

Three Pokemon from each so far seen. Dexio raised a hand to mutter to Sina alone. “Hey so Hau's kind of like, super-crazy, right?”

“Yeah!” Sina's reply came as a hiss with still enough volume for Olivia, Kahili, and Lillie to overhear. “He's like, top one percent of Trainer potential without a doubt. How many eleven-year olds can do that? We've met like... one before similar, huh?”

As Moon and Hau each displayed the fourth of their Pokemon – Hau's last at present – Dexio answered back with a statement that Olivia and Kahili understood, and Lillie found herself considering deeply. “It's really unfair he's gotta compare to Moon.”

Fourth were the young Trial-goers' catches from Lush Jungle, the exact design of the Trial from Captain Mallow one that had impressed Olivia with the girl's creativeness. Mallow had expressed, on more than one occasion, the desire to be as capable as the Kahuna one day, though Olivia had been forced to remind her that she was still young herself. By the time Tapu Lele was done with Olivia's service, whether that was for the entirety of Olivia's age or simply until she was no longer able to keep up, Mallow would be in her later years too. The next Kahuna of Akala would, providing no disasters occurred, be from a much younger generation.

Olivia had never specifically said it, but she also knew that desiring the role of Kahuna was often better done without ever being required to take that mantle on. There were requirements to such that bound the Kahuna harshly. But she didn't speak of that.

Nanu took care of it for the four – well, three at present – Kahuna in spades.

The Lush Jungle catches earned immediate note from Dexio and Sina who, only barely knowing of Wimpod, focused entirely on Moon's Larvesta. One of the world's rarer Bug Pokemon, with an evolutionary requirement of an obscene amount of time and energy, Larvesta was absolutely the most incredible among her number to their eyes – and that included the fact she had a Dragon in Bagon. Moon, who generally enjoyed the energy and excitability of Hau, found herself overwhelmed by the two adults. Kahili dragged them back.

“That's me.” Hau stepped forward to Olivia, his Wimpod climbing up his back to settle on his head. He looked up slightly and smiled, unable to see it but enjoying its presence all the same. “Just those four.” Just, the word hung heavy in Olivia's head. Hau and his four Pokemon in so short a span of time was an incredible once-in-a-generation achievement. And he described himself as 'just', measuring against Moon as he did. Dexio hadn't exactly been wrong. Olivia smiled at Hau. He grinned back.

“Then think hard about how you will face my Grand Trial,” already preparing concepts, Olivia was getting a good idea of just how she would test Hau. And what she would teach him. “The journey isn't as intense as any of those to the previous Trial Sites, but it does require you to temper yourself. To prepare everything you've learned so far. I'm looking forward to facing you.”

“Yeah!” Pleased with the Kahuna's words Hau nodded, rapid clicking coming from his Wimpod as it held on to avoid being thrown off his head, Hau wincing a little as its claws gripped tight, apologising a moment after. He stepped aside for Moon.

She still had two more Pokemon to show.

The Flaaffy, Moon told Olivia, had evolved during Lana's Trial. Lana had reported the Trial to Olivia, stunned her with the words that the Captain of Brooklet Hill had arranged for Moon to be
caught in a territorial crossfire between the location's two Totems. A veteran of such an intense Trial was a good idea. Olivia made no mention of the Trial's specifics, keeping such from those who may be affected by hearing of it, and nodded.

The sixth Pokemon interested far more for being the weakest of Moon's team by far. A far from common catch in Brooklet Hill's environment, luck had played a clear part in Moon's obtaining of the Feebas. They were difficult Pokemon to raise, Olivia mentioned to Moon, who replied that Lana had told her the same, but also that they were incredible when evolved. Dexio and Sina, who Kahili was holding back from rushing Moon and her Pokemon, were discussing the natural challenge in evolving Feebas amongst themselves. Lillie, hearing the name of the Fish Pokemon's evolved form in their discussion, took steps away and hugged the bag containing Nebby closer to her chest.

A part of her hoped Moon didn't go through the effort to evolve that one.

So that was Moon's six. Olivia found herself stumped by those numbers, by what the best Grand Trial to help Moon go forward could be. Still, there was time to think. She'd do so. She doubted she'd have a thoughtless moment until Moon's Grand Trial was done. Alola was responsible for this incredible Trainer, and overwhelmed child, and Olivia would not do her wrong.

The Island Challenge, which fostered in Trainers a love for the Alola Region, would not betray Moon. This, Olivia swore.

Examination of Pokemon, discussion on raising tactics – Dexio and Sina insisting on giving their advice, which, admittedly, was impressively intelligent – and just generally managing everyone here quickly wore the day on from the early afternoon arrival of Kukui's boat, the deeper oranges of dusk now settling across the sky. Hau, who'd used a Z-Move in his Trial that morning, was fading but kept going by a combination of Mallow's cooking, the nap he'd taken earlier, and a general reserve of energy that was hard to beat. Still, he looked relieved when Olivia suggested they all head to the restaurant Hoku-Hoku Barbecue. An early meal for the group. Dexio and Sina, who simply invited themselves along with whatever caught their interest, followed after. Given they had, actually, helped today Olivia chose not to drive them off. Kahili still suggested it under her breath.

Olivia had booked out this restaurant for their group alone, allowing them to not only eat but have their Pokemon join the meal as well – the place ready to cater for both. Moon and Hau let their full teams feed, while the adults each contributed only one or two Pokemon to the mix. Firstly because their Pokemon were far larger and would cause no amount of trouble in bulk, and secondly to guard their full teams from one another. After all, Olivia, Kahili, Dexio, and Sina would all be taking part in the initial Pokemon League of Alola. They couldn't go showing their full hands to one another this far in advance, right?

Shortly after setting up, Professors Kukui and Burnet arrived. The two immediately headed for Moon and Hau.

“Alola!” Professor Burnet was a woman of white hair that curled upwards, the length of it tied into a ponytail while more hung in spirals by her cheeks. Her skin deeply tanned by Alola's light, she grinned with a wide smile, a rough head's height shorter than Kukui, a half head taller than Moon and Hau. Moon and Hau greeted her in return. “I've been looking forward to meeting you, Moon. And you again after so long, Hau, you look well!” With a happy expression she nudged Kukui with an elbow, who mock staggered at the impact. “Kukui's been hoarding you for far too long.”

“I outright lost them after they got to Akala!” Protesting, Kukui missed how terrible his statement was until his wife laughed at him. Moon, Hau, and Lillie all chuckled amongst themselves.

“Oh!” Rolling her shoulders, free of the labcoat she'd been wearing at work, now garbed in a grey
tanktop and some simple black pants to relax in, Professor Burnet pulled out a chair and sat herself down halfway along the table, splitting the groups of Olivia, Kahili, Dexio, and Sina, from Moon, Lillie, and Hau. Kukui took opposite. “My husband's promised you'll be visiting my lab tomorrow, so make sure you do! There's some really exciting stuff happening at the moment that I'm looking forward to telling you about!” Thrilled by the prospect of ‘really exciting stuff’, Hau and Moon quickly agreed. Burnet tilted her head and gave Kukui a grin. He smiled back.

“Food!” Now satisfied everyone was here, Dexio and Sina got fully into the mood required for Alolan Barbecue, switching back into full tourist mode. With food served, the entire nine-strong group, plus their Pokemon partners, set into eating. Only after a solid while of that did conversation begin to emerge again. Olivia took the lead, looking Kukui's way.

“So how's recruitment for the Exhibition League going?” All eyes turned first to Olivia, then to the target of her question, as the topic hit exactly what everyone was interested in. The decision to host an Exhibition Tournament at the site of the Pokemon League, a showcasing of Alola's best Trainers meant to drum up interest in a full Pokemon League Tournament to be held in three year's time, was already capturing hearts and minds. Knowledge that the Captains and Kahuna of Alola would be taking part, as well as the legendary Kahili, already had everyone's interest. But as for the rest of the roster, still kept relatively secret...

“Well...” Kukui drew the word out, obviously putting on a show of debating how much he would tell, “I think it's going well. We've had a lot of external applications already.”

“Like us!” Sina raised a hand, taking a moment to swallow the meat she had been savouring. “Dexio and I got writ from the Kalos League! We're in!”

Kahili made a scoffing noise, drawing eyes. “Somehow.” Dexio and Sina both baulked at her dry barb.

“Hey!” Almost offended, able to recognise Kahili's style of humour only by having known her for the length of her time in Kalos, Dexio frowned. “We're both League Trainers you know! You remember us battling there don't you?”

“I remember eliminating you in the first round,” Kahili responded smoothly. Sina snorted hard, choking on her drink and requiring Dexio to pat her back. He looked a little put out.

“I remember eliminating you in the first round,” Kahili responded smoothly. Sina snorted hard, choking on her drink and requiring Dexio to pat her back. He looked a little put out.

“Besides them so far,” Kukui continued, saving Dexio from his roasting by the Flying-type expert, “Grimsley, from the Unova League, received invitation. He's been living on Ula'ula for a while anyway, and is popular with the locals there. He's a welcomed guest. And then last of the writ Trainers so far is...” pausing, Kukui noted Moon, Hau, and Lillie were watching him intently, interested as well. Kukui smiled to them. “Ryuki Oda.”

“Ryuki,” Olivia said the name, having heard from the Captains of their battle with him. She still found it hard to believe. More than a Dragon Tamer, a Dragon Master. He would be scary to fight.

She was very interested in doing so indeed.

“I looked him up,” Kukui continued, Kahili now also interested. “His writ is from the Hoenn League, he took part there, and was eliminated in the first round.” Noises of surprise were overridden by Kukui's continuation. “But it was by the one who became League Champion. And they said Ryuki was one of the hardest fights they had. So we don't actually know his full measure. A mystery man.”

“A mystery man with at least three incredibly strong Dragon Pokemon.” Kahili saying this helped fill
Dexio and Sina, who didn't know Ryuki by name, in on just what this challenge would be. Each shared a look. A League-level Dragon Tamer was going to make things hard. The Alolan Exhibition League would draw all eyes from around the world. How could it not? Kahili continued. “And who even knows what else. I wouldn't be surprised if what he hasn't shown is far scarier than what he has. None of the three we know of can Mega Evolve, after all.”

“Mega Evolved Dragons?” A topic they were versed in, Dexio and Sina chimed in. “Bets? Does he have a Dragon that Mega Evolves, or a Pokemon that gains the Dragon-typing when it does?”

“Maybe a counter to his weakness?” Sina followed after Dexio. “Dragons have serious Fairy troubles, so maybe a strong Poison or Steel type?”

“That wouldn't be the Mega Evolution Pokemon though,” Dexio countered back, “it'd be something he can swap in and out reliably. Whatever he has that might Mega Evolve, it has to be a big-line hitter. It'll be his strongest Dragon. I'd bet on it. Maybe a Salamence? Or a Garchomp? Something like that.”

“Aside from Ryuki,” Kukui continued, taking control back over the conversation as Dexio and Sina discussed Mega Evolution strategy – which Moon had been listening to with absolute fascination – “while we've still got some open slots for other nominated Trainers, we haven't accepted any more yet. From within Alola, besides the Challenge completion bracket, it's Kahuna, Captains, and some major representatives like Kahili.”

“And yourself,” Kahili replied to Kukui, noting he'd been avoiding his inclusion in the list so far. “We both know you're a monster Trainer too.” Kukui gave a look like being described as such was a little unfair. Burnet voiced a 'she's right' shutting down his complaint.

“The other major representatives?” Still interested, Olivia asked. Kukui, who hadn't been planning on detailing the current lineup quite yet, found himself unable to sit on it any longer.

“The heads of the Pokemon Schooling System, Pokemon Rangers, and Dragon Tamers all agreed to take part,” he seemed genuinely pleased to announce that. Burnet whistled.

“Asuka, Jackson, and Pitaya are all competing? That's going to be rough. I feel bad for the Challenge Completers.”

“That's up to us!” Olivia knew this one, taking charge to show off a little. “The Kahuna of Alola will be nominating a number of Trainers who have recently completed their Island Challenges to take part.” Catching Moon and Hau looking at her, Olivia gave them a wink. “Maybe you two?” Each of them expressed interest in that. Although, even if they took part, they'd still be up against practically unbreakable walls. Better they make it to the proper League to follow. Even then, lighting the fire would at least drive their motivation. That, at least, Olivia could do.

“Man,” Dexio leaned back in his chair, impressed at the line-up presented, even if he didn't know the majority of it. It felt significant, y'know? “This's going to be rough. Almost scary, don't you think?”

“Pfft,” Sina, equally impressed by the amount of talent the Exhibition League would have on show, took refuge in mockery of her partner, “you can worry all you want, I'm going to win it!” Dexio laughed at that genuinely enough for Sina to get mad at him. The two bounced playful insults off of each other. Burnet waved at Kukui.

“Looking for major representatives,” she gave him a smile, “why haven't you gone to the Battle Royal? It'll be a disappointment for all his fans if the Masked Royal doesn't go on stage, don't you think?”
“Well...” Kukui drew out the word, not quite meeting his wife's eyes, “the Masked Royal is all about the Battle Royal format. The League is one-on-one battling, yeah?”

“Oh that's a shame,” Burnet's words dripped with mocking amusement, “I was looking forward to seeing my favourite Pokemon Trainer on the grand stage.” Kukui made a noise of offence at his wife's clear appreciation for the mystery Trainer of the Battle Royal. Olivia glanced between them, trying to figure out whether any part of the conversation they'd just had was genuine. They were smiling at one another quite unsubtly. She gave a sigh.

“It's our poor luck,” she caught Kahili's attention, quieter words for the other woman alone, “the only two single adults here.”

Kahili, who'd looked to Olivia in curiosity when addressed, paused for a moment. Held back her words. Then committed. “Well, not me exactly...”

Dexio, who had far better hearing than someone as constantly loud as he was should, immediately leaped to his feet and pointed in accusation. “I knew it!” His voice rung out across the restaurant, Kahili cringing at the attention, “I knew that the two of you were-” halfway through his words Dexio was pulled roughly back down into his chair by Sina, one of her hands over his mouth muffling whatever he'd been prepared to say. Olivia, now aware she was in fact the only single here, tried not to sulk.

“The League's going to be crazy!” Hau, who'd been consumed by thoughts of the Pokemon League and little else, ignored whatever outburst was coming from the adults as he, Moon, and Lillie spoke amongst themselves. “Moon, we've gotta get there! We've gotta see those Trainers first-hand!”

Moon agreed with a nod, intent on making it. The Exhibition League was in eight and a half months. In one and a half they'd completed four of the seven Trials of Alola, but they didn't just have to finish their Trials, they had to get strong enough to take part. It wasn't going to be easy. But she wanted to try. And Hau did too. Lillie, aware the two were planning on achieving something that should be impossible, nonetheless chose to believe in and support them. If they were going to try, she was going to cheer for them.

“And you'll cheer for us when we're there too, right?” Hau asked it with lights shining in his eyes, grinning wide to hear Lillie confirm. “And both of us if we're fighting each other too, okay?” Lillie paused, looking from Hau to Moon, who nodded. She nodded back.

“Then I'll cheer for you both.”

“Okay you are absolutely lying to my face right now.” Sina's loud voice broke their discussion, her attention focused directly on Olivia, who was trying her best to avoid it after voicing her complaint. Sina shook her head. “There is no way you're single without trying. No way at all.”

“It's true,” Olivia protested, “I've just never found someone interested-”

“And I'm telling you you're lying,” Sina cut off Olivia, refusing to buy it for a word. “You are a super-strong Trainer, big-name Kahuna community leader, and drop-dead gorgeous to boot. There isn't a person alive who wouldn't be lucky to get the time of day from you. If I weren't spoken for I would ask you out right here and now. You can't tell me you can't find someone. You can't!”

Olivia, very embarrassed by Sina's words, retreated a little. Dexio nudged Sina. “You should go for it anyway,” he gave his partner a grin, “she's a catch.” Sina wasted no time raising a hand to flick Dexio in the forehead. He wiped a hand at hers. She wiped back. In the space of five seconds they escalated to a mock slap-fight that Kahili, with a long-suffering sigh, stepped in to break up. You
couldn't leave those two unattended for even a minute.

Otherwise they ran off and gave children Mega Stones. Right. She was still mad at them for that.

Olivia, hoping to avoid their attention for the rest of the night, found refuge in Professor Burnet starting a conversation about how the role of Kahuna was treating her. Olivia enjoyed that discussion far more.

More conversations flowed. The evening wore on. And, well feasted, the group broke and each moved to where they'd spend the night. For the darkness to pass and the sun to rise once again.

For the next day to dawn.

The Dimensional Research Laboratory was the home territory of Professor Burnet, who had, over the past few months, spent more nights there than at home with her husband and Lillie. With the focus of her research currently encroaching upon the world, Burnet had spent long days and nights mapping the flow of space across Alola, preparing every bit of information she could in collaboration with the Aether Foundation's significant resources. Still, the lab was hers. Her work was still hers.

She was very excited to share it.

A three-storey affair, the first floor of the lab held a reception area that greeted Hau and Moon as they were signed in by Kukui – who'd come to collect them from the Pokemon Center that morning. The lift within it Kukui took command over, skipping the second floor to bring the two to the third, where his wife was working. The lift doors opening, noise quickly filled Moon and Hau's ears, a large number of scientists working hard at the terminals throughout the room. Kukui smiled at the sight, knowing his wife was the one behind it all.

He was genuinely so very proud of everything she'd done.

“Good morning!” Professor Burnet, with Lillie nearby, waved to Moon and Hau, who quickly moved to join the young blonde girl. Burnet smiled at the sight of the three standing together, Nebby floating in circles around their feet. That was good. Though four months ago now she'd first met Lillie and Nebby, called to collect the unconscious girl and exhausted Pokemon from the shores of Hau'oli City by the loud cry of Tapu Koko, it was only seeing her with Moon and Hau that Burnet could truly see Lillie happy. Like they were easing the burden she carried. Yes, she agreed with her husband. It was vital the three be allowed to stay together.

For each's sake the other two were just so incredibly important indeed.

“It's super busy!” Looking around, Hau observed the many people at work behind the computers, the giant screens on the walls displaying data he just couldn't parse. Burnet laughed.

“Yes it is!” She agreed. “That's part of what I wanted to tell you about today! For you see,” stepping back, Burnet gestured for the others to follow her, away from the main thoroughfare of her lab, “in Alola, there is a mysterious phenomenon known as the Ultra Wormhole!”

Lillie, having heard Burnet's outline of her work before, focused more on Moon and Hau's reactions. They both seemed very interested indeed.

“The Ultra Wormhole,” continuing, Burnet indicated a screen on the other side of a divider, her office separated from the rest of the lab, “is a dimensional rift connecting Alola to another world
entirely. It surfaces at seeming random over the years, rarely being seen or interacted with. But, when it does, there is the chance for something to emerge. Something incredible!"

She was putting on a show for the two children, and Kukui smiled to watch Burnet emoting for them. He loved her so very very much.

“From the Ultra Wormhole come mysterious creatures stronger than any normal Pokemon!” Burnet held up her hands, posing as a scary monster to a child, “we call them Ultra Beasts, and we still know so little about them! Legends say the Guardian Deities of Alola fight the Ultra Beasts wherever they appear, but we've never seen such occur. Now though, with the developments here in my lab, we've begun tracking the Ultra Wormhole itself! And when it next opens, we'll catch it and see what happens! It's very very exciting for us.”

“That's so cool!” Hau, who only half got the concepts Burnet was explaining, locked on to the existence of Ultra Beasts. “I want to meet an Ultra Beast!”

“Well be careful if you do,” Burnet laughed lightly, “they're meant to be incredibly strong! So strong that they're difficult for even the Tapu to fight! So keep that in mind!” Hau nodded, now somewhat awed at the thought of creatures that could compete with the Tapu. Burnet smiled at the fascination Moon and Hau were showing. She held up a finger. “We believe the Ultra Wormhole will appear soon, that's part of what my husband and I were working on yesterday. When it does, I'm sure it will be news all of Alola hears about! Please look forward to it!” Hau and Moon both nodded, smiling as well. That was so exciting! Kukui stepped forward.

Alright,” clapping his hands together, he moved on to the other half of the reason he'd brought these two here, “now there's something else special to do here in this lab – which could be very useful for you both! Tell me, have either of you ever heard of Mental Patterns?”

At Kukui's question, Moon and Hau both shook their heads. Burnet smiled. It was probably time to satisfy Juniper's interest and stop the escalatingly playful yet threatening emails and calls she'd been sending.

“Mental Patterns are a recent study to do with Trainer's Bonds,” Kukui's opening description immediately had Moon and Hau at attention, each absolutely willing to hear every word he had. He grinned. “It's a special image which indicates how well you can form Bonds with certain Types of Pokemon.” Kukui summarised the complex study, skipping over the long backlog of brain mapping involved as part of it. “Everyone's Mental Pattern is unique, a seemingly random mix of lines drawn together, but here's the really cool part: Pokemon have Mental Patterns too, and all Pokemon of the same Type have similar Mental Patterns!” That was a meaty topic to consider, a little too much for Moon and Hau to grasp besides acknowledging it as being very cool indeed. Kukui and Burnet had spent an entire week in Unova with Professor Juniper and Doctor Fennel, Burnet's college friends, just talking about this after the study conducted by them with Professor Oak of Kanto had been published. Kukui's head still spun when thinking about it. It was a lot.

“So the thing is,” Kukui continued, leading back to what would really entice the two, “have you ever noticed some Trainers have certain Types of Pokemon they favour? Keep teams of mostly that Type?” The two children nodded. “That's not a random thing, it's actually to do with their Mental Patterns! You see, the closer a Trainer's Pattern is to that of a Pokemon's, the easier it is for a Trainer to build and support a Bond with that Pokemon! So because of that, Trainers similar to a certain Type have an easier time raising Pokemon of that Type! It helps Trainers find a way to go further, since they can support more strong Pokemon of that Type than any other! That's how it works!”

Hau was riveted. A Type specialisation, that might be just what he needed to keep up! He had to know. “Professor Kukui! How do we get our Mental Patterns!?”
Kukui grinned. “We can do that here!” His announcement had Hau cheer. “Professor Burnet has a Mental Pattern Scanner installed in the building. Moon, Hau, would you like to find out what your Mental Patterns are?”

Moon was silent, Lillie looking at her. Each knew, in the forefront of their mind, that Moon was different to every norm there was. What would her Pattern be? She almost didn't want to know. Hau turned to her with a grin. “Moon! Let's find out our Mental Patterns!”

Moon smiled back, nodded, and agreed.

The Mental Pattern Scanner was on the second floor of the lab, which Burnet led her husband and the three children down to. “It's a one at a time deal,” she spoke as she got behind the computer that managed it, “and it can take a few minutes too.” Immediately as she said that, Hau turned to Moon with a fist held out. Moon understood in an instant and raised her own.

This time she very definitely absolutely had to – Hau played rock and immediately beat her. Moon stared at her hand blankly while her fellow Trial-goer whooped and stepped forward, helped by Kukui to sit down as a visor was placed over his face. Lillie patted Moon on the shoulder.

Minutes passed idly, Hau talking about nothing while looking into the visor that showed nothing to his eyes. Burnet's own watched the screen she was at, seeing the data coming in from the device around Hau's head. Moon and Lillie kept him company, talking about the upcoming journey Moon and Hau would make to Konikoni City, and how Lillie would meet them there with Professor Kukui and Kahili, travelling around Akala by boat once more.

Then the scan was done and Kukui lifted the visor from Hau's face. He bounded back to his feet. Burnet spun around a monitor, showing two Patterns, side-by-side. Then hit a key and showed an overlay of the pair – a fairly close alignment. Kukui nodded.

“Looks like you've got a bias to the Psychic-type of Pokemon, Hau!” Hau cheered, unsure of specifically what that meant beyond he needed to get some Psychic-type Pokemon asap. Kukui considered. Thinking about it, that was what he would have guessed anyway. Hau had a natural talent for reading others, and had recognised Moon that one time without a missed beat. It may be that, much like many Psychic-biased Trainers, he had an ability all of his own.

He really was going to be one of Alola's greatest Trainers, no doubts about it. Kukui turned his eyes to Moon. She looked back. He nodded. “Are you ready?”

Moon didn't answer that verbally, only by sitting down in the chair and consenting for the visor to be placed over her head to begin the scan. Conversation of Hau interrogating Rotom-dex about Psychic-type Pokemon in Alola filled the room, Moon staying silent during that time. Burnet, watching the screen, saw data coming in. They were definitely going to get a Pattern from this. Juniper would be so pleased. Very good.

It took longer, five minutes to Hau's three, for Moon's Pattern to complete. Burnet, waiting eagerly to see it, immediately frowned upon its loading. Hang on. “Kukui.” Her husband walked around, saw the screen, and frowned too, Hau and Lillie both catching their expressions. Moon was still sitting in the chair, yet to be told she could take the visor off and stand back up. Muttering from the two Professors considering the data-set followed, before deciding on modifying some of the scan settings. Kukui looked back up with a rueful expression.

“Sorry Moon.” She frowned now too, turning her head to look in the direction of his voice, unable to see with the visor on her face. “Could you sit for a second scan? It looks like this one didn't work right.” Immediately the thought there was something strange about her Mental Pattern weighed on
Moon. But she didn't say anything and didn't move. Kukui nodded to Burnet. She started the scan again.

Taking longer this time, Hau reached a breaking point, Rotom-dex exhausted for topics to discuss. He stepped over to Moon. “Hey Moon,” she raised her head, aware he was before her, “I'm going to go ahead, okay? I'll meet you on the path to Konikoni, yeah? I know you'll catch up, right?” Moon nodded, Kukui stepping over quickly to make sure the visor stayed put. Hau grinned, waved, then set out. Lillie stayed behind.

And after a few more minutes, the scan concluded, and the same result occurred. Burnet shook her head. “I think the calibration is wrong,” she stood up, gesturing for Kukui to lift the visor from Moon's head, “sorry Moon, I was looking forward to showing you your Pattern, but it's a delicate process. We can try again another time, I don't want to keep you any longer.”

Moon stood up, stretching after sitting for a while, before giving Kukui and Burnet a long and intent look. Neither showed anything. Kukui stepped over to Lillie. “Hey Lillie, are you okay to see Moon out?”

“Oh,” Lillie paused, then nodded, “yes of course. Moon?” And holding out her hand, Lillie felt Moon take it and consent to be led to the lift. Looked back one last time to the husband and wife Professors. They waved to her, showing nothing at all. Then the lift doors closed behind her.

Kukui immediately sat down at the computer.

“This data...” he was scrolling it, eyes flicking over the values, “this is all definitely accurate.”

“It is,” his wife confirmed, “that Pattern is what it is. One-hundred percent.”

The two paused. Kukui looked up at Burnet. She turned.

“I'll call Juniper.”

A small purple Pokemon floated over the rooftops of Heahea City. It had been so long now, so many fallings of the bright light and risings of the soft one since it had seen the light that called to it. The one that was strong, warm, and safe. It had lost that light and was searching for it, but could not find it, not in the town in the trees or the city of metal. It had spent so long searching, every nook and cranny, that it had ended up on a boat, a ferry between islands, carried from Melemele to Akala.

Unaware of the difference in location, it had continued its search unabated. Searching for the one with the light.

And, today, it found her.

Success! Victory! With great joy the purple Pokemon rushed from the sky, down towards the one it had been looking for. At last. At last! At last it had finally- the world went dark.

In the absolute darkness, all light gone, Lillie and Moon emerging from the Dimensional Research Lab only to experience the same thing they had almost six weeks ago when stepping out from Professor Kukui's own lab, a piercing screech of absolute fear sounded out. Unable to see a thing, no light at all, the sun disappeared from the sky, Lillie screamed in response, clutching onto Moon's arm, the purple Pokemon fleeing in a singular direction from the hungry dark. Escape. Escape!
The light lost again.

Moon stared up into the darkness.

There was something there, not light, but colour, roaming through the sky. She didn't know what it was, the jagged triangles of every different colour moving together. But she felt when it stopped. She felt when it turned. And she was sure, without a doubt in her mind, that it was looking directly at her.

She stared back.

The darkness vanished, and the sun stared Moon down.

She flinched and cried out, raising an arm to cover her eyes, Lillie immediately letting go of her arm after the darkness faded, natural light returned to the world again. Hearing Moon's cry she guided her out of the light, into the shade under a nearby awning, without any idea of what had just occurred. What that unnatural darkness or the scream within it had been. Something scary though. Something wrong.

She was sure of that.

And in the Dimensional Research Lab behind them the third floor was alight with yelling, the scientists within blindsided by the sudden appearance of the Ultra Wormhole just overhead, gone again before they could do a thing. And in the floor below, the only two within it, Kukui stared at the monitor as Burnet spoke on the phone she carried.

“Yes,” Kukui didn't hear the voice on the other side, but knew it was Professor Juniper all the same. His wife continued to speak. “I know. Yes. No. Yes.”

She was pacing around the room, building up to it. Still struggling with what it could mean. So was he.

“We have it, yes.” Moving back towards her husband, Burnet moved to explain. “But no, there's no point sending it to you.”

This time Kukui heard Juniper's voice from the phone, extremely indignant in response to Burnet's words, demanding an explanation, a possible reason to not send her the Mental Pattern of Moon. Burnet breathed out a sigh. “Well,” stepping over a bundle of cables, she took position behind her husband, joining him in staring at the screen of pitch.

“...it's black.”

Chapter End Notes

Something I've been doing differently over the past few chapters is being less cavalier with paragraph breaks, building slightly longer paragraphs more often. Since it's been a few chapters, I'd love to hear if anyone has any opinions on readability comparing the latest few chapters to those that came before. I'm under the impression the denser paragraphs are better, but I could be wrong. Feedback valued.

Looking back it's laughable that I planned to do two chapters from the start of the grass trial to this ending point and not three. One day I will learn to properly predict content growth. Or I won't. I don't think anyone ever does.
This chapter definitely set the record for most named characters on screen over the course of it, and absolutely blew the entire fic out of the water with most named characters referenced, as the discussion of competitors in the upcoming Exhibition League revealed. There's a lot of reference and set up for future events and characters, which I'm really pleased to do. I feel like I just gassed up the engine of Eldritch and am ready to take off. Which then let me get into the ending segment.

The Dimensional Research Lab segment is one I've had in mind for months upon months, since the early days of Melemele if not before starting this fic entirely. I'm really excited to have hit it, and super excited for what remains in the final chapters of the Akala Arc. We've still got some more characters to meet and excitement to feel, so please look forward to it. I know I am.

As always, my thanks to all readers. As Eldritch grows larger and larger it becomes far harder to attract people to it, but I'm still not stopping this ride and everyone who's been with it so far, or started after this chapter went live and made it here, I appreciate you so much indeed. Comments are always desired and valued, so please don't hesitate to leave me your thoughts. I enjoy them all.

And that's that for this chapter! I'll see you with the next one when the time comes. It's some hectic weeks for me at the moment, hence the slower release of this one, but that's simply how life comes to us. Nonetheless I will continue. No holding back.
Riled Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The southern region of Akala exists almost disparate to the rest of the island proper, connected by a small bridge of land and three paths from Heahea City alone. The first of these paths is by water, the docks of Heahea and Konikoni, southern city of Akala, frequently travelled between by residents of the island. The second is by road, a curving stretch that loops around the south-eastern coast of the island, kept below the cliffs upon which Memorial Hill and the Ruins of Life are built.

The third, and most direct, is also the slowest – travelled on foot alone. First follow alongside the road going south from Heahea City, and when it forks left continue upon the walking path further still. From there you will come to an opening into the mountainous terrain of Akala's southernmost tip: the beginnings of the Diglett's Tunnel. A passageway dug out by the Mole Pokemon over the course of Alola's history, today the Diglett's Tunnel is a space shared thrice-over. First by the Pokemon that live within the cavernous system dug through the southern mountains of Akala. Second by the workers expanding mines, carefully done so to avoid disturbing any life within the region.

Third by those taking the path – whether they be Island Challengers tasked to walk Alola and experience the fullness of its measure; hikers who enjoy the vast trails of the region; or simply those who felt like putting themselves to the test. It is this path that, roughly ten minutes ago, Hau entered on his Island Challenge. And it is this path now that Moon joins him on.

In comparison to the Dividing Peak Tunnel it was a far more natural affair – a rock and stone path, no asphalt in sight. Apparently other entrances further along the southern road allowed mining vehicles entry and exit, but those paths were dug to have the minimal possible impact. Even in mining the earth those of Alola took great care to reduce any damage they might do. Such was the spirit of this land. Yet in comparison again to the tunnels Moon had stumbled into in the north of Melemele – still sometimes thoughts haunting her mind of wandering the darkness only hoping the sound she was following would show her the way – this passage was made to be walked. It reminded Moon somewhat of Ten Carat Hill, all the way down to the mining set-up as part of it, but somehow even more welcoming. This was also a part of the Island Challenge, she supposed. The Kahuna and Captains must make sure it was well maintained.

She wondered if Z-Rings and Z-Crystals were mined here too.

Beyond the Diglett's Tunnel was a short walk to the entrance of Konikoni City, southern point of Akala Island, home territory of Kahuna Olivia. Olivia had told Hau and Moon the night before that this would be the next part of their Island Challenge: to make their way through these tunnels to the awaiting southern city. It was a long walk, and would take a good portion of their day, but give them a new vision of Alola compared to all the paths that had come before. Alola was beautiful under the sun and moon's light, but even in the darkened underground there could be found the spirit of this place too. Olivia had wondered whether they would. She was looking forward to seeing them on the other side.

Moon thought about this as she walked, following the well-defined path. Sometimes it led through tunnels with lights built into their side. Sometimes out over ravines, high fencing erected alongside paths to ensure safety as best could be. Moon looked off into the distance and saw mining machinery at rest, no workers out today. The Diglett's Tunnel was quiet. Some Zubat, flying overhead. Some Diglett themselves, their cries heard in the distance, though not yet encountered on the path proper.
Moon considered whether she would catch one, but decided not to go out of her way to do so. If one crossed her path perhaps. Only then.

Thinking about catching Pokemon led Moon to pause her thoughts, though her onwards march never slowed. Walking with her was her Eevee – one Pokemon kept out whenever on her own now – though while the Evolution Pokemon seemed to enjoy stretching its legs, it still stayed close to her. She smiled at it whenever it chirped at her. But spent the rest of her time in thought.

Z-Moves, of which she could perform many. Trainer's Bonds, of which she could support any. The connections which did not fade at a distance like they should, the Bonds between her and those at the Poke Pelago still able to be felt. It had been a while since Moon had returned there, not since encountering Lana during the Wela Volcano Trial. She wanted to go back. To see the Pokemon she'd caught. Those she felt bound to. Connections that should be impossible.

Her initial motivation had been such a simple thing: to catch because she could. To see a Pokemon and desire to travel with it – to know it was not a difficult thing to do – she'd reached out so greedily at first. Only when realising the rate it slowed their growth, so little time able to be given to each, did Moon feel the pinch. The Poke Pelago had resolved that, and now Moon felt free to catch with abandon, except for that was a strange thing that apparently only she could do.

Had Professor Kukui and his wife lied to her? Was there something strange, something wrong with her Mental Pattern? With her? Moon tugged at the sleeve of her clothing, the green blouse Mallow had given her. She raised a hand and patted at her caramel blonde hair, forcefully enough to wince at the impact. She still didn't see herself in mirrors. It had been the best way to avoid the attention of people fascinated by her, to do her Island Challenge in peace, but even still she hated it. And it had only amounted to so very little indeed. She'd still needed to be bundled about by the Captains, escorted off of the familiar paths. Still been given strange looks by Trainers she met in battle – this young child seemingly too strong. A disguise so she could do her Island Challenge? Had it even worked?

The good in her journey, in that she could bond with any Pokemon, in that she was strong enough to keep up with Hau on his Island Challenge – Hau who was so skilled and kept going no matter what – was balanced precariously against what she had to do to remain this way. To shoulder the weight of her own gift forced upon her by whatever factors had led to it. Destiny or fate, or just coincidence, she didn't know.

She still didn't know if she'd rather have this or not.

Warm fur brushed against her face, the weight of her Eevee upon her shoulder, the Pokemon giving soft calls to its Trainer, feeling her heavy swirling thoughts. Moon pushed her face against it and whispered quiet words of thanks. No matter what, as long as she had her Pokemon beside her... then it would be okay. Things would be okay. Believing that, she kept moving forward.

Walking the path ahead.

“Oh, young miss!” A voice called out from before her, Moon coming to a stop as a white-clad figure barring the way came into view. The woman was wearing the symbol of the Aether Foundation, the same symbol as the one upon Moon's Ride Pager, another mystery she still didn't understand. Lana had asked Moon if she'd be willing to trade the pager for another, but that time of offer had never come, leaving Moon unsure what to make of it. She'd chosen not to ask any further. Ideally, she'd want nothing to change. For the Poke Pelago to continue as it was – a little place she could rest and be apart from it all. That was her wish. The Aether Foundation worker approached with hands raised.
“It's dangerous to go ahead,” the woman turned, waving an arm to indicate the way forward, “Team Skull have been sighted in the tunnels causing a ruckus – apparently they've riled up the local Pokemon.” Moon frowned, displeased to hear the name. The woman nodded in agreement.

“You're right,” she read Moon's expression with ease, “they’re terrible – no good pointless thugs who just cause trouble for their own amusement. But it is dangerous for people right now, especially young Trainers. I see you have a Pokemon, but it's still better not to-”

Moon gave her name and watched the woman's expression change. This was the first time she'd done such, used who she was as a weapon. She wasn't some random young Trainer, she was Moon who had six Pokemon and could use Z-Moves without limit. The Aether member looked at her blankly. Moon began to continue on her way.

“Ah, wait!” The woman sounded shaken, surprised to discover the young girl before her was the mysterious Trainer Moon, talk of the entire world. She shook her head. “Even with strong Pokemon, should the wild Pokemon ahead damage any of the tunnels, there is the real possibility of a cave-in or collapse. It really would be better if you waited here until we’re notified that-” Moon asked of Hau, cutting through the words of the one before her. Hau had gone ahead of Moon, and she had yet to catch up with him. Had he been let through? The woman sighed, shoulders sagging. Spoke in a weaker voice. “Of course I told him the same, but I needed to stay stationed here to warn any travellers and he just- please wait!” Moon, who'd begun walking again, looked back, annoyed. She was falling behind. She would not fall behind.

“Look,” the woman took a step forward only to receive a hissing warning from the Eevee upon Moon's shoulder, the Pokemon picking up the feelings of Moon's stress at being held in place. She stopped. “There is danger ahead, please at least be careful. There are other Aether members on the other side of the disturbance, I'll let them know you're coming through so if you don't we'll come looking for you. Just, please be careful, okay?” She looked almost on the verge of tears, unable to stop either of the two headstrong young children who'd brushed by her. Moon at least reassured her she'd be careful.

But she was still going.

And further into the darkness she went.

Further ahead the wild Pokemon of this Diglett's Tunnel did indeed grow more aggressive. Contrary to before wild Diglett now approached Moon directly, looking for a clash. But her Pokemon were all stronger and Moon pushed back each challenger with ease. Scratches and gouges in the path along walls and floor, some purple liquid still spread about – the appearance of poison-based attacks – told Moon the tale. Team Skull had walked this path with their own Pokemon, attacked the area wildly, and kept moving. A level of wanton destruction that only annoyed her further. From the second time she'd ever met Team Skull she'd held a grudge against them. And not once in future meetings had they eased that. Not when crossing her in Verdant Cavern. Not when messing with the Totem in Brooklet Hill. Not when blocking the path to Royal Avenue. As far as Moon was concerned, any encounter with Team Skull was one they needed to be sent packing from as soon as someone could.

Should she cross them she fully intended to be the one to do so.

Yet the rate of progress was the same. As Moon walked forward, through the tunnels, over the canyons, rarely out through light-dappled valleys between the southern mountains, the overhead midday sun beaming down upon her, all she encountered were wild Pokemon incensed. Hau, who'd gone ahead of her, and Team Skull, causing trouble, were nowhere to be found. It was just Pokemon. Some Moon battled. Some she caught. But mostly just silence. One who enjoyed peace and quiet often, Moon found this environment terrible for it. She hoped for something, anything,
Kahuna Olivia had tasked her and Hau to find beauty in this underground region of Alola, but Moon, her head full of thoughts, was having difficulty in doing so. She didn’t enjoy the underground at all, she decided. Would rather just be out on the other side.

Kept on walking ahead.

“Ugh.” The sound of frustration reaching her ears drove Moon's footsteps to increase, approaching the one who'd made the noise. As soon as he came within range Moon slowed, her expression changing to stare coldly at the Team Skull Grunt lying against the tunnel wall. He looked up at the sound of her footfalls, began to stand up, then just gave up and sat back down. Waved her on. “I already got beat,” he looked the other way, not meeting eyes with the young girl who felt so intimidating. “Get going. We were just having some fun I don't see why people gotta take it so seriously.”

Moon walked past, not slowing her pace or looking down at the man. Eevee, on her shoulder, watched him as Moon walked on. Made sure he didn't rise again. He didn't.

It was now that Moon began to witness others. Three more members of Team Skull, each unwilling to fight, each claiming to have been beaten by a young Trainer going on ahead. Feeling no doubt at all that it was Hau who had done such, Moon moved faster still, doing her best to catch up. If Hau was battling people he'd be slowing down. She might be able to catch up to him. And she did. Just in time.

“A two against one?” The voice of the Team Skull member, a girl this time, set Moon racing up slopes and stairs, moving to join the group at the top of the rise she'd come to. “Cocky, ain'tcha?”

“It's been going well so far!” Hau's chipper voice made Moon smile, hearing him talking down to Team Skull as he was, “I think I'll be fine!”

“Yeah well,” as Moon reached the top of the rise she saw the group before her, two Team Skull members staring Hau down, his back to her. The girl, who'd been raising a Pokeball, paused seeing the new Trainer approaching from behind. She huffed. “Are you serious, does anyone else want to get in our way? Anyone?” Hau turned around at the exclamation. A wide grin crossed his face.

“Aue! Moon!” He clapped, Moon smiling at him as she made her way to his side, “I knew you'd catch up!” Moon nodded and instructed her Eevee to jump down from her shoulder, Hau grabbing a Pokeball of his own. Each turned to face the two Team Skull Grunts before them. The girl was staring at Moon.

“Hang on,” she was dressed the same as any of Team Skull's pack, a skull-motif beanie, bandanna over her mouth, silver pendant around neck and black and white clothing besides. Her hair, vibrant pink, made Moon pause. Was that... “hey I know you! You're the one from Brooklet Hill!”

Moon nodded. She knew this Team Skull member too. She and another – not the one she was with now, his body shape was different – had caused trouble for the Totem and soaked the entire place, her included, with water. The girl laughed. “Yep,” throwing the Pokeball she was holding up and then catching it again, she held it forward, “that was great. Alright! I'm into this! Let's go!”

With a delightful whoop she released the Pokemon within the ball, the red light containing it resolving into a small shape on the ground before her. The Pokemon clicked aggressively at the pair in front of it. The other Team Skull member slapped a palm against his face.
“Riley come on!” She turned to his exclamation with an annoyed look, staring him down as he stared her back. “Are you serious? Come on!”

“You got a problem?” She snapped back loudly, Hau tapping Moon on the shoulder and raising his own Pokeball with a nod, one she answered with her own. “You gonna complain? Gonna go tell the boss about how you think my super cool Bug Pokemon sucks and I shouldn't be using it? You think he's gonna like hearing that outta you? Huh? She needs training, yo, this is a good chance! They're just kids!”

A flash of red light from the green coloured Friend Ball Hau used released his Wimpod to face down its opponent, clicking sounds coming from each of the Bug Pokemon now escalating. Riley turned back from her argument to stare at the pair of Wimpod now before her. Looked up at Hau with wide eyes.

“That some kinda joke?” She took a step forward, menace in her tone, “making fun of me? Think you've got what it takes to beat me with the exact same Pokemon? I had to go out of my way and nearly get blown out into the ocean to catch that girl, she's not gonna lose to your jerk no way no how!”

“I had to work hard too y'know!” Hau's tone was still relaxed and friendly, “And he needs to get stronger too! So let's see who's done better so far!”

“Tch,” with a jerk of her head Riley settled into a battle-ready state. “Alright then Wimpod! Go get em!”

“Right back at ya! Don't back down Wimpod!”

The two Bug Pokemon wasted no more time, following their Trainers' orders and rapidly scuttling towards each other. The grand pile-up of the two butting heads, beginning to scramble up one another as their legs grabbed purchase, and then falling over and starting to roll around as they sought dominance over the struggle, was made all the more thrilling by Hau and Riley's non-stop commands and encouragements. The two bug pile was truly the ultimate battle. Incredible.

The other Team Skull member rolled his eyes.

“Alright,” stepping away from Riley's Super-Hype Bug Battle (tm), he waved for Moon's attention, “let's have an actual Pokemon Battle that means something while those idiots do their thing.” Moon frowned deeply, displeased to hear Hau called such. The Team Skull member didn't care. “He called you Moon, yeah?” She paused, steps now still. He caught her stopping. “Yeah, you're that super broken Trainer then, whatever.” A Pokeball in hand, he opened it to reveal a Salandit, Moon commanding her Eevee to go forward. The man, a teen only a few years older than Moon, really, sighed and shrugged. “Just cause you've got some crazy superpower don't go looking down on us, aight? Team Skull ain't pushovers! Go and act all high and mighty but try and stop us and you'll see what—” cutting through his speech, Moon completed the Z-Pose for the Normalium-Z. A blur of movement that was her Eevee streaked across the tunnel and slammed into the Toxic Lizard Pokemon. Thrown by the incredible force it hit a wall and slumped down it. Moon lowered her arms.

In the silence, Riley and Hau's encouragement for their respective Wimpods echoed out. The Team Skull Grunt made a noise best described as choked. Moon stared him down.

“Hey...” he raised a hand, before letting it fall limply again, “that was a bit much, wasn't it?” Moon turned away from him and walked back over to watch Hau.

The two Wimpod were continuing to roll over one another, a battle which the intensity of was only
matched by the ridiculously low stakes. Really it was difficult to tell there was even a fight at all, it was just the two Wimpod refusing to let one another go. For how tame the fight appeared, Hau and Riley were continuing to be as psyched up about it as they could be, cheering and supporting their Pokemon with unending passion. Moon got the feeling the real battle was between the two Trainers instead of their Pokemon.

But eventually it came to an end, the two Bug Pokemon breaking apart and one slinking off while the other clicked victoriously. Riley, with a dagger stare at Hau, bent down and picked her Turn Tail Pokemon up. “Don't think this is over!” She pointed at Hau with a determined expression, “There'll be a rematch! You'll get yours! Don't forget! Riley from Team Skull's gonna getcha! I'm gonna!”

“Ohay!” Hau waved as Riley grabbed the very dejected other Team Skull member and dragged him off down the path Moon and Hau had climbed, “I'm looking forward to it! See you then!” Moon smiled at Hau as he lowered his arm again, the two Team Skull members gone. That had been enjoyable. Gotten some of the stress out. Hau grinned back at her. Palm met palm and then each shook their hand from the impact again, the pain of the intense high-five as much a part of the ritual as the high-five itself. But they laughed and were happy with it. Hau pointed forward.

“Ohay Moon!” She nodded as he took the lead, “To Konikoni City!”

Not ten minutes beyond the battle-site with the Team Skull Grunts, two members of the Aether Foundation jumped to see Moon and Hau approaching. Quickly ran up to them to make sure everything was okay, relieved as could be to hear Team Skull had all been beaten and were slinking off again. One of the two looked at Moon.

“I was told the two of you were coming through,” she tilted her head, a curious expression one Moon didn't find herself enjoying. “Team Skull aren't nearly as tough as they pretend to be, but being able to battle them is still really admirable. The two of you, you really are all that, huh?” Moon gave no answer, Hau intercepting to say that as long as people and Pokemon work together, Team Skull couldn't do a thing. The Aether members chuckled at his declaration, then waved the two on. They'd head through the tunnels now to make sure everything was okay.

As Moon and Hau walked away, the echoing voices of the two adults carried Moon's name to their ears time and time again.

From mid-morning to mid-afternoon, the venture through the Diglett's Tunnel had taken the two youths the hottest hours of the day. Yet the caves they'd travelled through were cool enough that even emerging into the afternoon light they still immediately felt it. Hau wiped a brow. “Hoo-ee,” he loudly announced the heat, staring down the path from the tunnel's exit, the city of Konikoni arrayed below them, “it's a hot one, huh Moon?”

Moon, Kanto born and raised, was used to far less intense warmth and humidity than this. She wiped her brow far more genuinely than Hau had. He waved a hand to blow a cool breeze against her face. Moon leaned into it with eyes closed and a smile. “Stay strong, Moon, just a little further to go!” She nodded and followed after, every now and again the two taking a breeze break to wave hands at one another and create a little gust of wind. And down from the path, down from the high mountains of Akala's south they'd travelled through, the two Island Challengers entered the southern-most residence of Akala.

Konikoni, City of Sea Breezes.

Konikoni was a long city, curving around the south-western coast of Akala's southern stretch, claiming every inch of sea-level terrain it could. As soon as one was beyond the boundaries of the city the land began to rise, quickly spiralling up into hills and mountains that afforded so much less
room to live. The coastal road that looped around this southern region, built against the cliffs and over the sea, served as one of two main lines of connection between Konikoni and the rest of Akala, the other being by sea. In comparison to the road journey, a quick boat ride between the northern docks of Konikoni and western docks of Heahea was by far the fastest way to get around. Because of that, in Konikoni it was far more likely for a resident to own a boat than a car, the signature main road running through the city instead densely populated with people, housing, and shops. A great red paifang built across the entrance of the city served as its gate and greeted Hau and Moon as they approached it.

Standing just beyond that entrance, Kahuna Olivia waited with a smile.

“Allow me to be the one to welcome you both to Konikoni City!” Olivia didn't miss for a second the state of Hau and Moon, each clearly burned down by their journey. While Hau was a natural font of energy, and Moon had never even once displayed effects from maintaining her many Pokemon, each of these two children still reached exhaustion points after a solid day's travel. Olivia waved them to follow her.

“The Pokemon Center is just ahead – you'll be able to clean up there, and the restaurant owned by Mallow's family is nearby – a great place to eat. Let's get the two of you some rest and relaxation, shall we?” Each of the children were immediately agreeable to that proposal. Olivia led them along.

“For as often as I'm required to travel all over Akala, and at times Alola as well, Konikoni City will always be where my heart remains. This city is a beautiful and welcoming place, and I hope that for the time you spend here, you're each able to appreciate it.” Looking back, Olivia saw the two following but only half-listening. They looked tired. She smiled. It was cute.

Being Island Challengers, Moon and Hau had no problem claiming rooms at the Pokemon Center of Konikoni, taking a while to relax and change clothes after their walk. While Hau's look remained mostly the same – the only real difference being that the shirt he was wearing now was Masked Royal branded, clearly purchased at the Battle Royal – Moon had switched from the green blouse she'd been wearing to the sea-blue shirt she'd had when first meeting Olivia on the docks of Heahea, a mere nineteen days before. That span of time, to complete Akala's three Trials within it... it was now thinking of it that Olivia was truly hit by the gifts Moon and Hau possessed. Their Pokemon had grown at exceptional speed, and the two young Trainers had maintained calm, focus, and ability to command those Pokemon in harsher and harsher battling environments. Their growth rates were, truly, absurd.

Once more Olivia reinforced her awareness that the tests she would level against them in their Grand Trials must be the best possible choices to help them continue on.

“Hungry?” Both children nodded quickly in response to Olivia's question, clearly in need of a good meal after their journey. With a smile Olivia led them on from the Pokemon Center, Aina's Kitchen awaiting. “I'm sure Captain Mallow would have wanted to cook for you in her home herself, but she's been busy. With the Pokemon League upcoming, many Trainers have been redoubling their efforts to pass the Island Challenge. All of the Captains have been busier and busier of late.” Moon and Hau nodded, following Olivia along the main road of Konikoni. “Still,” ever smiling, Olivia indicated the restaurant ahead, “she's not the only cook in her family – and they're all the type to love to share their work. Go ahead.” Waved on, the two youths moved to the door. Olivia smiled as she watched them go. Then followed a moment after.

“Hey there you two! Good work making it here, yeah! Come on, we've already ordered!”

The voice of Professor Kukui drew Moon and Hau's eyes as soon as they were in the restaurant, seeing him seated with Kahili and Lillie at a table within. Both immediately moved to join the others.
Lillie happily greeted them both.

“T’m sure you're hungry,” she looked up to see a member of the staff approaching with the first plates of food, timed for the arrival of the two Island Challengers, “it's been a busy day.” The nod of answer from each only lasted as long as it took them to get started on their food, Lillie smiling to see the two digging in. They were so similar like this. Energetic, always moving forward. She enjoyed that so much. Just being around them, the world felt more alive to her. Like there were people in it that she could be happy with. It was times like this that she knew she'd made the right choices to have been brought to this point. She was sure of it.

Kukui smiled seeing Lillie's own, before turning his attention upon other thoughts. Curious eyes had remained on him and Kahili since their arrival in Konikoni earlier that day, both of them well-known individuals – Kukui being the region's head Pokemon Professor, and Kahili one of Alola's favourite Pokemon Trainers. Here, in this restaurant, those who'd kept a passive eye on them, interested in what they'd do, noted the two children to join them. Two dark-skinned youths, the boy with a crop of black hair stuck up at the back just so, the girl with two caramel blonde braids hanging to her shoulders. Appearance-wise, Moon only somewhat resembled the girl from the Grand Trial video, but the company she was keeping was more than enough to allow most to make a quick realisation. Ah. So that was Moon.

Spotting those looks being given to the group, nudging Kahili and pointing them out to her so the pair could stare back at those curious until they looked away, was the first thing to occur to Kukui, Moon and Hau too busy with their food to notice at all, but soon enough it faded to something else entirely. Looking back down at Moon happily eating, Kukui thought of what he'd seen just that very morning. He still didn't know what to make of it.

A black Mental Pattern. What did it mean? Neither he, his wife Burnet, nor professor Juniper could tell. Mental Patterns were black on white, a series of lines and shapes that meant nothing except in the context of other Mental Patterns, but even still it felt significant. It wasn't like you could point at a certain line in a Mental Pattern and say “ah this tells us this about this person”, nothing like that was the case for them. They truly had no real meaning beyond being compared to others. But even still. For the scan of Moon to be such – what did it mean? Was the way she thought so different? The inside of her mind alien to anyone else? Kukui didn't think so, she acted far too much like a normal child – though admittedly a particularly quiet child shouldering quite the weight. He regretted his knee-jerk reaction, trying to convince Moon the scan simply hadn't worked. He'd felt like knowing her Pattern would only further push upon her feelings of otherness, but just saying the scan didn't work on her would do enough of that on its own. It had been a bad choice. He'd apologise, but at this point telling her he was trying to help her feel less strange would only make that worse too. He didn't know.

He seriously felt in over his head.

When the two children finally took a break from eating, the first dishes provided cleared, Kukui looked up to Kahuna Olivia, who'd quietly joined them at the table, giving the young ones time to focus on their food. “So it's your Grand Trial next, yeah?” Moon and Hau both looked up at Kukui, then over to Olivia, seeing her sitting nearby. She nodded in response.

“I am prepared to perform the Grand Trial once they are ready – all they need do is travel to the Ruins of Life to meet me there. Although, if possible I'd rather not face both in the same day.”

“I get that!” Kukui laughed as he said it, “they're each always going full force, I think they'd wear anyone out! And you want to be at your best for each, right?” Olivia nodded at that too. She did. Hau turned to Moon.
“Hey Moon,” raising a hand with a smile, he waited for her to do the same, “want to see which of us is going first?”

Moon paused on that, looking at Hau's hand, thinking deep. The Pokemon with her, she always felt like she was a step behind Hau in their strength. He'd be giving everything he had to the Grand Trial. She needed to be ready to do so too. A little more time to train then. She shook her head. He could go first. She'd go second. Hau looked at her in confusion for a time after her saying that. Then back to the Kahuna and Professor. Olivia nodded once more.

“Then Hau, if you would like to do your Grand Trial tomorrow, let me know and I will travel to the Ruins of Life to meet you there.”

“Right,” Hau glanced back at Moon, who reassured him, “then tomorrow!”

More food served. More silence for a time. Then Lillie spoke, eyes upon the Kahuna. Olivia looked back in interest.

“Umm, Kahuna Olivia,” Moon spoke the least of the trio, but Lillie was the quietest in addressing others, Olivia noted, “I was hoping to visit the Ruins of Life myself. So that Ne... so that Nebby can see them. Is that okay?”

“Hmm,” Olivia considered, looking over Lillie, “it's fine as long as you stick close to me, but you shouldn't be wandering around the Ruins on your own. And I'll be in one place looking after Hau and Moon when they're there.”

“Oh...” Lillie looked down for a moment, before looking back to Kukui. “Professor, do you think you-”

“Sorry Lillie,” Kukui hated to turn her down, but was forced to all the same, “Kahili and I have some meetings over the next few days, before we head on to Ula'ula Island. If you'd like though,” seeing her face fall, Kukui thought fast, “I could ask my wife if she'd be able to come by and take you out there. Would that be fine?” He asked that to Olivia as much as to Lillie. Olivia nodded.

“I know Burnet can handle herself, so if she's looking after Lillie that will be fine.” Lillie, thrilled to hear this, nodded with a smile.

“I understand!” She seemed very pleased to know Professor Burnet would be guiding her. Kukui appreciated that. He didn't know a whole lot about Lillie, really, but he hadn't missed at all how closely she'd bonded to his wife. It was nice.

He appreciated it.

In the wake of their meal the group were free to do as they wished within Konikoni, Olivia heading back to her own home. She'd need to check out her Evolutionary Stone stocks, and set some aside for Hau and Moon. One for Hau's Pikachu, and three each for both children's Eevees, should they wish to evolve them that way. Kukui and Kahili, who were ready to put the finishing touches on their presentation for the Alola Culture Council, set up in the Pokemon Center to work on that. Thus left to their own devices, Moon, Hau, and Lillie set to wander.

Each had their own thoughts and challenges they struggled with – for Moon her ability which turned the eyes of the world upon her; for Hau the upcoming Ula'ula Island, and the warnings he'd been given that he'd be unable to maintain his pace; and for Lillie her attempts to care for Nebby, and help find the Cosmog's way home. But together, as a trio, it was so easy to forget those worries. To just enjoy the presence of one another and relax.
And so they did and the day turned to night and the sea breeze of Konikoni cooled the city under the moon's light. The night passed. The sun rose. And the seventh week of Moon and Hau's Island Challenge began.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a long while to write, but not so much for the content as it's just been a real Capital T Time in my life lately. I think things are going to calm down a bit now, which is good, because I'm really excited about what's coming up. The final acts of the Arcala have some real tasty stuff in them. Please look forward to that.

That said there definitely were some challenges in this chapter. Pacing haunts me as I have to handle what's coming forward, but I've got a good idea on that so I feel confident with what I'll be writing next. Further looks into Moon's state of mind, and the way she's changing as the story goes on, challenge me still - defining a blank slate character into someone consistent with what I've shown of her so far. There's a lot to her, and a lot more to go, but for now it's visible to see a fair few differences from the start of this story to now. That's character development baby! Hopefully the good and enjoyable stuff.

Riley's here again - you might remember her from her brief appearance during Moon's Water Trial. There's a rare few non-canon characters I've needed in this story, and she's one of them. She's a regular team skull member, kind of a dummy, but has a lot of heart. Just maybe not in the right place. She's doing her best by her own metrics though. Please support her.

Not too much to say about this chapter, but it's set up plenty more and helped keep the character development and interaction going. The next few chapters are going to be spicy ones though, so I hope you're excited for them. Thanks for reading, and if you enjoyed, tell a friend! Being able to share my work with more and more people is the dream, and that's something all of you can help with! Working together, we can bring Eldritch to everyone who'd want to see it! Wouldn't that be great?

Okay, that's it for me this time. I'll see you next time with the next chapter, hopefully a little sooner than it took to write this one. Til then, buhbye!
Sina and Dexio appeared a few hours after Moon and Hau's arrival in Konikoni, having found their own way to the City of Sea Breezes. In spite of their priority goal in being in Alola at the moment – observing absolutely every last record and sense-breaking thing the young girl known as Moon was up to – the person they sought out first was in fact Professor Kukui. Dexio took the lead.

“So hey,” he was playing with his sunglasses – bought at the first souvenir shop he'd found as soon as they'd landed in Alola – flipping the pair open and closed as he and Sina menaced over Kukui. Or tried to, at least – Kukui was taller than them both and built like he could pick each up and pitch them over the roof of the nearest building with ease. Seriously, dude looked like he wrestled Machamp for fun. Like he could crack walnuts with his pecs. Like... Sina elbowed Dexio hard to get him speaking again. He wasn't sure how long he'd been distracted. He coughed. “You checked their Mental Patterns, right?”

“Kahili was right about you two,” Kukui frowned, suspicious that the Kalosian researchers had waited for him to take a break from working with Kahili and step outside the Pokemon Center, rather than enter and catch her ire themselves. During the dinner last night he'd observed they tended to back down as soon as Kahili turned an eye upon them, and though Kukui had only seen the bare edges of the Flying-type Expert's frustration when attempting to mollify particularly ornery Alolan residents regarding the planned Pokemon League, just that alone told him she was a most fearful sight when enraged. It seemed like these two knew that well. “You really do hear everything around you.”

“It's part of the job,” Sina made a show of pretending to be flattered. Dexio didn't drop the point.

“So?”

Kukui shook his head.

“That's not my place to tell you.” The rejection did nothing to slow the pace of the two, who only seemed to grow more interested. “I know Professor Sycamore wanted you to help—” even saying help was Kukui doing the pair a kindness, 'investigate' and 'meddle' far better describing their actions, “but I'm not about to start gossiping about everything to do with them. They're still kids, yeah?”

“Being kids doesn't stop them from being completely beyond the norm,” Sina answered back quick, not about to drop the point. “Even discounting what's going on with Moon, Hau's Mental Pattern is important too, y'know! He's way way waaaaaay in the top bracket of Trainers for his age. Anyone guiding him should know if he has any biases. And you've gotta be guiding them, right? You can't just let those two be going on their own. Right? Right?”

Kukui glanced uncomfortably away from the pair inching closer and closer towards him. Spending the amount of time he had working on organising the upcoming Pokemon League, as well as assuaging the worries of Alola's more tradition-focused populace that the League would do no harm to the region's culture, meant he'd only been keeping an eye on Hau and Moon from a distance. The Captains and Kahuna were working to guide them along, but none of them were spending full time with the two. Most young Trainers would be fine in this way, but Moon and Hau were exceptional. Someone should be watching over them and helping them grow, making sure their abilities didn't bring them stress or worry. Which no-one was right now. Dexio and Sina seemed to sense that
immediately.

Dexio whirled and sprinted away.

“Hey Hau!” The trio of children – Hau, Moon, and Lillie – were gathered near to the Pokemon Center of Konikoni, spending time together while still staying close to Kukui and Kahili. Each looked up and seemed concerned to see Dexio running at them at full speed, the brown-haired man pulling to a stop just moments before crashing into them. Hau looked at him with a questioning expression in response to being addressed. Dexio flicked his hand as a wave. “Do you know your Type Bias?”

The reaction of the three continued to be rather blank looks, the older man's approach and question both startlingly direct. Hau bounced back quick though, glancing from Moon to Dexio as Dexio nodded back to him. He answered. “It's Psychic-type!”

Little could have brought a wider smile to Dexio's face, the man immediately whirling around and cupping his hands over his mouth to yell out to his partner. “Sina!” Her voice, projected through her own cupped hands from the few dozen metres she was away from him, answered back in a similar yell.

“What?”

“He’s got a Psychic-bias!”

“Heck yeah!”

Kukui, with control lost – or rather never had – over the pair, watched blankly as Sina raced over to join Dexio with the kids. Then, as the moment of realisation that he had to be the one to reel them in hit him, followed after as the two researchers excitedly addressed Hau.

“We've got Psychic-biases too!” Dexio pointed a thumb at himself, while Sina gave a thumbs up with one arm, the other leaning on her partner's shoulder. “It's a really powerful Pokemon-type, which a lot of people tend to forget compared to the flashier Dragon. But, but, did you know—” halfway through his exciting declaration Dexio found himself interrupted by Sina slapping a hand over his mouth so she could tell it instead.

“Psychic is the most common type amongst all known Legendary and Mythical Pokemon!”

And immediately Sina had made her catch. For the youth of the world, and indeed Trainers long past such young ages, stories of Legendary and Mythical Pokemon captured hearts and minds. Imaginations locked upon the possibility of becoming one of the historic figures to form a Bond with such – the once in a generation or rarer event when such a Pokemon made itself manifest. Just hearing the word 'Legendary' had Hau and Moon's attention on her. Lillie seemed interested too, but in a more detached manner. Well, she wasn't harbouring those dreams anyway. Sina focused on Hau.

“There's actually a lot of really cool research all over the world about the Psychic-type, and its relation to the Dragon-type – since they're both very powerful and common Legendary typings. Not to mention both are known to be significant regarding Trainers biased to them – since most people without a Dragon-bias can't support a single Dragon-type Pokemon, and most people with a Psychic-bias develop way better senses for Trainers than those without!”

Moon and Hau were both nodding rapidly, completely transfixed. Sina and Dexio were masters of spinning a story, and the two told just enough while leaving more on the hook to have the two young
Trainers eager to hear their every word. Dexio, finally pulling Sina's hand off of his mouth – she waved it a little and stuck her tongue out at him – looked to Moon. “Speaking of,” Moon immediately knew what he was asking, and moved to cut him off before he could ask it, “would your bias be-” she didn't have one. Dexio and Sina went silent. Moon looked away.

They hadn't been able to determine her Mental Pattern.

Lillie and Hau, both still watching Dexio and Sina, saw them glance at one another with an expression that didn't mean much to them. Probably meant the world to each other though. Dexio and Sina looked back.

“Well that's not too bad,” attempting to walk back his interest, Dexio continued speaking. “Type-biases are mostly only cool because leaning into them lets you better handle a larger number of Pokemon, but since you don't have any limits anyway it wouldn't really matter what your bias was. Maybe you're just all-biased.” Moments after saying that the two went silent again, considering whether that might actually be true. Then realised they were having an internal conversation while the three youths before them were growing antsy. Both turned back to face Hau.

“So hey, Hau,” Sina took over in speaking to the young boy, “like Dexio said, he and I both have Psychic-type biases. So we know a lot about Psychic Pokemon, and can give you loads of advice about raising them! You've got an Eevee, right? If you evolve it to Espeon, that's one.”

“And a Pikachu!” Realising in a flash, Dexio smiled wide. “Pikachu evolve into Alolan Raichu in Alola, which are Electric and Psychic-type! Ahhh that's so cool, I need to catch a Pikachu. Sina, let's go find a Pikachu in Alola!”

“Alright, alright,” Sina nodded, as interested in the Alolan Raichu as her partner, but better able to reel herself in for the moment, “but hey, Hau, having Psychic-type Pokemon will make things easier, but don't feel like you only need to have them. I only have one and I'm doing fine!” With a grand motion Sina flexed an arm, showing absolutely no muscle behind it. Dexio bit back laughing at her because she had and would continue to elbow him for being rude. Instead he focused on another aspect he could tease.

“She says that but it's not like she's keeping a wide variety of types,” Sina pouted, Hau laughing slightly awkwardly at the exchange, Moon and Lillie staying silent. Kukui chose this as his moment to intervene.

“Alright,” in comparison to Dexio and Sina failing to menace him earlier, when Kukui stood behind them, the evening sun pushing his shadow over their shoulders, both of the Kalosian researchers went still. “Moon and Hau need to rest, since Moon's going to be training and Hau has his Grand Trial tomorrow. Let's give them some freedom for tonight, yeah?” The quick nods of Sina and Dexio's heads told Kukui he'd convinced them. He wasn't really good at being intimidating or forceful, but at the least he was able to appear so. Maybe. The two were backing off at least. He focused in on the kids.

“Don't forget to let me know if I can help,” he made sure to address Moon and Hau when saying this. Despite being a general presence in their Island Challenge, Kukui was only now realising he really hadn't done much for them at all. He should be more responsible. “There are people all over Alola who'll lend a hand to those in need, me included, okay?” The two youths nodded, and that was good enough. Kukui gave a final look to Dexio and Sina, who quickly agreed that they should go find some food for tonight and maybe somewhere to stay, before he returned to the Pokemon Center.
to continue preparing the Culture Council presentation. Just a scant week away. Oh he was nervous.

And the night passed for them all, just like that.

Hau and Moon awoke the next morning to a message from Kahuna Olivia left with the Pokemon Center nurse, informing Hau that Olivia would be waiting at the Ruins of Life beyond Memorial Hill, deep in the mountains that spanned the southern reaches of Akala. She was looking forward to his challenge. Hau looked nervous after hearing that. Moon reassured him.

She intended to go out that way too, to train in the fields beyond Konikoni City. The offer to go with Hau, for a little way at least, was appreciated but turned down. He needed to make it there all on his own. Moon got that. So she and Lillie saw him off and spent some time together before Moon herself moved out for the day.

A busy day's training ahead.

“Do you think a day will be enough?”

Lillie's question, asked as she and Moon sat together in the Pokemon Center, having just seen Hau leave, left Moon thinking. She'd changed her Pokemon a little – her interest in raising the Feebas she'd caught balanced by the knowledge it wasn't ready for a Grand Trial. The Wishiwashi, which had taken part in Kiawe's Fire Trial, would do far better. Moon felt strongly that her Dartrix, Bagon, and Eevee were all ready for the fight. Less so about her Flaaffy, Wishiwashi, and Larvesta. Though each had fought one of the three Totems of Akala, there was still a difference between the Totems and a Grand Trial. Her battle with Hala still stuck with Moon. She was sure Olivia would be equally if not more intense.

“She seems so nice,” Lillie considered that, “I wonder what she's like when she's battling... it's hard to imagine.” Was it? Moon looked at Lillie strangely. Lillie shook her head in response. “Trainers always seem so intense, almost intimidating, when battling.” Moon seemed shocked to hear that. Looked down, then back up at Lillie. Was she as well? Lillie thought.

She had only truly seen Moon battle all-out once, during Moon's Grand Trial on Melemele Island. In that time, watching as Moon commanded her Pokemon with absolute focus, watching her shine as she performed her Z-Moves, had Moon been intimidating? Yes, Lillie nodded. Moon looked distressed to hear that. Lillie shook her head.

“I think you have to be – that you can't battle without holding back without being a little scary too.” Moon still seemed upset. Lillie cast her thoughts looking for something else to say. Anything. “And even if it was scary... it was beautiful too.” It had been. The sight of Moon, standing firm, commanding her Pokemon with relentless will, it had been striking. Lillie still remembered it. Wondered if she could ever be the same. Maybe not. But it was nice to think about. Moon stood up and moved for the door.

“Oh, Moon-” she needed to train, to prepare for her Grand Trial tomorrow. Oh, Lillie understood. Nodded. Felt slightly awkward watching Moon leave so hastily. But did her best to smile all the same. “Well, good luck! I'll see you when you get back!” With her reassurances given, Lillie watched as Moon took her leave. Professor Burnet had replied that she'd be free tomorrow as well, and so Lillie would be able to take Nebby to the Ruins of Life then. Who knows, maybe she'd be able to see Moon's second Grand Trial too. She hugged the bag she carried closer, feeling the Nebula Pokemon within respond. Yes. She'd like that indeed.
And Moon, stepping out into the morning sun, walked on with light step and a smile, heading for Memorial Hill to train.

Beautiful...

In comparison to the cemetery built in the shadow of the mountains to the north-west of Melemele's Hau'oli City, Akala's Memorial Hill was a far larger affair. From Konikoni City's southern exit the walking path split, one way continuing along the road looping around the island's south-eastern cliffs, the other beginning to climb the hills and mountains that dominated Akala's south. Rough and uneven terrain, there was little human presence throughout it, mostly rolling fields of trees and grass capping each successive rise. Far in the north-east of this locale, this self-contained block of Akala, the Ruins of Life, home to Tapu Lele, awaited. A place Moon knew nothing of, beyond that the Tapu of this island could be found there. Tapu Lele had seemingly shown far less interest in Moon than Tapu Koko had, given she still had yet to meet the Island Deity. She found herself quite relieved by that.

The memories of Tapu Koko's appearance during her Trial in Verdant Cavern still raised the hairs on the back of Moon's neck. Those Pokemon were simply too much to be close to. That was what she decided.

And those were the thoughts she mulled over as she too climbed the path so many of Alola's Trainers had, the rising, winding way to the entrance of Memorial Hill.

An ancient burial site spread over the mountains of Akala's south, Memorial Hill was, as all burial places tended to be, a haven for Ghost-type Pokemon. Barely had Moon reached the gates that marked entrance to the site, stepped within and felt a slight chill in the air despite the exertion she'd given in the climb, before the Pokemon began to fall upon her. Pushing and prodding, teasing and cajoling, they took delight not only in frustrating but in being fought back after doing so. Moon rotated through her Pokemon, focusing on the three weaker – Flaaffy, Wishiwashi, and Larvesta – ensuring they could carry her will. Respond to her commands quickly enough that she felt confident imagining herself facing down the Kahuna.

In one day, if she were to keep up with Hau – Hau who she was convinced would pass his Grand Trial with flying colours – she must reach a level capable of defeating Olivia. It was a tall order, and Moon felt it heavy upon her shoulders as she set to wander, walking the sloping and rising paths from site to site across the stretching territory of Memorial Hill, poorly named for the number of peaks it spanned. In this stretch of time she had to encounter as many Pokemon, and people, as she could, and battle and best them all. This area was a challenging ground for Akala's Trainers, much as the northern span of Melemele had been, and those Moon met with were all amenable to battle.

She took to them with wild determination.

Quickly she was recognised. Though she did not use Z-Moves, aware that using them without care would only exhaust her Pokemon, not give her or her team the experience they needed, still Moon rotated Pokemon fast enough for people to go from impressed, to shocked, to understanding. So she was Moon. Training for her Grand Trial? How admirable. Many left it at that, the words of the Masked Royal having circulated Alola and brought many to realise their interest in this mysterious young Trainer was a harmful one indeed. But some Trainers did not. Insisted upon following her, peppering her with questions, determined to figure out just what she could do.

Moon's Pokemon answered her distress at being pursued every single time.
Pokemon and their Trainers are linked, connected by the Bonds between them. Those Bonds carry energy, given from Trainers to empower their Pokemon, but not just that energy alone. Thoughts, which enabled those Pokemon to follow their Trainer's commands far faster than could be believed. Feelings, bringing Trainer and Pokemon onto the same wavelength, helping them work together best. Intent, the will and sometimes hidden wants of a Trainer, expressed by Pokemon who far quicker obeyed such desires than their human partners would.

Each and every last time someone spent too long in her presence, Moon's equal frustration and fear at being followed and overwhelmed peaking, her Pokemon lashed out. Dartix flew overhead and pecked at those too curious. Bagon growled and Eevee hissed at anyone coming too close. Flaaffy puffed up with electricity, Wisp made a show of its great size – the two positioned between Moon and any source of her concern – and Larvesta simply stared with piercing blue eyes full of menace. Anyone, and everyone, who pushed Moon too far quickly received the instruction to step away.

The pressure upon her had allowed Moon's emotions to boil, and her Pokemon to share the heat that burned her. She was strong, everyone knew that. But those who'd pushed too far, received that warning to leave her be, they knew something else. She was dangerous.

Alas that their concerns were hidden by their shame at needing to be chased away, and not one ever carried those words to the ears of someone who could help, Captain, Kahuna, or Professor. Alas.

Moon continued on.

“What are you doing you fool?”

A voice Moon did not know, something sharp and nasally, reached her ears and drew her attention as she stepped out from the tree-line she'd been wandering through, having taken a break from the busier path. A group of figures were just beyond, two in white, two in black. Moon recognised each, Aether and Skull, in an instant. Quickly moved to interrupt the clash.

“I thought you had completed all of Alola's Trials? Can you not defeat a simple pair of thugs?”

“I told you I don’t have those Pokemon any more, the ones with me are for rehabilitation! I keep telling you that!”

“Pardon me?”

“... I keep telling you that, Branch Chief.”

“That’s better.”

The two Aether members were arguing, much to the entertainment of the pair of Team Skull Grunts before them. While one of the Aether members had an outfit like most of those Moon had encountered, a white suit covered in pouches, the other was wearing a more decorated coat, lime green wrappings around his wrists and upper arms, as well as creeping out around his neck. The pale skin of his face, light blonde hair covering head and chin, showed he’d spent little time under Alola's sun. A pair of excessively sized green-tinted glasses rested over his face. Moon glanced at them as she stepped between the pair of pairs.

“Oh?” The more decorated member of the Aether Foundation glanced at Moon, recognition she didn't see flashing in his eyes. “Well, here is an able-bodied Trainer, surely she will be more able to rout these thugs than you were, Jace.”

Recognition hit Moon immediately, the name one she had heard before. Jace, a figure of relatively
tall build, tan skin, and sun-dappled cowlicked brown hair, saw her look at him. He knew who she was too. Prepared to greet her. “Hello, M.”

“Now now!” The loud voice of the other Aether Member, clapping his hands, cut off Jace's words, “we will have all the time for introductions later. Young Trainer, would you do we fine members of the Aether Foundation a kindness and dispose of these Team Skull thugs? Your assistance would not only be greatly appreciated but, ah! Yes! Rewarded! You will do it, will you not?”

Moon turned from Jace and looked back at the other man, who was rubbing his hands eagerly together with a wide grin. It wasn't a reassuring gesture, nor was he a reassuring figure, but it didn't take Moon much to turn her ire upon Team Skull. After having spent the past few minutes amongst a wooded grove to avoid people too interested in knowing who she was, she had some pent-up energy to burn. She nodded and turned to face them. One of the two snorted loudly.

“Yo yo yo,” moving his hands as he spoke, swaying from side to side, he glanced from the two Aether members to the young girl before him, “is this for real? All you think we're worth? Sending a kid at us and thinking that's good? We're hard as bone, yo, we don't crack under the pressure. We were just gonna give you some grief but if you're giving guff we're gonna get tough! Right bro?” Jerking his head, he looked at the compatriot standing behind him. The other Team Skull member whose eyes hadn't left Moon since she'd arrived. His face was pale. The Grunt in the lead paused. “Uh, bro? You okay? You don't look so good.”

“M-m-m-m-” a stammering sound that failed to form a full name stumbled out of his mouth, Moon's eyes now staring back at him. By the way Team Skull dressed it was difficult to tell them apart, but she was sure this was one of the ones she'd crossed more than once before. They still hadn't paid properly for insulting her. She clicked a Pokeball and manifested her Wishiwashi, the Pokemon's schooling form created not by the presence of other Small Fry Pokemon but instead by its own natural power. The towering gigantic fish menaced over the Team Skull pair, the one who didn't recognise Moon turning back from his friend as a shadow fell across him. Then looked up.

“Uhhh...”

“Now that,” the higher ranked Aether member raised a hand to cover his mouth, projecting his voice to Jace alone, “is a fine specimen.” Jace didn't say anything back.

“Yo,” scrambling to pull a Pokeball from his pocket, the Team Skull Grunt who wasn't paralytic was still staring wide-eyed at the giant Pokemon above him. The heck was that yo? This kid wasn't playing? Okay, well, he didn't play either. Except play hard! Bone hard! “Okay then, yeah, okay, go Raticate!” And from a jet of red light the Alolan Mouse Pokemon, with fur of black and brown in contrast to the variants Moon knew from Kanto, appeared. Looked up as well. Big opponent. But it didn't back down.

Leaped into the Wishiwashi with reckless abandon. Jace averted his eyes.

Wishiwashi, the once-Trainer now Aether Foundation member knew, were difficult to attack. The water binding their schooling form together needed to be disrupted, but just jumping into its grip was dangerous. The Team Skull Grunt had clearly known nothing of that. Cheered as his Raticate disappeared right into the Pokemon, believing it would burst through it. Moon raised her arms, a blue crystal set within the white ring she wore glittering. And performed the pose.

It was a compact Z-Move, contained within the form of the Wishiwashi she was partnered to. The water that made up the Pokemon constricted, then swirled faster and faster, power flowing through it, light glowing deep within the Small Fry school. Inside of its body rushing water raced this way and that, buffeting its prey, slamming it again and again from every direction. Not a drop fell from the
Pokemon's body. No power outside of its shape was expressed. But when the water slowed, when it relaxed and grew again in size, just a little, the Raticate dropped out of it and hit the ground with a wet thud.

And didn't move again.

“Ah... uhm... h-hey...” only slightly less stammering than the Team Skull member Moon had encountered before, the one who'd sent out the Raticate quickly ran to it, checking it over and pushing its chest, expelling a cough of water from it, before returning it to his Pokeball. That had been violent, yo! Way too much! What was the deal with-

“Moon!” The voice of his friend, the other Team Skull Grunt, finally finished the name of the girl standing before them. The first Grunt looked up at her, standing before him. And realised just how out of his depth he was. He jumped to his feet and ran.

“Cheese it!”

And the other followed quickly after.

A moment of silence followed before loud clapping interrupted, the Aether Foundation member wearing the coat putting his gloved hands together again and again. “Bravo! Bravo!” He was smiling widely, before sweeping into a bow to Moon as she looked at him, “My endless thanks, young miss Trainer. Why, were it not for you those Team Skull ruffians may have caused us who knows what harm! Yes, I am thankful, quite thankful indeed.”

Jace, recovering from the sight of Moon's quite frankly vicious battling style, moved to approach her. “Hel-”

“Now then!” And immediately was interrupted by his superior, who continued to monopolise the girl's attention. “Introductions! I am Faba, Branch Chief of the Aether Foundation, a pleasure, I am sure.” He smiled with great relish at introducing himself. “Over there is my assistant Jace, both a Pokemon Conservationist as well as Researcher and Developer of Aether Foundation technologies. Say hello Jace.”

“Uh,” Jace blinked, “hello M-”

“Wonderful,” cut off again by Faba, Jace looked annoyed. Faba paid him no mind. “Well then! You, young miss, have done us quite the favour, and in return I must offer my own. As the Branch Chief of the Aether Foundation, I possess significant powers within the Foundation, and so I would like to extend to you, yes you, an invitation!”

Moon and Jace both looked at Faba when he said that. Faba looked only at Moon.

“So then, to wit, allow me to invite you to visit the Aether Paradise, our special sanctuary for Pokemon set within the sea south-west of here. Yes, I will arrange a full tour for you to see all of the Aether Paradise and all we do there, so you might feel appropriately relieved for your actions in assisting us. A fine reward, is it not Jace?”

Jace spent a moment too long being surprised by Faba asking him something, the Branch Chief turning back to Moon and continuing on without an answer.

“What do you say then, young miss, would you like to see the place where Pokemon are revitalised from their wounds before being reintroduced to the wild? The pinnacle of care in the Alola Region? The centre of technological development for the sake of conservation? I am sure, beyond reasonable doubt, you must be, yes! Shall we?”
Moon shook her head. Faba looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Oh?

She had to prepare for her Grand Trial, was to battle Kahuna Olivia tomorrow. Jace looked absolutely stunned by hearing that, his own ridiculous pace in his Island Challenge obliterated by the young girl's. Faba stroked his beard in thought.

“Of course, of course, one’s Island Challenge is so important, is it not?” He turned to Jace. “Well then, allow me to propose a solution! My assistant Jace will remain on standby at the Hano Grand Resort, east of Heahea City. When your Grand Trial is complete, young miss, why not travel there after? He will escort you to the Aether Paradise for your tour, yes, that is perfect, is it not?”

Moon looked from Faba to Jace. Jace seemed like he had a million things he'd like to say, but couldn't focus on one without the rest driving him to silence. This wasn't meant to...

“Yes, perfect!” Faba clapped his hands, “Young miss Trainer, as thanks for your efforts, please seek out Jace at the Hano Grand Resort and come to see the Aether Paradise yourself. Bring a friend if you wish! I will be happy to show all who come with you the glorious work we do! I hope that is agreeable?”

It took a moment's thought, but soon enough Moon nodded. The Aether Foundation, she appreciated what they did. And the Aether Paradise... sounded interesting. A smile crept along her face. She was looking forward to it! Faba smiled back. Clapped his hands once more. How perfect indeed.

“Well then,” turning, he began to step away, “with that I must bid you adieu. The work of the Aether Foundation is never done, and I must get back to it. Come, Jace, you will need to work hard to complete your outstanding duties before being stationed at the Hano Resort. Let us be off!”

“I-” Jace looked from Faba to Moon, still having so much he wanted to say. But Faba's call of his name in just the exact tone that said work wasn't done pulled Jace along. He frowned and nodded to Moon. “We'll catch up.”

Moon nodded back. She had questions. But not for now. For now, as the two Aether Foundation members took their leave, she turned back to the path.

She still had to train.

As afternoon settled, the light of day turning from blue to red, Moon's training came to a stop. In truth she would have continued on her own, pushed her Pokemon further, but it was another who brought the day to a close. For as Moon trained amongst the fields of Memorial Hill, continuing her preparation for the day to follow, the largeness of a passing Pokemon, the heavy sounds of its footfalls on the path, drew her attention.

Moon quickly ran to the one walking beside it.

Kahuna Olivia smiled to see Moon appear from the fields, coming to a stop as the Pokemon behind her did too. Moon looked up at the massive red reptilian Pokemon, orange scales and spikes dotted across it, a ring of white fur over its shoulders and under its chin, and felt awe. This Pokemon, it was significant. Incredibly so. Olivia smiled at that too. Moon's keen interest in Pokemon was a fine thing. She approved.

“This Pokemon is one of my partners,” Olivia began to walk again, Moon keeping pace beside her, the large Pokemon following after with heavy sounding steps, “a Fossil Pokemon: Tyrantrum.”
Quick to emerge from Moon's bag and pontificate, Rotom-dex outlined the nature of Tyrantrum before continuing on to speak about Fossil Pokemon in general. Moon wasn't listening. Just the typing of the Pokemon was enough to stun her. She looked at Olivia in amazement. Olivia smiled back.

“Yes,” she nodded, “It is Dragon-typed. Certainly a great challenge to raise, but a fine partner too. He has been with me for a long time now.” Moon stared in awe at the giant Despot Pokemon, stomping along behind the Kahuna and Island Challenger, head held high. A Dragon Pokemon. So Olivia could keep one too. Thinking about that, so interested in it, it genuinely took this long for Moon's mind to remind her she was forgetting something important. She immediately came to a stop.

What about Hau?

“Look there,” Olivia pointed, turning Moon's eyes back to the Pokemon behind them. Now that she looked, there was someone lying on its back, carried by it as it walked. It took only a moment for Moon to realise that was Hau. Why was Hau-

“He's fine,” Olivia laughed, Moon's distressed expression turning back to her, “just exhausted. I'm bringing him back down to Konikoni – he's in no state to walk after the battle he went through.”

But... Moon looked between Hau and Olivia again, was he okay? Did he... did he pass? Olivia kept her smile. Pointed again. “Just look.” And when Moon stepped back, when she looked up at Hau, lying atop the back of the Tyrantrum, she saw on his restful face a grin that would not leave. Contentment.

Moon looked back at Olivia with the widest smile she could muster. The Kahuna grinned back. Those two, they really were so wonderful. She couldn't wait for the next Grand Trial either. Hau had impressed her, truly inspired. And Moon... Olivia was ready. She knew she was.

Tomorrow would be as fine a Grand Trial as could be. She swore it.

The two, with Pokemon carrying a third behind them, continued on. Silent for a time. Then Olivia spoke again.

“I've been reading a book about Fossil Pokemon lately,” she kept her eyes forward on the path, knowing Moon was alongside her, “I'm always interested in them.” Moon nodded, waiting to hear more. Olivia kept talking. “It's about the differences between old records of these Pokemon and the Pokemon themselves. In the past, before the Fossil Restoration System, we only knew about these Pokemon from the bones they left behind. People had to assume, make guesses based on what little they had, and often those guesses would be significantly wrong.”

Looking back, Olivia thought of the image extrapolated from the first retrieved Tyrantrum bones, a far longer and more crocodilian predator. Then looked forward again.

“The point of that is,” she continued, “records of the past are often incomplete. Even today much of what we believe as fact from the past is instead our best guesses, important context and information that went unpreserved lost. There's so much we don't know. So much that doesn't survive. The records we have, they're best guesses made by what we know now, not the truth unfiltered. It's important to remember that. That what we believe is true about the past may not be so. Do you know why I'm saying this?” Moon didn't. Shook her head. Olivia answered her. “You and your ability are unique, one-of-a-kind, no-one in history having ever existed who can support Trainer's Bonds such as you.” Moon looked away. Olivia spoke again. “Or so we believe.”

Moon stopped. Olivia stopped too. Waited for the young girl to look up at her. Olivia knelt down.
“For as incredible as you are, Moon, there is just as much possibility someone like you has come before. That they lived a life and a good life too, that they shouldered their gift and continued on. In all of history, so much unknown, the chance that there has been another, I can believe it. Do you want to believe it too?”

Moon was silent, deep in thought. This loneliness. This disconnect. The eyes of the world on her because she was different. Even if she'd never meet another, to know there had been one, did it make it better? Did it bring relief? She didn't know but...

it was nice to think that maybe someone else had been this way too.

“If you want to, then let's both believe it.” Olivia stood back up. “That even though their name is lost to history, there's another who's come before. And there will be another who comes after. If you believe in that, then believe you are no different to them. Another part of this world. Does that make sense?”

A part of this world... Moon nodded. The feeling of Alola, welcoming her through the Island Challenge, teaching her to become part of it, it helped. She raised her head and watched the clouds pass by. Their shapes, she hummed the song they showed, the wind mixing into the tune. Olivia joined her, the two feeling the song of Alola within them. Just two people that were part of this world.

And with the song carrying them, the evening setting across Alola, they continued down the path, glittering Konikoni City awaiting far below.

Chapter End Notes

Before we kick things off, I'd like to dedicate this chapter to my good friend Jaya Yormgen who a) has a birthday today and b) has been a constant presence of support throughout my writing this. Jaya's both an excellent artist and writer, so you can find them on twitter or ao3 where there's fantastic content to be enjoyed. Send them my best wishes.

We're really ramping up to the end-game of the Akala arc now. This chapter flowed really easily for me compared to the last one, likely due to my increasing excitement for what lays ahead. The next two chapters I'm extremely thrilled to be sharing soon. You don't yet even know. For this chapter we've had one encounter expected, Faba's appearance, but maybe the one with him comes as a surprise. Ilima's friend who he created the Ride Pager with (That's game canon) doesn't exist in any form, so it was completely up to me to define Jace. His name is derived from Jacaranda, as so many Alolan names are plant derived. We're going to get a solid amount of time with him during the Aether Paradise chapter, and he's been mentioned before, but this here's his official introduction. Even if he barely got the chance to get a word in. Faba does enjoy the sound of his own voice.

The overall story of Eldritch is composed of a few different prongs, some having little to nothing to do with Moon, but her personal journey is very much one of them and we're really starting to see the effects of her ability that differentiates her from all others. She's doing her best, but things still aren't easy for her. Let's all hope for things to improve soon. She needs it.
That's it for this chapter, but stay tuned. It won't be long now to the next chapter and that chapter is Kahuna Olivia's Grand Trial of Akala. Please look forward to it.

I know I am.
Even Diamonds Can Shatter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The Aether Paradise?”

Having awoken soon after his return to Konikoni City, Hau, along with Kahuna Olivia and Moon, quickly joined Professor Kukui, Kahili, Lillie, and the recently arrived Professor Burnet for the night’s meal. The brief recovery period brought on by eating was keeping Hau alert for the moment, but it was still well understood he’d be out again before too long. Olivia had pushed him to his absolute limit, after all. As she’d fully intended to do.

“Huh,” Kukui looked interested, hearing Moon’s report of her encounter with the Aether Foundation members and their invitation to the floating man-made island in the south-west. “Well I’d say that's an excellent opportunity, yeah! The Aether Foundation do great work all over Alola, and getting to see their amazing tech up close is a real big chance! And he said you could invite a friend too?”

“I wanna go!” Hau shot a hand up even as Moon was nodding, his smile growing wider as Moon confirmed she had been about to ask him to come with her. From there both turned to Lillie, each with the question on her lips. Would she come too?

Lillie, a blank expression on her face, had to be directly nudged by Professor Burnet before realising she’d been addressed. She flushed and shook her head. The group at large looked her way.

“I…” Lillie looked to the side, not meeting the eyes of anyone despite all their eyes being upon her. She was thinking as fast as she could, but even then her words came slowly. “I'll stay with Professor Kukui and Ms. Kahili. Since we'll be moving on to Ula'ula Island as well, I want to help them setting up.”

“Hey that's fine, Lillie,” Kukui shook his head, “the two of us can pretty easily-” in a moment Kukui clamped his mouth shut, a clear signal shooting from the eyes of his wife into his own telling him to walk back what he was saying. He wasn’t entirely sure of the reasoning, and in truth Burnet herself wasn’t either, but all the same she was well able to tell Lillie’s great stress in this moment. A silent and undeniable message of ‘she doesn't want to go’ communicated between her and her husband. Kukui shook his head again. “But I mean, an extra pair of hands wouldn't hurt either, and it'll help us be ready to greet Moon and Hau once they get there. So yeah,” Kukui turned his eyes back to Moon and Hau, gesturing to draw their attention, “you two head to the Aether Paradise, and then come tell us all about it when you get to Ula'ula Island, okay?”

“Okay!” Hau was loud to agree, a more silent Moon giving a long glance to Lillie, one Lillie did not answer back. Another piece of the secret puzzle the Aether Foundation was at the centre of. Moon stayed quiet. Kahili spoke next.

“And they said to meet at the Hano Grand Resort?” Upon confirmation, Kahili smiled. “That is my father's property, I can take you there when you are ready. My bird Pokemon can easily carry you both to the nor-” in surprise Kahili stopped talking as the reserved voice of Moon drifted across the table, asking if there was a way to the resort that didn't involve flying. Kukui looked uncomfortable.

“Sorry,” eyes settled on him as he spoke up, rubbing the back of his head, “she had a bad flying experience with me.” Razor stares from Kahili, Burnet, and Olivia did nothing to make things easier, even if Moon quietly tried to add in that it had been her own fault. Kahili leaned over to Burnet and
whispered something only Lillie was close enough to hear. Lillie looked at Kukui with an expression
of great pity indeed.

Moon felt guilty.

It wasn't as if flying was impossible for her – she'd used the Ride Charizard she had many times to
travel to the Poke Pelago. But each time she did she felt queasy, a part of her still remembering the
moment of slipping from the back of Kukui's Braviary before he'd caught her. So if there was a
choice that didn't involve flying... she'd honestly rather that. Kahili sighed.

“How about this? Kukui can take us around to Heahea City the morning after tomorrow, and I'll take
you to the Hano Grand Resort while he and Lillie head to Ula'ula. Then after I've seen you off, I'll
fly there myself to meet up with him. Does that work?”

Moon nodded, relieved to avoid flight. Hau, fine with anything, shrugged but agreed. Kukui, spoken
for, nonetheless accepted that was the best strategy. Mentioned to his wife that he'd take her back to

With that the night rolled on. Hau was soon to fade again, collapsing into bed to sleep off the
intensity the Kahuna had put him through. Olivia stayed up longer with Kukui, Burnet, and Kahili,
while Moon and Lillie occupied themselves with their Pokemon, watching as Nebby played about
with Moon's team. But each had other things on their minds – Moon the battle she had to face
tomorrow, and Lillie the closeness of the Aether Foundation to her. There wasn't much to say
between them. Each retired early as well. Slept somewhere between fitful and deep. Hours passed.
Dawn broke.

And the morning of Moon's second Grand Trial began.

Olivia had left the same message with the Pokemon Center nurse for Moon: she was awaiting
Moon's challenge at the Ruins of Life. While Moon had explored much of Memorial Hill the day
before, she'd never gone so far as to approach the Ruins directly, giving Hau the space to take his
Grand Trial on his own. The morning began with Hau motivating her, loading up the plate of food
Moon had for breakfast, encouraging her to give it her all – that Kahuna Olivia was super cool and
strong, but Moon would do great and Hau knew she'd win. It was a fair amount of pressure, but from
Hau laced with such honesty Moon couldn't feel the burden of it. She nodded.

Yeah. She was going to win no matter what. Hau grinned back.

Lillie wasn't there to join them for breakfast – Moon aware that she and Professor Burnet would have
left with Kahuna Olivia that morning. There was nothing else for Moon to do but head out, and so
she prepared to do so with head held high, Hau cheering her own.

Moments after Moon was through the gates of Konikoni, heading off to her Grand Trial, Sina and
Dexio appeared and wrangled Hau for a training session of their own. If he had a Psychic-bias, then
they owed him the full crash course in Psychic-type Pokemon! Overwhelmed but nonetheless
agreeable, Hau threw himself into their training as he waited the hours for Moon's return.

She'd be okay. He knew it.

He believed.
The path for Moon was much the same as the day before, winding up and down the hills and mountaintops of Akala's southern stretch, the region littered with marker stones for the deceased, encountering Pokemon of all inclinations – from courageous to cowardly – and a fair share of Trainers too. But this time Moon walked past them, eyes focused forward on the challenge ahead. She had a Grand Trial to take. Any Trainer who heard that... they stepped down. Yesterday she'd been someone others could approach, though some had still taken that too far, but today... today she was beyond their reach. Moon, never wavering, continued along the path to the Ruins of Life, mind locked on what she had to do to face the Kahuna. Olivia had mentioned Fossil Pokemon, and Moon had used that to study all of them in her Pokedex she could. A through-line of the Rock-type, which was what Moon now believed Olivia's speciality to be. It would make sense why she'd advised Moon and Hau to look for beauty in the underground of Alola. An answer Moon hadn't found at the time.

Still wasn't sure of even now.

It was in her focus upon her thoughts, preparing strategies, concepts, anything that might help, that Moon missed what was occurring before her until the distance was closed. Until the sound of a Pokeball's beeping raised her eyes to the one ahead, an attempted catch being made. The figure who'd been doing so, standing near to the entrance of the Ruins of Life themselves – a great stone archway in the mountainside ahead framing the path leading forwards – looked up with surprise as well. Neither had noticed the other. Her eyes narrowed.

The Pokeball opened in a burst of red light – catch failed.

Flashes of recognition came to Moon's eyes one after the other. First the woman standing before her, black pants and midriff-baring sleeveless top, lightly tanned skin and pink hair – though two of the four tails she'd styled her hair into were yellow instead – but most strikingly the silver pendant around her neck and the pink marking across her stomach. The symbol of Team Skull. Moon stared coldly at the lithe-formed woman staring back at her. Then her eyes wandered to the Pokemon floating between them.

Purple with vibrant pink highlights, a large head with wide blue eyes set atop a much smaller somewhat reptilian body. The Pokemon stared back at Moon, as equally surprised to see her as she was to see it. The last time Moon had seen this Pokemon, it had been in the cemetery north of Hau'oli City. The last time it had seen Moon had been just two days prior, before the darkness settling over the world had driven it to flee. It raced to hide behind her in an instant. Rotom-dex, detecting a new Pokemon, emerged from Moon's bag to scan it. Came to the same conclusion as before.

“Zzt! Unknown Pokemon! Not registered in the Pokedex!” The Pokemon in question clutched onto the back of Moon's shirt with its tiny hands. The woman across from her scoffed.

“So you really are all that.” She spoke with a low and husky voice, one tinged with annoyance as she took a step towards Moon, the Pokemon that had been with her – Moon hadn't spotted it before – moving up as well. It was a Salazzle, and though far smaller than the Totem of Wela had been, Moon couldn't help but feel caution in just the way it moved. It was strong. She could tell that just by looking at it. The woman's eyes drifted to the purple Pokemon hiding behind Moon, the one she'd failed to catch. Her stare narrowed.

“That's annoying.” The way she said it was so matter-of-fact, but so laced with something dangerous all the same. Moon's eyes went back to her. She met them. “And you know what people like us do about that, don't you?”
Moon couldn't help it. Like us?

"Isn't that what you've been doing?" She held out her arms in a shrug, as if this was nothing more than a casual conversation, "stomping on my cute and dumb little brothers and sisters whenever they've annoyed you? You got some power and set out to get rid of anyone who messes with you as violently as you could, right? I'm not much of a recruiter, but you really should consider joining Team Skull instead of fighting us. You're clearly suited for it."

The cold stare Moon gave in return drew a thin smile from the woman, the answer as obvious as could be. She lowered her arms. “I guess people can be too alike. The two of you wouldn't get along.” Shook her head and introduced herself. ‘I'm Plumeria, the big sister of Team Skull. You've been causing some real trouble, scaring those lovable idiots every time they've gone out to play. You had to realise this would happen, right? Acting out like you did was always going to have consequences. Don't go getting upset about this. It's not a surprise to anyone.”

Moon took a step to the side, closer to the rock walls framing the entrance to the Ruins of Life. The purple Pokemon with her moved along, holding onto Moon's shirt while remaining floating in the air. She needed to get inside the Ruins. Find the Kahuna. The woman opposite her, Plumeria, was dangerous. For the small number of experiences Moon had so far had in meeting strong Trainers, she was sure of it. Plumeria took another step towards her.

“Your acting up annoyed me,” she waved a hand, her Salazzle quickly moving forward, “so now I'm going to crush you. But don't take it personally. That's just how things are done in Alola.”

What Pokemon... Moon reached for a Pokeball, thinking as hard as she could. She needed the room to get inside the Ruins. For that, she'd call up...

A blast of purple liquid shot past her, hitting the ground and bubbling before the Salazzle. Moon and Plumeria both looked at the one to fire it, the purple Pokemon moving to float before Moon. Moon called out to it. Was it sure? The sound she heard back, she was sure it was affirmation. It was going to fight for her. Well then...

There was only a split second for which Moon could see it. Could see the Pokemon that was defending her racing towards the Salazzle, a loud cry of readiness to fight given off, before it vanished. A split second of seeing the pink blur that had raced out of the Ruins of Life, sunk a black fist into the tiny Pokemon's gut, and then sent it flying with such immense force that it shot into the distance in an instant.

In a voice that shook the land around it, Tapu Lele announced its presence.

“Lelelelelelelelelele!”

Taking a step back as she glared at the Pokemon before her, Plumeria swept her arms around – one activating her Salazzle's Pokeball, calling the Toxic Lizard back, while the other opened a Great Ball to unleash a different Pokemon entirely, a large and brightly coloured mass of moving sludge, the Alolan Muk a poisonous rainbow to consider. “Tch,” she clicked her tongue, “a Tapu huh?”

The air quivered, raw energy from the Guardian Deity of Akala Island infusing it, spreading out from the pink shelled body of Tapu Lele, a small and wispy black upper body within the casing belying the incredible strength it had sent the small purple Pokemon flying with a moment before. Vibrant pink hair curled from the smaller pink shall set atop its black head, waving absent as power continued to flow from its body, the very air turning pink in its presence. Moon, shaken, stood rooted to the ground as the feeling of the Pokemon washed over her. It was so much. Much too much. Plumeria snapped an order.
“Hit it! Poison Jab!”

The mass of living sludge rolled forward, making a throwing motion to unleash a ball of toxic ichor at the Tapu. From Plumeria's perspective she watched the purple gunk disappear as it approached the Tapu, vanished by its pure power alone. She clicked her tongue again. Of course it wasn't going to be that easy. Nonetheless...

With a wave of its hand Tapu Lele unleashed a surge of force, grass and dirt stripped from the earth and blown away, pure psychic energy washing over the Alolan Muk. To this Plumeria smiled, her Pokemon continuing to move forward. She called out. “Don't think I'm not prepared to fight you,” she took a step forward once more, her own confidence building, “I know what you're all like.”

Tapu Lele paused. Seemed to consider the Pokemon that had not shifted under its psychic powers. Then raised its fists, unfurled a finger from each, and pointed upwards. The flow of force changed, Moon feeling herself beginning to lift off the ground, having to reach down and grasp onto the grass around her to keep hold. Plumeria held her position, watching as her Pokemon continued on, unable to be moved. She smiled wider.

The earth around it cracked and began to rise.

Plumeria's face fell seeing her Pokemon lifted into the air – not lifted itself but the very ground it stood upon rising up. Higher and higher the block of earth rose, the Muk atop it carried upwards. At its peak Tapu Lele paused, then gestured with a finger. Flipped the earth around. The Muk fell. The earth fell after it.

Moon's eyes snapped up at the sound of Plumeria's yell, just in time to see the rainbow coloured Sludge Pokemon disappear into the hole Tapu Lele had created by ripping the very earth into the air. Then the mass of earth following after slammed down upon it.

The psychic field faded.

Moon had little more chance to act, the Guardian Deity rounding on her and reaching out, picking up and tucking the small girl under its arm. As it floated off into the Ruins, carrying its prize, Moon watched backwards at the sight of Plumeria and her Salazzle digging desperately into the earth to get to the Muk in time, yelling out to it again and again. It was a striking sight.

Moon shut her eyes and kept them closed.

“Huh, well look who's here!”

The voice of Kahuna Olivia was what finally drew Moon to open her eyes, shortly before being set down upon the ground by the Guardian Deity Tapu Lele. Looking around, Moon saw not only the Kahuna but Lillie and Professor Burnet standing together, the area they were in grassy and open to the sky, ringed by rock remnants of structures long collapsed, creating a circular field. Lillie rushed to her, Olivia, Burnet, and a happily bobbing Nebby a step behind.

“Moon, are you alright?”

Moon turned and looked back, down the passageway she had been carried along, unable to see any sign of Plumeria beyond it. She didn't know. But looking back at Lillie, clearly concerned at the sight of her being carried by the Guardian Deity, Moon forced down those worries and smiled for her all
the same. Relieved, Lillie smiled as well. Stepped back.

“Professor Burnet has been helping me explore the Ruins this morning – Nebby was very excited to see them, they've been more energetic than ever since getting here.” With a loud ‘pew’ Nebby floated up to Lillie and Moon, making noises for attention. Lillie reached down and picked it up, holding the Nebula Pokemon in her arms. It snuggled into her grip as she continued. “I still... don't understand how the Ruins are important to Nebby, but clearly they are. Maybe I'll need to take them to the Ruins of Abundance on Ula'ula Island as well...”

“Doing your own Island Challenge?” Olivia stepped up, caused Lillie to squeak and step further away from Moon, to not get between her and the Kahuna. Olivia gave Lillie a smile. “It's a rare Pokemon that feels comfortable in these Ruins – most won't go near the territory of our Island Deities. Though they are our guardians, the Tapu can also be rather violent. Most Pokemon tend to be fearful of that.” Moon looked at Tapu Lele, floating in the air nearby, and considered the violence she had just seen. She really didn't feel comfortable around it. Olivia gave the Guardian Deity a long look, wondering why it had left in such a hurry to collect Moon. Hala had reported Tapu Koko had taken a keen interest in the girl too. Something else to consider. She turned her attention back to Lillie.

“Well,” pausing for a moment, Lillie looked from Moon to Olivia, “I don't know if Nebby is a normal Pokemon. I'm trying to find out more about it, but... there's not much I've learned so far.”

“Hmm,” considerate of that, Olivia looked thoughtful. “Well since you're heading with Kukui to Ula'ula Island next, why not visit the Malie Library? There's plenty of rare and ancient texts stored there – you might just find a hint!”

“Oh!” Lillie nodded with a smile, “That is a wonderful idea! Thank you so much, umm, Ms. Kahuna?”

“Please!” Olivia laughed at the formal address, “you can just call me Olivia. That was far too formal, you'll make me feel old!”

“Alright, alright,” walking up to the group, Professor Burnet spent a long moment looking at Tapu Lele herself, the chance to be so close to an Island Deity a rare thing indeed. Unless you were a Kahuna. Or Moon, apparently. “Since Lillie and I have toured the Ruins, it's time for us to head back. We shouldn't be getting in the way of Moon's Grand Trial, after all.”

“O-oh...” Lillie looked down. Moon, Burnet, and Olivia all looked to her. She didn't look up. “I just... I was hoping that...” Moon turned to the Kahuna and asked if Lillie could watch her Grand Trial. Lillie's head snapped up to look at Moon in an instant. Olivia hummed a noise as she put a hand beneath her chin, as if in consideration.

Then grinned wide. “Alright then! If you two would like, feel free to stay for the show! But take a good step back, cause this is going to be a rough one. I'm not taking it easy.” Lillie and Moon smiled brightly, Burnet chuckling to herself as she guided her charge away from the group. Just at the edge of the circular battlefield, between some of the stone remnants of the Ruins, Burnet sat and gestured for Lillie to sit with her, the blonde-haired girl doing so and settling Nebby into her lap. She'd been hoping for this. Was thankful.

Had wanted to see Moon shine again.

“I take it you're watching too?” Olivia's casual address of Tapu Lele surprised all but the Kahuna and Deity, the second of which clapped and floated up above the field, spinning slightly, before choosing to move to where Lillie and Burnet were. Lillie squeaked a noise of surprise as the Deity settled
beside her. Turned its head to look down at the girl.

Then reached over and plucked Nebby from her grip, holding the Nebula Pokemon with one hand while stroking it with the other. Nebby made a contended sound under its care. Lillie and Burnet both stared.

Olivia directed Moon to a small circle at one end of the field.

“Yesterday,” she raised her voice as she moved to the other end, another circle marking where she would stand for the battle, “I pushed Hau to his limit and held him there. Used one Pokemon for each of his and forced him to give it his all for as long as he could. Ula'ula Island, you've likely heard, isn't easy. You're meant to be pushed further and further by the challenges there, and it's up to me to make sure you won't just be crushed outright. This won't be easy. Last chance to back out and come back later.”

Of course Moon shook her head. Olivia would've been shocked beyond measure if she hadn't. Activating the pink-coloured Love Ball holding her partner for this battle, Olivia unleashed Moon's opponent. The manifested Wolf Pokemon took position before her. Rotom-dex, escaping Moon's bag to observe the battle, was quick to describe it.

“Lycanroc, zzt! Midnight Form, evolution of Rockruff!”

The bipedal Pokemon stretched its arms, red fur bristling as it moved, white undercoat shaking. A long spiked mane of the same white fur hung over its head, momentarily masking the red eyes it stared with. Mouth opening to yawn, pointed teeth seemed to glint. Moon stared at it, formulating strategy. Then paused.

Was that it? She had to ask. What about the Tyrantrum she'd seen the day before? Olivia laughed.

“If I let him out it wouldn't matter how much I intended to hold back, he'd destroy you without question. If you want to fight him, Moon, you're going to have to make it to your Final Trial, alright?”

Moon paused. Final Trial, she'd heard the Captains mention that a few times, but still didn't know what that was. Olivia shook her head. “Kukui didn't give you the full explanation? Then allow me to tell you. Upon completing all seven Trials and four Grand Trials of an Island Challenge, there is the Final Trial remaining. You will travel to Mount Lanakila on Ula'ula Island and battle the four Kahuna in a single day. Only upon beating them will your Island Challenge be complete.”

The four Kahuna in a single day... even imagining it Moon felt overwhelmed. How could she be ready for that? Olivia loudly called out.

“You can think about that afterwards, we have a Grand Trial to do here and now!” Moon nodded, back in the moment. Olivia continued. “Captain Lana told me, she battled you going all-out, didn't she?” Moon confirmed. Lana had crushed her. Olivia nodded.

“If I did the same with this one Pokemon, you'd lose without being able to do a thing.” Hearing that from the Kahuna, Moon frowned. It was true, she knew it was true, but hearing it still stung. Then what should she do? “Moon,” Olivia smiled, “I'll give you some space. A little room to think and breathe. But only just. This is going to be more intense than any battle you've had before; if you can't keep up, then you're not ready to go forward. Do you understand?”

Moon paused. Then nodded. She was ready. A hand rested upon a Pokeball. Olivia's smile widened.

“Then let your Grand Trial begin!”
First came Dartrix, Olivia's smile remaining at the sight of the Blade Quill Pokemon, the large owl of brown and white feathers accented by green leaf-like growths. Both a Pokemon with a weakness to and effectiveness against her own Rock-typed Lycanroc, it was also Moon's strongest partner. The initial battle in such an encounter – many against a singular power – required as powerful an opening as one could muster to claim as much momentum as possible. Olivia had felt sure it would be this Pokemon to face her first. Moon was ordering a command, for her Dartrix to keep distance and attack with propelled leaves. A wise choice.

But far far too naive.

“Bring it down!”

Though the slowest form of Lycanroc, the red-furred Midnight Form was possessed of more than enough experience and growth for that to matter little in a battle against such children before it. Moon reacted quickly, her orders for the Dartrix to back up, but the closing of distance was far too quick, and Olivia's Lycanroc had already chosen its next move. An instant burst of speed brought them together. A swinging clawed hand reached out. Olivia's smile never flickered. Moon thought faster than she spoke.

It was like a grenade of leaves exploding upon contact – the Lycanroc's attack successful in reaching the Dartrix, but responded to in an, if not equally powerful, equally fast and aggressive manner. In the moments after the counter-attack Lycanroc settled on the ground and Dartrix flew further into the air, Moon unsure what had just occurred. She hadn't said a word, hadn't given the order at all, but the truth was that she hadn't needed to. The intensity of her thoughts were already being conveyed to the longest tenured of her Pokemon. That was another trait of hers that really should take far longer to establish, Olivia noted, keeping her smile and providing the next tactics for her Pokemon, instructing the Lycanroc to rip a large section of the earth out of the ground and throw it at full force. One dodge. A second as the Wolf Pokemon continued to haul mounds of earth from the ground and hurl them into the air. A third. And... in position.

“Go!”

Olivia had not needed to say it, her orders already communicated to her Pokemon – the calibre of intent she could provide through her Trainer's Bond superior to Moon's by leaps and bounds. But if she did not speak a word then Moon would have little chance – Olivia already providing a challenge that tested the limits of what a Kahuna of Akala should give. But Moon could take it. Or rather, she needed to be able to. The ridiculous rate of her Pokemon's growth, not only in the power they gained from the Bonds between them, but equally in the speed at which Moon learned to communicate to them, told Olivia enough. She'd make Moon aware. Because if she didn't understand, if she wasn't truly conscious of the effects she was having upon her Pokemon...

Naturally, that would only end in disaster.

The three mounds of earth had pushed Dartrix into a position before a collapsed section of the ruins, one that served as an easy ramp for Lycanroc to race upwards and leap into the air. Moon, expecting an attack thanks to Olivia's vocalisation, having searched for it and spotted the angle, ordered a retaliatory attack to push the approaching Wolf Pokemon back down. But Moon still lacked understanding of the difference between the power of her Pokemon and Olivia's. This Lycanroc, if Olivia were going all out, it would easily be able to hold its own in the Final Trials. Moon needed to be far more able to handle this threat than just throwing what power she had at it. Olivia communicated that with the next attack, the curled fist of her Pokemon slamming into the Dartrix and sending it flying. It hit the outer stone walls of the ruins and slumped down it. Well then, was that Moon's first?
Olivia was holding back. Spacing the timing of her commands, not focusing with intent upon the Bond between her and her Pokemon, and even restraining some of the power that flowed between them – an ability that came with years of growth together with one's Pokemon. Balancing the amount you gave was something important to learn, but which could only be learned with experience. These young chicks, Hau and Moon, both gave one-hundred percent at all times. Well, Hau gave one-hundred percent.

Moon gave as much as her Pokemon could take.

Dartrix returned to its feet, weary but willing to continue. Moon called for it and it flew by her, momentary closeness, before facing Lycanroc once more. Moon's movements were obvious, setting a green crystal into her Z-Ring. With Dartrix so injured, she wished to perform a Z-Move before having to switch her Pokemon out, to deal as much damage as could be done. So blatant. Olivia directed her Lycanroc to perform an attack of thrown stones, generated with a swing of the Pokemon's arm and detonating all around the Blade Quill Pokemon it faced. It was a slow attack, and Dartrix slipped through it with ease, closing in upon the Pokemon still in the midst of its motion. Moon began her Z-Pose.

“Now!”

The speed at which Lycanroc changed, dropping from the weak attack it had fired to a crouching position before surging upwards with a claw faster than Moon, focused on her actions, could respond to, was too much. The power was too much. Contact and Dartrix flew up into the sky before falling again, landing heavily upon the grass. Moon stared. Olivia shook her head.

“Z-Moves are openings!” Her clear voice called out across the field to the silent Moon, instructions given in the heat of battle. “Your desperation to use one was obvious, and easily lured. Performing a Z-Move will always create a moment of weakness – you need to be aware of that and know when the right time is! You especially, who use them so freely. Each time you do, a strong opponent will punish you for being so hasty. Listen to me Moon, if you are not careful, each time you perform a Z-Move I will knock your Pokemon out first. Don't. Be. So. Hasty.”

Moon stared in silence, mind racing. She'd been lured, baited with ease. Because she'd been focused on performing a Z-Move, which had always solved her problems before. But a strong Trainer would crush her for that. And now... Dartrix was struggling, failing to stand, and gave in limply as Moon called the first of her six Pokemon back. She'd done so much less than she'd expected. Because Olivia was stronger. Because Olivia was more experienced. Because Moon had assumed she could do the same as she always did, just better, and be fine. Looking up as she unleashed her second Pokemon, Moon changed the Z-Crystal in her Z-Ring in the same moment. Fine. She'd find the opening for victory.

And not be baited again.

Flaaffy called loudly upon appearance, the white Normalium-Z, first of Moon's six Z-Crystals, glittering in the sunlight falling over the field as it crested the high rock walls of the ruins. Electrical bolts crackled and snapped around the Pokemon, its puffed up fur an intimidation tactic that meant nothing to the far more experienced and aged Pokemon that faced it. Moon gave the first order of the second leg of this fight.

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Olivia snapped back an equal order, encouraging her Pokemon to break through the electrical field around the Wool Pokemon and strike it directly, only for the Lycanroc to pull back as it closed the distance. Moon's eyes flitted from the pair of Pokemon to Olivia, who gave no sign of any other order given yet neither confusion at her voiced order being ignored. Strong Trainers could command their Pokemon without a word, Moon knew this. Focused on the Flaaffy again. She needed to do the
Both Wool and Wolf Pokemon burst into movement at the same time.

Lycanroc dipped under the forward bolt of electricity that lashed at it, claw curling up again, before rolling as another bolt jumped out, the highly electrified Flaaffy dangerous to touch. Though the power it was expressing was not so great a threat, the after-effects of electrical attacks could often lead to defeat. Olivia knew that and so her Lycanroc knew it too, choosing to avoid contact until its opponent had run its course. The Wool Pokemon could not maintain this electrical guard around itself forever. Lycanroc circled around it, swaying and dodging seeking bolts, waiting for its moment to strike.

Olivia, focused forward, caught Moon’s plan moments before it was enacted. Covered her eyes as the electricity around Flaaffy built brighter and brighter before bursting out, a wave of blinding light surging across the field. Burnet, eyes closed and a hand over Lillie's own, made a noise of approval at the strength of electricity the Flaaffy expressed. That was a pretty impressive Pokemon Moon had already raised.

The Lycanroc, already wary, had guarded as well but in the time it spent guarding, the time Olivia was looking away, Moon had completed her Z-Pose. The fading light did not fade completely, and the brief moment of Olivia wondering how long until the brightness dispersed was enough for Moon to order the attack. The Kahuna of Akala grinned wildly as she realised. A Z-Move in the light! Flaaffy, with full force behind it, charged into Lycanroc and the two slammed into the ruins ringing the field.

The Normalium-Z was all Moon had able to be used for Flaaffy, the Pokemon lacking the ability to make use of any of her other Z-Crystals. Lacking effectiveness against a Pokemon such as Lycanroc, it would only do a fraction of the damage needed, but for the positioning it was far better than anything else. Moon focused on the Bond between her and her Pokemon and watched as crackles of electricity flickered amongst the dust escaping the impact zone of her and Olivia’s Pokemon with one of the fallen rock structures around them. She understood this tactic was risky, but believed in it all the same. Olivia gave her order as well.

A flash of electricity. Another. Then a loud cry and silence. Movement in the dust. And Lycanroc emerged, throwing the bested Flaaffy before it. A Pokemon that performs a Z-Move suffers exhaustion as well. Each time Moon used a Z-Move, if she were not careful, Olivia would knock her Pokemon out first. But each time she used a Z-Move regardless, Olivia would knock her Pokemon out after.

She couldn't rely on them so quickly, give up the length of a battle and the amount each of her Pokemon could do. That was a lesson to be learned. Olivia called back her Lycanroc to the field's centre to await Moon's third Pokemon. Lillie, staring at the battle, saw in Moon the same as she had before. A vision of intensity, and power, that made her breath hitch. Moon looked with such focus, such absolute desire to fight and win, that it overwhelmed her. She was silent and wide-eyed. Moon, taking a moment to choose her third Pokemon, caught Lillie's expression and paused.

...was she afraid?

She faltered.

Olivia caught it. Traced Moon's gaze across the field to Lillie. It was hard for her to know exactly what was between them for this reaction, but in this moment Olivia found herself wondering whether she should have allowed Lillie to stay. Called out to her opponent. “Eyes on me, Moon!” And watched as Moon's vision snapped back on to her. Lillie, aware of this, shrunk back, having seen
Moon look at her. She didn't want to interfere. Burnet tried to reassure her. Moon chose her third Pokemon.

The battle continued.

Third was Eevee, another Pokemon that would make use of the Normalium-Z when the time came. But not nearly as soon. Flaaffy had, despite a quick defeat, still struck Olivia's Lycanroc with electricity multiple times. If it added up at all, it would allow a chance. Moon gave her orders. Set Eevee to maintain distance and dodge, measuring the Lycanroc's abilities in this moment. Olivia gave her own. Lycanroc dived in. Moon prepared to counter.

The flash of Lillie's face within Moon's mind, sure she feared the way Moon battled, came unbidden. The command she was giving through her connection to the Evolution Pokemon failed. Eevee's dodge came far too slow. The power behind Lycanroc's swing lifted the smaller Pokemon off the ground, threw it into a nearby rock, and left a mark of impact as Eevee slumped down it.

“Focus!” Olivia's snap command shocked Moon, the woman staring her down. “This is your Grand Trial! Didn't you say you were ready for this?” Moon shrank back, distressed at the Kahuna's tone. She wanted to win. She didn't want to scare Lillie. She had to give it her all. Her all was too much. She was an Island Challenger. She was something different from everyone else.

When she fought the day before, when she'd crushed those against her, she'd been so strong. She'd been so scary. Why had Plumeria said Moon would be suited for Team Skull? Because she was this way? Because she was scary? How could she be strong without being scary? What should she...

“Moon!” Olivia spoke again, a commanding voice that shook Moon from her thoughts. Lycanroc had moved to stand over Eevee, who was struggling to stand after the impact it had received, the reassuring strength it usually took from its Trainer not reaching it in this moment. Moon shook her head. Olivia stared without blinking. “What do you want?”

She... to win.

“What's holding you back?”

It's... she wasn't right.

“What is right?”

What... what was right? Moon shook her head again. She didn't know. She didn't know what she was meant to be. What she was meant to do. Being the same as she had been so far, she was... she was...

She wasn't...

“Moon!” Eyes across the field turned to Lillie, who'd risen to her feet and stepped forward. For a moment Burnet was reaching up to hold her back, before stopping and letting the girl speak her mind. Lillie shook her head. “You can do it Moon!” Moon stared back at her, unsure. If she just...

“Don't hold back! Isn't that what you and Hau promised? That you'd both go all out? Haven't you been trying so hard all this time to keep going? Isn't that right?”

Moon stopped. She had promised that. To go all out. To go all the way. If she stopped here, if she backed down, wasn't that breaking a promise? One of the most important promises she'd ever made? She shook her head, jumbled thoughts swept away. Looked up with clear eyes once more.

If she did only one thing, kept only one promise, that was going to be what it was. No matter what
else, that was what she was going to do.

No holding back, right?

She gave her next command.

Olivia, going from concerned and frustrated with Moon's sudden meekness to pleased as could be at her recovery through Lillie's words, found herself surprised by the speed of what came next. Sure Eevee could be quick, but even then this one rushed to move faster than she'd expected. One moment it was lying before her Lycanroc, bruised from the impact taken, the next it had raced between its legs and disappeared between the stones ringing the battlefield. Moon's refocusing had returned the strength she lent her Pokemon and through it her Eevee, third longest partner with her, exceeded anything it could achieve alone. Olivia grinned and ordered her Lycanroc to hunt, to leap atop the stone structures the Eevee had disappeared amongst and find it. If Moon was going to go all out, Olivia owed it to her to give her a worthy challenge.

It was the only way to make sure she was ready for what came next.

Through the will Moon gave by the Bond connecting her to her Pokemon Eevee attacked as soon as the Lycanroc took a scouting position, jaws locking onto a leg, the impact infused by energy the Pokemon could manifest, before it disengaged and tumbled back down into the rocks, Lycanroc's response clipping its rear legs but failing to secure a full strike. Olivia ordered vigilance. A moment later Eevee struck into her Pokemon from behind. The Kahuna shook her head. What a poor position Moon had drawn her Lycanroc into. Fine then.

“Shatter it!”

The downwards swing of Lycanroc's hand into the stone immediately broke it into tiny pieces, the force of the impact exploding them outwards in a spray that collected Eevee in the midst of its next attack. Moon vocalised an order, a command to stay strong, even as the Lycanroc swept through the stone shrapnel and swung another clawed paw around. Lillie looked up in shock as a very quiet but clearly annoyed sound came out of Tapu Lele as it watched another part of the Ruins of Life be destroyed.

Eevee was taking damage. The more damage a Pokemon took, the less responsive it became and the easier it was to damage again. And with Lycanroc's power, all it took was a few good hits for one of Moon's Pokemon to be bested. It was approaching the time she should perform a Z-Move, if she was going to, and she and Olivia both knew that and knew that Moon knew Olivia knew that. An endlessly stacking mind-game as Moon commanded her Eevee to throw up a streak of dirt at the menacing Lycanroc, looking for an angle to perform her Z-Move, commanding her Pokemon to leap back as Olivia's simply broke through the attack and swung another paw down. Maintain distance, dodge its attacks, Moon gave those commands as Lycanroc continued to pressure Eevee by remaining close, refusing to be escaped, too quick to loose. Olivia grinned as Eevee's direction of retreat proved obvious, towards the holes in the ground her Lycanroc had created when attacking Dartrix earlier in the fight, clearly intending to trip her Pokemon in them and use that chance to perform a Z-Move. But Olivia fully intended to make Z-Moves as difficult to use as could be for Moon. A lesson in their use the young girl simply must understand.

It was the only way she'd be able to go forward from here.

Eevee broke away from Lycanroc and leaped over the holes, turning around and sweeping at the soft ground to throw another clump of dirt at Lycanroc as it leaped after. Rocks formed by each swing of the Wolf Pokemon's arms smashed through the dirt and rained down upon Eevee, the Pokemon bracing against the impacts. It was strong, Olivia noted, Moon had trained it well. Most Eevee
wouldn't take such a strike head-on. Nor respond in attack by leaping directly into her Lycanroc, the power behind its charging strike enough to push it back.

Oh! Olivia smiled despite herself as Lycanroc fell backwards upon the holes it had dug and Moon performed her Z-Pose, the Wolf Pokemon's ability to return to its feet just a little too slow in the pockmarked environment. Very good indeed!

Eevee slammed into Lycanroc at full force and the Wolf Pokemon of Kahuna Olivia slammed a heavy paw down and smashed the Evolution Pokemon into the dirt. Shook itself slightly to dislodge the slight aftershocks from the impact of the Z-Move it had taken. Then moved to stand before Olivia once more as Moon called her Pokemon back. Three bested then, Olivia nodded. Moon was doing well, but only well. Not great. Not yet.

She needed to go further still.

Bagon was next, the Rock Head Dragon-type crying out its readiness to battle. Moon prepared a command. Lycanroc closed the distance between it and its opponent far too fast. Slammed a clawed paw on each side of the Bagon's head. It dropped.

“You need to be faster.” Olivia's direction barely made its way through Moon's blank stare, watching her Pokemon be bested in an instant after so long a battle already. The Lycanroc stared back at her with deep red eyes, intimidation powerful in its form. Olivia felt similar. Like there were two wolves staring Moon down. She looked up at the Kahuna. Olivia was still smiling. “You only start thinking about what to do when your Pokemon comes out. The gap between a Pokemon being beaten and your next one sent out, do you think that's free time? In a battle, a real battle, you need to be giving it your all every single second. That's what the best Trainers do. And only the best Trainers pass the Island Challenge, Moon. Now show me. Show me what you'll do!”

A red crystal set within Moon's Z-Ring, she threw the white Premier Ball containing her Larvesta. At this point the Pokemon with her were gaining experience fast enough to be truly different from those she kept at the Poke Pelago, and so even in poor matchups they proved better able. The Rock-type Lycanroc was a significant threat to the Torch Pokemon and so Moon had held it back this long. But now was the time and Olivia kept her guard up despite what should be an easy battle. Because it should be an easy battle and so Moon must be prepared to make it not.

Jets of fire shooting out in every direction around it, Larvesta set the field ablaze.

This time Burnet looked up at Tapu Lele, who while still holding Nebby had stopped giving the Nebula Pokemon its attention. At first the Professor was sure the Guardian Deity must be frustrated at the damage taking place within its home, but moments after realised that was not the case. Tapu Lele was transfixed. Burnet looked back to the battle. Well... so was she.

Moon commanded again.

Through the fire Lycanroc burst swinging, but the screen of the flames had allowed Larvesta to already move away. The fire licked at the Rock-type Wolf Pokemon, doing little, but having its effect all the same. Cinders and ash filled the air, the dry grass of the battlefield easy kindling, as Larvesta amongst the flames continued to spew more and heighten the firestorm it was creating. Olivia nodded, the strategy a fine one to give the disadvantaged Pokemon a chance. If she used her Z-Move now she would crush the Larvesta in an instant, but Moon had one more Pokemon and so Olivia held back for the time being. Instead ordered her Lycanroc to return to perching atop a fallen piece of stone and shoot rocks across the field to disperse the flames. The red-furred bipedal lupine did so with ease, squatting down upon the stone and waving a paw, sending a rock flying forth each time.
Moon, silent with arms held behind her back, orders given through Bond alone, kept her focus. Her intensity, her drive to win. Olivia had put so much power against her, an almost overwhelming amount, but she was still going to fight. Still had things she could do. And Larvesta...

A jet of sticky silk burst out of the flaming field, already burning as it wrapped around the Lycanroc’s leg and pulled. Olivia's responsive thought, the best counter, communicated fast enough for Lycanroc to dive into the fire and swing down at the point of origin of the attack, striking nothing but the severed end of the silk strand – already disconnected from its creator. Larvesta, a pace to the side, latched onto Lycanroc's leg and bit down. Performed a draining attack upon its target. Though weak, the Torch Pokemon did have one Grass-type ability.

Moon, raising the hands she'd lowered and held behind her back, began to move as the rising flames made it just a moment too difficult for Olivia to tell she'd changed the red crystal in her Z-Ring for one green. Olivia's eyes widened a moment too late.

Grass-type Z-Move Bloom Doom.

The surge of light blew out across the field, washing the flames away, Olivia taking a step back as it rushed by her, Tapu Lele waving a hand and preventing any of it from reaching it or the two women with it. The move Larvesta had used was weak, and so when transfigured into a Z-Move would not carry the true strength of such an attack, but it was a Z-Move all the same and when the light cleared and the resolution of Lycanroc, pushing Larvesta into the ground, came to the eyes of all, it was still so obvious the Wolf Pokemon was panting heavily. Moon called back her fifth. One more.

Olivia shook her head at the girl's trickery, using it to account for the difference between them. Good. That sort of cleverness was what it took. She directed her Lycanroc to step back so Moon could unleash her sixth.

Moon did so.

Water surged out around the Wishiwashi as it manifested, lifting it into the air, taking the shape of a much larger school of the Small Fry Pokemon. For that to be the last, Olivia grinned with defiance: Moon had saved a powerful and dangerous Pokemon to face her in the final throes. She'd done well, used clever strategies, and faced overwhelming strength while remaining at full force the entire time. She was close to meeting Olivia's approval. But not yet enough. And if Moon was bringing her best for last...

“I'm speeding up!”

Lycanroc burst through the Wishiwashi, speed so fast it would not be caught by the water the way the Raticate had the day before. Though it reformed some of the water had fallen away, and the giant fish turned to find Lycanroc had already dropped back to the ground, circled around it, then leapt onto another piece of fallen stone and returned to strike again. This time Moon ordered a counter, a jet of water bursting out of the Pokemon – able to emerge from any point in the schooled mass – to shoot forward. Lycanroc swung a paw and threw a stone into the jet, scattering the attack as the Wolf Pokemon dropped back to the ground, its own leaping attack interrupted by the exchange. The large fish held height, a unique floating target, jets of water shooting out from it upon its opponent below. But Lycanroc moved fast, far too fast for the number of hits it had taken so far, and evaded between them with ease. Olivia counted seconds between strikes in silence, the grey crystal set within her Z-Ring awaiting its moment. She had a Z-Move too. Looked for her own right moment to use it. Just as Moon did.

Their two Pokemon continued to attack at one another, Lycanroc evading water used to both attack it and prevent its own. But this constant rain of water couldn't be sustained forever, the energy Moon
was giving her Pokemon impressive but not pumped infinitely at such speeds the Wishiwashi would never tire. Moon took a moment, while Lycanroc was forced further back from the Wishiwashi than Olivia would like, to allow its water to shine and begin to refresh itself. Olivia's snap order had her Lycanroc leap from where it was with greater strength than it ever had before in this battle, easily coasting over the top of the schooling Small Fry Pokemon. Both Trainers moved as one, to both strike and counter the attack coming.

Moon let her arms flow, from side to side as Lana had taught her. Olivia tensed her arms and held them out, feeling Z-Power flow through her. Lillie, enraptured, couldn't help her eyes drawn to Olivia as the woman's arms resembled cut stone as she held them up. Incredible...

Water-type Z-Move Hydro Vortex. A massive torrent of water exploded from out of Wishiwashi's body, circling upwards into a twister surrounding the target above it.

Rock-type Z-Move Continental Crush. Stone raced into the sky, collected above Lycanroc's raised paw, and then began to fall. Felt the water push against it and gave, just a little. Then pushed back. A storm of water surged upwards. The staggering mass of stone pushed down. Moment by moment ticked by. Olivia clenched her fists.

And, as they were always wont to do, the pure power within each Z-Move mixed and detonated, all that was left as the meeting of each stripped the rest away. An explosion of light illuminated the Ruins of Life even brighter than Moon's Flaaffy had before. Moon covered her eyes. Olivia closed hers. Burnet once more turned away and held an arm out over Lillie.

Tapu Lele stared into the light without blinking.

Slowly the light faded. Slowly Moon looked up, the Kahuna across from her doing the same. Slowly Burnet lowered her arm and Lillie stood up to see what the result of the great clash was. Oh!

Oh.

Oh...

She stared. Moon stared. Olivia, with wide eyes, stared. At her Pokemon, her Lycanroc, lying on its back upon the ground below. And at the far smaller fish Pokemon lying atop it, similarly unmoving. So then. That was that.

“A tie.” She took a step forward. “I so often forget those are an option.” So Moon hadn't defeated her, not fully. They'd defeated each other. Olivia wracked her mind for what she was meant to do in this situation. Moon had shown fine effort, but without a complete victory, was it right to send her on? Perhaps she should ask the Tapu. It had been present for this battle after all. Moon called out to her.

Olivia looked and went from deep thought to blank face as Moon activated the Pokeball she held. As, despite swaying and barely standing, despite the heavy attacks it had taken earlier, nonetheless still conscious Moon's Dartrix emerged. It hadn't been completely knocked out when she'd called it back before. Olivia had missed that. The Kahuna stared. All stared.

Tapu Lele's loud sound of amusement was the only thing to eclipse Olivia's own.

“Well then!” Lowering her head from the great laughter that had overtaken her, Olivia beamed at Moon, “I cannot argue that! Moon! You've bested the Kahuna of Akala Island in her Grand Trial! Congratulations!”

“Moon!” Lillie wasted not a second more racing across the charred field to Moon's side, joy so great
on her face. “You did it!” Looking at her, so thrilled, so happy, Moon felt only relief. At winning. And at Lillie's expression being only happiness. No fear. No concern. Moon hadn't scared her. Lillie smiled and Moon smiled back. Olivia grinned at the pair. Then removed the grey crystal from her Z-Ring.

“Here.” She held it out to the Trainer before her, “This is a Rockium-Z. You can use it to perform the Z-Move Continental Crush. Pay close attention as I show you the Z-Pose once more. The movement in the hips is crucial.” Moon and Lillie both watched as Olivia once again tightened her arms, stuck her hip out, and then turned it and her entire upper torso with it. Both nodded as the Kahuna straightened up and smiled at them. Very good. Burnet approached as well.

“Only under great pressure does coal become diamonds,” Olivia grinned at Moon, “but equally can diamonds be shattered by that pressure. I'm glad you made it through. Ula'ula Island isn't easy – you'll need to give your Pokemon more time and energy than you can believe to get through its Trials. But I believe you can. As long as you do too. No holding back, right?” Moon nodded emphatically. Lillie smiled at her. Burnet smiled at the pair. Very good.

“Well then,” the Professor set a hand each upon Moon and Lillie's shoulders, “should we head back?” Each agreed, Olivia turning and gesturing for Tapu Lele to return Nebby, who did so with a clear display of reluctance, placing the Nebula Pokemon back into Lillie's arms. Lillie stared up at the Island Deity in silence. All watched as it turned and left, heading deeper into the ruins, spending only one moment more to give Moon a deep look. Moon looked back. It seemed content with that.

Thus they returned. Thus celebrations were great. Thus the day came to an end, Moon slept deeply indeed, and the next day dawned.

The day Kukui would take Lillie with him to Ula'ula Island. The day Kahili would fly there on the back of her Pokemon. The day Hau and Moon would be taken there after their visitation to the Aether Paradise.

The day that the Island Challengers Hau and Moon would bid farewell to Akala Island, its three Trials and Grand Trial complete. The second of four islands on their Island Challenge done.

And still so much more left to go.

Chapter End Notes

Second Grand Trial complete! I've been looking forward to this chapter for a while for the introduction of Plumeria, but I gotta admit the Grand Trial went well too! Olivia definitely set out to make Moon give everything she had, but then she did the same to Hau. It was just a different approach for each.

With this chapter we now stand at the conclusion of the Akala arc. The next chapter, the Aether Paradise tour, will be it. After that, the Ula'ula Arc begins. I don't have a snappy name for that one like the Arcala, but nonetheless it's right ahead of us. I'll do metrics for the Akala arc at the end of the next chapter. Please look forward to it, and keep your eyes open when it hits. There's a lot to see, I promise you that.

As always, my thanks to all readers - knowing that I'm not sending this work into the void, that people are seeing it and enjoying it, helps motivate me to keep going at the pace I have been. I look forward to and enjoy your comments left with each chapter, so
please don't be shy in yelling out your thoughts, I love to hear them. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and are excited for the next one. I'll see you all then.
An Invitation to Paradise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She wasn't wrong, that was what Moon decided.

Lillie had called her scary. Lillie had called her beautiful. Those two thoughts had warred in Moon's mind as she trained the day before her Grand Trial, equally telling her that she had to change from the way she was and that she had to be even more of what she was. That confusion, mixing with the mounting tension Moon had felt as she'd prepared to face the Kahuna, as well as the stress from other Trainers along the way paying her too much mind, had driven Moon to a most precarious state indeed.

Then the encounter with Plumeria had nearly pushed her over the ledge she had come to.

She hadn't told anyone about it. Didn't say anything of the hole in the earth beyond the entrance of the Ruins of Life when leaving it with Olivia, Lillie, and Burnet. The Kahuna had asked Moon, who had come through this way before, if she knew, but Moon had lied and said she did not. Because she didn't want to talk about the Team Skull Trainer and the words she'd said: that Moon had just been crushing people with her power because she could. Because she didn't want to think about how bad it had felt seeing Tapu Lele do the same to Plumeria herself. Ever since the encounter with Tapu Koko in Verdant Cavern, Moon had felt a wariness to the Guardian Deities of Alola – aware that their strength was far too much for the seeming expectations they'd placed upon her. Seeing Tapu Lele and the way it fought, it solidified that wariness into almost fear. The Tapu... she didn't like being around them.

But she said nothing of that at all.

For a moment, before being drawn into the Grand Trial with Olivia that had taken so much of her focus she couldn't think of anything else, Moon had doubted herself. She'd doubted the way she used Z-Moves to brush away others – the sight of the Raticate falling from her Wishiwashi the day before still with her. She'd doubted the power and ferocity with which she'd battled – memories of her Pokemon chasing off others who stayed too long surfacing one after another. She'd doubted that the way she was, the way she thought and battled, was right. Believed that she needed to change. And that maybe that would mean she could no longer go on.

And when all of those doubts had come to a head, when she'd looked at Lillie and been sure she'd seen fear, Moon had for a single moment accepted it. Accepted she should stop here. Go no further. For a moment she'd been prepared to surrender.

Then Lillie had called out to her, reminded her of her promise to Hau. They were both going all the way, never holding back, and that meant Moon had to give it her all. It was in thinking of that that Moon found anew her confidence and determination. Resumed the Grand Trial with full intent. And was now sitting in Konikoni City later that day, surrounded by others – Hau and Lillie, Kukui and Burnet, Olivia, Kahili, even Sina and Dexio having found their way into the group again – all celebrating her victory. Her and Hau's victory. They were heading on to Ula'ula Island next. Their Island Challenges continuing. Oh everyone was so proud. Moon had kept quiet through it all. Until now.

She stood and smiled for she was not wrong. She'd thought about it, thought about it so much, but now she was sure. No holding back, right? That meant the only thing that was right was for her to
give it her all every single day. That was what she believed.

That was her childlike conclusion.

Not one of the people who looked out over Moon had ever seen the darker side of her aggression – even Kiawe watching over her as she struggled with his Trial only assuming it was childlike frustration. No-one here had seen Moon coldly order a Z-Move, lacking the passion and excitement of true battles, to dispose of Team Skull in her way. No-one had noticed the way her Pokemon acted with more ferocious attitudes when their Trainer was accosted. For none of that had ever happened in their presence. No-one knew of the pressure Moon had told no-one of, and so no-one could judge that against her. If they could things would have been different. Moon wouldn't have been told it was right to go all out. Olivia, in truth, would have failed the girl her Grand Trial and instead taken on mentorship of Moon, to help her better centre herself and treat all her battles, even against those like Team Skull, with greater respect for the Pokemon within them. Moon would not have left Akala Island, and her pace with Hau would have been broken. Frustrating, driving her anger further, but even that would help those with her better understand her. And, breaking their race that way, might have been better.

But that was not what was happening and everyone celebrating did not know. Moon's wide smile, happy to have found her answer, showed none of just what that answer entailed. Thus the course of what came next was set.

Great conflict upon Ula'ula Island lay just ahead.

“Okay, so,” Dexio, always one of the louder voices in any gathering, was looking over a pair of Pokemon, two that shared a name and only barely an appearance. In comparison to the bipedal red and white-furred Midnight form of Lycanroc, the Midday Lycanroc of Professor Kukui remained on all four legs, its fur a light brown mixing with muzzle, mane, tail, and feet of white. The two Lycanroc of Olivia and Kukui seemed roughly comfortable around one another, but maintained a distance all the same. Their glances were more competitive than anything else. Dexio looked over them with keen interest, “which form is stronger?”

“They each have different strengths,” Kukui shook his head, “one isn't specifically better than the other.”

“Though if you're talking individuals, definitely my own,” Olivia smiled, moreso when Kukui looked up at her with a raised eyebrow.

“I wouldn't be so sure.”

“Should we test it?”

Dexio, wide-eyed and nodding, joined by Sina who was similarly interested – and similarly capable of hearing an interesting discussion from across any distance and honing in on it with ease – each blew out a huff as Olivia and Kukui laughed and shook their heads.

“We'd make a horrible mess if we went all out.” Kukui's words were quickly agreed to by Olivia's nod.

“We might be outside right now,” they were, gathered in a group at a park nearby to the Pokemon Center of southern Konikoni, “but even then it'd be too much damage. If we took it to a battling field maybe but...”

“Best save it for the League,” Kukui grinned. “That's where all the best battles are going to happen
Moon, who'd approached the group with interest too, smiled at Olivia when she turned and smiled at her. The Kahuna found herself delighted by Moon's far happier mood. Bent down to whisper to her.

“I'd win, of course,” she made sure only Moon heard, “but it would be too much. One of the things about Pokemon Trainers is the more powerful you grow, the less you can give it your all. It'd just do too much damage to your surroundings. The more you grow, the more responsible you have to be, alright Moon?” Moon nodded in answer. She got it. Olivia smiled even wider. “I knew you'd understand.”

“I'm surprised you heard about that,” Kukui's voice drew Olivia and Moon's attention back, the Professor talking to the two Kalosian researchers, “it was about... Olivia, two years ago that a Dusk form was first observed?”

“That's right,” Olivia nodded in answer, “young Tristan and his Lycanroc. Come to think of it, we still haven't done his Final Trial.”

“Well,” Kukui frowned, “there's not a whole lot we can do about that until we have four Kahuna again. Tapu Fini still hasn't chosen Captain Mina?”

“Not that I've heard,” Olivia shook her head, “Mina hasn't said anything either. Just that Tapu Fini is waiting. We're not sure what for.”

The Professor and Kahuna made thoughtful noises at the mystery of Poni Island's unchosen Kahuna, while Sina approached Moon instead. Moon looked up at her as she addressed the young girl.

“We're talking about new Pokemon mysteries!” Sina with a grin pumped an arm, Dexio wandering over to join her. “Just like a new form of Lycanroc was discovered only recently, there's so many other unknowns – both new Pokemon and forms – just all over the place.”

Moon nodded. Like Eevee. Both researchers nodded back.

“Yes!” Dexio took over, he and Sina passing off the same speech with ease borne of having known one another for a very long time indeed. “There's probably tons of evolutions of Eevee we still don't know about. Are you going to try for one?” Moon nodded again. Olivia had offered her and Hau the choice of an Evolutionary Stone from her collection, but each had turned her down. They'd evolve their Eevees differently. Hau had accepted a Thunderstone, but that wasn't for his Eevee. And wasn't yet to be used.

Not until he was ready.

“You and Hau both love your Pokemon a whooole lot,” Sina held the 'o' of 'whole' for a moment to display the amount Moon and Hau cared about their Pokemon, “and at your pace they've been growing strong too. You'll probably see an Espeon, Umbreon, or Sylveon soon if you don't find something else.” Moon considered that. But didn't seem perturbed. She was fine with what happened. Both researchers grinned to hear that.

They were too.

“But keep an eye out!” Returning to the point they were shooting for, Dexio spoke again. “There's still so many mysteries about Pokemon, both undiscovered and forgotten! You know how many old records there are that say something was one Pokemon but we interpreted it wrong and believed it was another? Way too many! It just means there's discoveries to be made all the time! If you do your best, I'm sure you'll find some! And be sure to tell us when you do, okay?”
Moon nodded. Dexio and Sina were high-energy enough to be overwhelming, but Moon couldn't help but share their excitement either. She wanted to discover new things too. She'd try her best!

Hau watched Moon promise that in silence.

Where the Captains and Kahuna Olivia had spoken in advice, Dexio and Sina had told him earlier that day in plain detail. He was approaching a wall. Soon enough the Pokemon he kept with him, the Pokemon he was giving his all to every day, would begin to grow beyond his measure. Would, to overcome the challenges ahead, require even more power than they took now. Their growth, the growth of their demands, would be so much faster than the amount Hau could give them. He'd stop cold, unable to continue until he took the time, however long that was, to rest and grow with them. Not to charge forward into new challenges but instead to focus on improving himself. It was something that happened to everyone, they told him. He'd get through it. But it was about to stop him and he wouldn't be able to continue. The writing was on the wall. His Island Challenge was about to come to a screeching halt.

Moon seemed so happy. So relaxed now, maybe moreso than Hau had ever seen her before. She'd chosen to believe there was nothing that could go wrong as long as she continued moving forward. He'd been forced to acknowledge there were only a few steps more he could take. Their race together, motivating each other, sharing Trials and experiences, competing and doing their best, he had to tell her. Had to explain that where she could continue on, because her Pokemon's growth would never slow her down, he'd need to stop. That he couldn't race with her anymore.

That their competition had come to an end.

Moon, catching him looking her way, stepped over with a smile. They had their next Island ahead, right? She was excited for it, ready to do her next Trials. To go to new places with Hau and Lillie and see all that she could see. He was the same, right?

“I-” Hau stumbled at the expression of happiness and expectation on Moon's face, sure she knew his answer. He smiled back. “Yeah! We're gonna do great!” Moon rushed off to tell Lillie the same as Hau looked down.

She was gonna do great.

As Kukui's boat pulled away from the docks of Heahea City the next morning, Lillie aboard it waved to Moon, Hau, Kahili, and Burnet, who'd all disembarked to go their own way. The former three would now head across Akala's largest city to the Hano Grand Resort, where Jace, member of the Aether Foundation, was awaiting the two children to take them on to the floating Aether Paradise, man-made island to the south-west. Sina and Dexio were absent, having been sternly told by Kahili it was about time they gave the kids some space and maybe focused on preparing for the League so they'd do the first of Alola credit. They'd taken the hint that maybe it was best for them to come back around later.

As far as they knew, they'd given Moon and Hau all they could for the moment. Best let them grow on their own for now.

“Okay,” Burnet waved at the group, “time for me to get back to work! Tracking the Ultra Wormhole and what readings we can get from it is pretty tough stuff, so I can't leave my lab alone for too long! It was nice meeting you, Moon, and you again, Hau!” Moon and Hau both nodded back and thanked Professor Burnet for telling them all about the Ultra Wormhole and joining them for the past
few days. Burnet smiled back. Bid farewell to Kahili as well. Then took her leave.

Ever since the Ultra Wormhole readings spiked a few months back – strangely synonymous with her and her husband's discovery of Lillie – she'd been working full time on tracking the Wormhole, sleeping at her lab more often than not to be on site whenever it might manifest, whether the middle of the day or night. It had meant she'd spent a lot less time with her husband than she'd like of late, but this was something important to the extreme. She'd make it back when her research was complete. Maybe they'd take a trip somewhere? That'd be nice.

But back to work first! Professor Burnet of Alola, exit stage right.

From the docks of Heahea, Kahili took command, leading Hau and Moon across the city. Heahea City stretched far from the western coast of Akala across its breadth, a length of forest and field beyond it, and then a stretch of more expensive housing after. It was beyond that still, all the way on the eastern coast of Akala, that the Hano Grand Resort was situated, a hotel whose name existed alongside the very best of the world. It was when Kahili entered it to receive the immediate attention of the staff, all but falling over themselves to welcome her, that Moon and Hau realised just how notable she could be.

Kahili focused on none of that and continued directly on to stand before the Aether Foundation member seated on one of the foyer's chairs. “Jace?”

“Oh!” Jace stood, immediately nodding in confirmation. He was a young man, of similar age to Captain Ilima, and seemed slightly awed in the presence of Kahili Hano herself, especially being in the luxurious building bearing her name. Kahili lifted her head slightly to angle her stare at him.

“Moon and Hau were invited to the Aether Paradise?”

Looking past Kahili at the two children following behind her, Jace nodded at them, Moon specifically. He knew of Hau, and didn't find himself surprised to see the boy with Moon for this tour – especially since Branch Chief Faba had so freely told Moon to bring another. Jace turned his attention back to Kahili. “Yes, I was tasked to wait for them here, I can bring them back after as well.”

“Rather,” Kahili redirected Jace's intent, “are you able to take them to Malie City instead?” Jace blinked.

“Of- of course, but that would mean-” he looked back to Moon and Hau, the former with a relaxed smile. Wait. “Then the two of you...”

“Don't make a scene.” Kahili only lightly rested her hand on Jace's shoulder, but the way he immediately stiffened up showed he was all nerves. She shook her head. “They completed their Grand Trials. Leave it at that.”

“Right!” Jace nodded with almost mechanical precision. Kahili sighed and turned back to the others.

“I'm going to go and visit my father,” though she found the opulence of this place stifling, Kahili still appreciated her father and made sure to visit him when nearby, “and I will meet the two of you on Ula'ula Island. Congratulations on making it this far. You should both be proud.” Each smiled at her for saying that. Though their ridiculous pace still shook her should she let it, Kahili had learned over the past weeks to push past that. They may be incredible children, but they were still children, and she owed it to them to do the right thing by them. Kahili had returned to Alola on Professor Kukui’s invite, but for her own motivation. To help Alola and its Trainers grow even more.
Bidding the two farewell, giving Jace a final look that clearly instructed him to look after them, she took her leave as well. She'd see them later today.

But their farewell to Akala was still a thing every last person who knew them felt.

Jace focused his attention on the two children before him.

“Well then,” having been notified by Kahili calling ahead Jace had already checked out from the resort, the cost of staying covered by the Aether Foundation yet still feeling like a little much to him. No doubt the Branch Chief had thought himself doing Jace a favour by stationing him in such an opulent location, but it just hadn't been to Jace's taste. He was happy to be heading off. He nodded down at Moon and Hau. “Shall we be off?” Moon and Hau nodded back. Well then, off they go!

A boat docked at the resort, branded with the symbol of the Aether Foundation – a symbol Moon remembered was upon her Ride Pager every time she saw it – awaited the three, each stepping aboard one after the other – Jace, Moon, Hau. Jace went for the cabin with the two children following after, each wanting to speak with him. When Kiawe and Mallow had mentioned Jace and his friendship with Captain Ilima during the rainy day of their Lush Jungle Trial, the interest in him had been set within each. Given the freedom to pilot the small boat out of the docks and cove of the Hano Grand Resort and onto the open sea, Jace breathed out a loud sigh once he could just focus on one direction ahead. Turned his attention to the two children watching him. Gave them a reassuring smile. “We'll be there soon enough!”

Garbed in the white clothing of Aether Foundation workers, Jace was a taller and lankier individual than Captain Ilima had been, the only real similarity between them how clearly long each had spent out under Alola's sun, tanned as strongly as they were. Another difference between them was the confidence they expressed, so much less so in Jace than Ilima constantly had on display. Jace, looking at these two, bit at his lip and stumbled on how to begin talking multiple times, wondering what he could say. He wanted to ask them so much, about their journey so far, the unnatural speed at which they'd gone – about Moon's incredible and once-believed impossible ability – but any way he came up with how to phrase it seemed rude. Self-doubt kept him silent.

Eventually Hau spoke first.

“You're friends with Captain Ilima, right?”

“How?!” Thrilled to be the one addressed rather than addressing, Jace nodded with a smile. “Ilima and I did our Trials together, racing our way across Alola. We set records!” His proud smile quickly grew wistful. “But those are gone now with you two. I don't think anyone's going to match yours.”

In the silence of Moon and Hau, aware of their own ridiculous pace, Jace sighed to himself. “It's been a long time now, over six years already. I didn't complete my Final Trial when Ilima left, it just didn't feel right. Trained with my Pokemon more but... well, I joined up with the Aether Foundation – they have programs for young Trainers to lend hands around Alola and I went from there to full-time. Let my Pokemon go since it wasn't fair keeping them when I wasn't battling, and got into working on Aether technology. When Ilima came back from Kalos he and I designed the Ride Pager, you know?”

Moon and Hau both nodded at that, aware that the man before them had done something really impressive. Jace seemed embarrassed to catch himself bragging. “Well, it was a team-effort, Ilima's super-smart, he led the way.” Jace looked away, out the window of the boat coursing over the wide seas of Alola. Looked past his reflection in the glass. “Honestly, I haven't spent much time with Ilima since then,” he turned his head, looking at the two children behind him, “how is he?”
“He's good!” Hau affirmed and Moon nodded, both agreeing that Captain Ilima was doing great. He'd helped them each out during their Melemele Trial and Grand Trial a whole bunch! They really liked him and he seemed really happy. Jace smiled to hear that. Looked genuinely relieved, to be honest.

“I was hoping so,” he said it with such honesty it stuck out to Moon. Was... was Jace expecting something to be wrong?

“Oh...” caught out by Moon's surprising insight, Jace looked away again. “Just... his father can be...” suddenly tight-lipped, Jace went silent. Moon asked again. Was something wrong? Jace kept looking away.

“Ilima's father,” he spoke slowly, as if debating every word he said, “loves to show Ilima off to others. Is so proud of him but every time it's just 'look at my son, isn't he amazing, please appreciate him'. He's always been that way. Ilima came back from Kalos and the first thing his father did was throw a party to show him off to all the other highbrows in Hau'oli. And I know Ilima doesn't like it. He never liked it.” A huff of breath came from Jace as he finished, aware he'd been venting. “Sorry,” he shook his head, “I shouldn't be ranting at you.”

“Uh...” Hau glanced at Moon, who looked back at him with similar wide eyes. They hadn't expected to hear this. “There was a party we saw him in one time-”

“Ugh!” Jace made the noise of disgust with enough emotion to make Hau and Moon both go silent, the Aether Foundation member staring daggers at his own mental image of Ilima's father. “He was always like that, even when we were younger! Even then it was always 'look at my child, aren't they special, everyone needs to know how great they are! Ilima doesn't want that! He never wanted it! And I keep telling him to-” abruptly Jace slapped a hand over his mouth, aware now he was going way too far. He shook his head and mumbled something neither children before him could hear through the hand clamped over his mouth. Eventually Jace drew the hand away.

“I spoke out of turn,” he kept his eyes down, “please don't mention this to Ilima. I just... no, forget it. Just leave it be.” Moon and Hau looked at each other. They'd heard a lot they probably shouldn't have. But a question still remained.

“Umm, Mr. Jace?” Jace looked at Hau as the boy addressed him. “Why did you and Captain Ilima stop doing your Trials?”

Jace paused. Then looked away.

“It's complex.” He said it to himself, his own faint reflection in the glass of the cabin, more than to anyone else. “If I were to explain it I'd say... imagine spending time with someone and it's the best, you're so happy together that you forget all your problems, nothing ever feels wrong. But those problems... they're still there. And the more you ignore them, the worse they get. So even though you can't feel them when you're together, as soon as you're apart they just... they hurt so much more. It was like that.” Jace paused again before shaking his head. “Sorry, that probably doesn't make sense.”

In the silence that followed, thinking on the words Jace had spoken, Hau answered in a voice far quieter and more restrained than most had ever heard him speak before. “No,” he shook his head, “I get it.”

Jace looked at him. Then back to the way ahead. “Huh.” In the distance, its white structure glittering under the sun's light, the Aether Paradise lay before them.

The ship bearing them continued on.
“Aha! Welcome! Welcome!” The reedy voice of Branch Chief Faba of the Aether Foundation was quick to greet Moon and Hau as Jace escorted them through the main entrance of the Aether Paradise, the boat they had taken here docked at a level below and an elevator ridden up to the entrance floor. Faba approached the group. “Very good Jace, very good.” Jace nodded.

“Thank you, Branch Chi-”

“Now then!” Cutting through Jace's response, Faba rubbed his hands together. “Welcome, each of you, to the Aether Paradise, a technological marvel containing technological marvels, the pinnacle of Pokemon care the world over, the bastion of the future for people and Pokemon alike! I am, as you know, Branch Chief Faba of the Aether Foundation, one of the firm hands upon the wheel of this great ship we are sailing into tomorrow! It is indeed my great pleasure to welcome you to the centre of Pokemon conservation efforts within Alola – today you will see many great things! Your tour guide has already been prepared, she will be along shortly, I am sure.”

Moon and Hau stared blankly. Faba had just said a lot. Or rather very little in a lot of words. Jace opened his mouth to speak.

“Ah!” Faba's voice overlapped his in an instant. “And there she is now. Come now, Assistant Branch Chief, you cannot keep us waiting.” Clapping his hands, Faba jerked his head to indicate the woman approaching them should hurry up. “The time I spend here is time not spent working and, I can assure you, that is time most wasted indeed. We all have so very much to do after all, do we not?”

“Y-yes, Branch Chief Faba.” The woman saying that had a light and airy voice that sounded weighed down by having to speak as such. She was of similar height to Faba, though the mass of her dark and voluptuous hair caused her to look quite taller. Wearing another modified version of the Aether Foundation outfit, this one with a pink sweater-like upper half from her midsection to neck and wrists, she raised a hand and adjusted the wide rimmed glasses she wore, their frames a similar pink as well. “Greetings Hau, greetings Moon, my name is Wicke, it is a pleasure to have you visit us today.”

“Very good very good,” Faba's droning tone came in as Wicke finished her introductions, “Now then, Assistant Branch Chief, if you would take these children on?” Wicke quietly nodded and instructed Hau and Moon to follow her. Each made it a few steps before Faba called again. “Ah, but Miss Moon, if you would a moment?”

Moon stopped and turned. Hau did too but Wicke instructed him to move forward with her, the boy reluctantly following after, creating enough space for Faba to address Moon alone. He stepped closer to her.

“Now then, I am to believe you are in possession of Aether property, is that not the case?” Moon paused, looking at Jace, who did nod to her which she supposed was reassuring. Jace's outbursts on the boat over had surprised her, but at the same time it sounded as though he genuinely cared for Ilima. That was enough to trust him. Moon reached into her bag and withdrew the white Ride Pager she carried.

“Ah, yes yes yes,” Faba wiggled his fingers as he outstretched a hand to Moon, who almost instinctively pulled the Ride Pager back. Faba paused, looking at her. “Now now, young Miss, this is no act of thievery on our part! We are very thankful for you returning this piece of technology to us, and will have it replaced, with its contents transferred to a new Ride Pager, before your time here is
done. Now then, if you please?"

With reluctance Moon handed it over. She'd promised Lana she'd trade it for another, though still didn't understand why. This wasn't how she'd expected it at all but... maybe it was for the best? She didn't know. She didn't understand a lot of this. But Jace attempted to reassure her, before Faba spoke over him again, and that meant something. She supposed.

“Now then,” with a wide smile Faba waved a hand, “please join your fellow with Assistant Branch Chief Wicke, and enjoy your tour of the Aether Paradise! Much of the technology in use here has had my hand upon it, so you will surely appreciate all of it, yes!” Waving again and again, Faba succeeded in shooing Moon off to join Wicke. Turned to head off to the labs with prize in hand. Oh so very good indeed.

“Uhm, Branch Chief?” Jace, following behind, had to question it. “Have you... reported to the Madam President yet about this? That we've located the missing Professor Moh-”

“Now Jace!” In a strong tone Faba ordered his assistant's silence. “Surely you are aware we are in a delicate period right now, with the Ultra Wormhole's manifestations becoming so frequent across Alola? We do not yet know the specific status of this so-called 'Professor Mohn' and, frankly, the introduction of him to the President would be most distressing at this time. No, until I have ascertained all that is involved in this situation, no reports shall be made. As your superior I have already taken charge of this task, and you should worry no more about it. Do you understand?”

Jace, cowed by Fabas's words, backed down and nodded. The Branch Chief smiled and continued on. “Now come, Jace, we have work to be done! With the original Ride Pager in hand we will finally be able to complete our prototypes! It is a great day for the Aether Foundation and you should put all worries from your mind! Today, we seize the future!” Led on, Jace followed after Faba. Spent a moment looking back, but Wicke and the children were already gone. He sighed and continued on.

Back to work.

“Welcome to the Aether Paradise Pokemon Conservation Zone.” Tour-guiding wasn't really Wicke's job; as Assistant Branch Chief she was actually quite high up the ladder within the Aether Foundation. However that meant nothing to the orders of those above her, and so today Wicke found herself pulled from usual duties to guide two young children around the Aether Paradise. A small part of her was, admittedly, annoyed by that.

“Oh it's so cool! Look, Moon! There's Corsola down there in the water!”

In truth though, watching Hau and Moon observing the Conservation Zone within the Aether Paradise, a location filled with lush fields, trees, flowing water, and rock structures, Wicke couldn't help but smile all the same. Despite the beauty of this place, white walkways set above it to not disturb the Pokemon below, sometimes it took seeing someone else's reaction to remember how grand it was. How good what the Aether Foundation did could be. She appreciated the reminder. Stepped up to the edge of the walkway Hau was half leaning over to bring him back. And resumed the tour.

“The number of Corsola in Alola is actually quite low for such an aquatic region – due in large part to the hunting practises of Mareanie and Toxapex. They are quite vicious Pokemon, which have torn apart the Corsola colonies of Alola quite savagely. We keep a colony here in the hopes of replenishing those numbers one day.”
“That's rough...” Hau mused, looking out over the Pokemon below him, this area built atop the level Wicke had greeted them on before. It was hard to believe there was so much below what looked like a perfect nature reserve. The Aether Paradise really was incredible! “I know my gramps likes to say the world of nature can be cruel, but still that's just... you know, Moon?”

Moon, who'd seen cruelty from nature first-hand just the day before, nodded. Wicke agreed.

“Yes, and at times we must question the degree to which we, as humans, choose to interfere in nature, but nonetheless there will still be times we are required to act. Our President, Madam Lusamine, makes these decisions with absolute confidence. She has led the Aether Foundation for well over a decade already to incredible effect. As you can see all around us.”

“Oooh,” Hau nodded, “do we get to meet her too?”

Wicke raised her head and looked around. “It is possible she may be here.” But not in sight for the moment. Wicke continued the tour.

“The Aether Paradise employs a special jamming signal,” Wicke spoke as Moon and Hau looked every which way, Pokemon of all kinds in the conservation areas below, “which prevents the functioning of Pokeballs within it. This is to prevent poachers from raiding the location – as there are many Pokemon in rehabilitation here that could not protect themselves from would-be thieves.”

In curiosity, Hau attempted to activate one of his own, Brionne manifesting and giving a happy cry in doing so.

“Aha, only unused Pokeballs,” Wicke shook her head, “any system that prevents a Pokemon from leaving a Pokeball, or imprisons it in any way is, after all, highly immoral.” That earned nods from the two children. They got that. Hau called Brionne back to him. The tour continued.

Footsteps approached the group from behind.

“Wicke, who have you here?”

She spoke with a lilting voice, one that carried strongly the intent it was spoken with. Curiosity gave way to a smile and a much happier tone as the group turned to face her, each raising their head to the tall woman that had appeared.

Lusamine, Madam President of the Aether Foundation, smiled widely.

“How wonderful to meet you, Moon and Hau, I had heard you were to be visiting but did not realise it was so soon.” Aside from her height, even taller than Professor Kukui himself, what was most notable about Lusamine was her hair, long and brilliant blonde, wrapping around her head and down to her waist like a shroud. It was reminiscent of Lillie's own, and between the tall woman's striking green eyes and the white clothing she wore – a dress with yellow transparent frilling layered over its waist and a deep green crystal set into the chest, long pants of white with sides of black – Moon couldn't help but feel a strong resemblance to Lillie in Lusamine's form. It stood out to her.

“I am most delighted to welcome you both,” her voice was warm, care and happiness behind it as she spoke, “and pleased that you have been able to see the Aether Paradise I have built. A place where Pokemon can be safe within my care. I am one who feels a deep love for all Pokemon, and my desire to create a haven for them has borne fruit. Everything you have seen today... is a result of love for Pokemon. Please keep that in your hearts.”

“Wow...” Hau, looking around, internalised that. A place like this, a place built out of love for Pokemon, it stuck with him. He looked back to Lusamine with stars in his eyes. “That's amazing!”
He was nodding his head as he spoke, unable to keep still. “Miss Wicke said you'd been doing this for a decade, you must've started at, like... our age!” Lusamine spent a moment wide mouthed before raising a hand over hers, laughing delightedly.

“Oh you young charmer!” She seemed as pleased as could be, “I am more than old enough already to be your mother!” Hau stared at her with an odd look before raising his hands, counting fingers, then shaking his head. Looked at Lusamine again.

“Really?”

She laughed louder. “Honestly, Wicke, you've brought such a silver-tongued young gentleman into our midst, I am so sorely tempted to keep him!” Wicke smiled thinly as Lusamine turned her attention back to the boy. “It is simply a matter of taking proper measures to care for oneself,” she seemed happy to explain, “that and of course the correct fashion. You and young Miss Moon are on your Island Challenges at present, correct?” Each nodded. “I would not dream of interfering with something so important, but when you are done, the Aether Foundation does indeed have outreach programs for working with local Trainers around Alola. I am sure our styling would most suit you.”

“Hmmm,” Hau looked from Lusamine to Moon, “I dunno, I think only Lillie could do that look.” Moon nodded back to Hau. Lusamine and Wicke were silent.

Moments passed.

“Well!” Lusamine clapped her hands, “I should return to my work. Wicke, if you would be so kind as to-”

Alarms blared.

Barely was Lusamine able to demand what was occurring before the room shook. Before the Aether Paradise shook. Lusamine called into a communicator, demanded a report, garbled static in return. Wicke, rushing to Moon and Hau as everything shook, held each to her to keep them stable. Moon's eyes were locked on the air before her.

It was cracking.

Splitting. Tearing. Fractures in the air itself radiating a rainbow of colour widened before them, a hole forming over the conservation area below. Light, bright light from deep within the hole washed over the four, all now staring into it. Lusamine mouthed the words 'Ultra Wormhole'. No-one else heard her.

A form took shape within the light.

“Stay back!” Taking steps forward, ordering Wicke to bring Moon and Hau back, Lusamine stood before the creature emerging from the hole before her. It was white, jellyfish-like and floating, a mass of white tentacles hanging from a round and frilled head. Light flickered around its body, an aura similar to that the Totems of Alola held. Moon stared at it, Wicke's hand on her shoulder. What was...

“You're here,” Lusamine breathed the words, standing before the floating being, “at last. You've come from so far, but you are safe now. I have you.” She raised a hand. “Come to me.”

The creature screamed.

Lusamine's yell back, her own loud “no!” went ignored as the beast raced past her, over the railings and out past other Pokemon, cowering from the shaking and the feeling of this creature that did not
belong. Lusamine ran after it across the walkways, yelling into her communicator as she went.

“Faba, bring the prototype Beast Balls to the conservation area! No I don't care that they're not done, get them up here immediately! And deactivate the signal jammer so we can use them! On the double!”

Moon broke free of Wicke's grasp and threw a Pokeball of her own.

Dartrix flew out, over the conservation area below, circling the strange creature that had appeared. In return the creature screamed at it, tentacles shaking violently. It lashed out, reaching to the Blade Quill Pokemon, who hastily careened back under Moon's orders. The creature gave chase.

Through the air, over the conservation areas, it followed Moon's Pokemon back to where it had emerged. Hau, who'd led Wicke away, watched as Moon stood before the hole the creature had come from, Dartrix leading it down to her. Moon called out to it. It yelled at her. She called again. It paused.

Lusamine, racing back around the walkways, unable to go in a straight line as the Pokemon and creature had flown, heard Moon speak. Heard her ask why the creature was so afraid, what was scaring it? Heard her tell it that it was safe, it didn't need to be frightened anymore. And watched as it began to calm. Watched as Moon, not her, Moon, was accepted by the Beast. Gritted her teeth and closed in.

“Moon come here.”

Lusamine walked forward, reaching an arm out to take Moon's own, “Get away from there, it's not safe.” Moon pulled back, insisting she was fine. She was calming the creature. Lusamine looked at it, noting it had grown more placid. Turned her eyes to look back at the Ultra Wormhole.

Widened them in shock.

“Look out!”

The strength behind Lusamine's pull, hauling Moon from her feet and through the air, away from where they stood, was immense. The two hit the ground, Lusamine unbalanced by the action, Moon carried without choice, as from the radiating hole of light a massive shape emerged. Dark, pitch black, crystalline in structure, three sharper segments stretching from it in what appeared to be claws. The white creature, the Ultra Beast, screamed but that was all it could do. The hand wrapped around it.

And pulled it back into the light.

The alarms faded away.

In the silence that followed Lusamine pulled herself to her feet, looking with cold eyes out into the space the Ultra Wormhole had been and was now gone. An Ultra Beast had come before her and she'd lost it. It had been taken from her. Because... turning, she looked down. Moon was still on the ground, pulling herself up to a sitting position before wincing and grabbing at her right arm, the one Lusamine had pulled her by. Rolling up her sleeve gently, Moon winced again at the touch. Lusamine could see the girl's skin was bruised.

“Wicke.” She said it matter-of-factly, drawing the assistant's attention, “A first-aid kit.”

“Yes!” Wicke nodded, immediately racing to the nearest station, returning as fast as she could. Lusamine took it from her and knelt down before Moon.
“Honestly,” she placed one hand around Moon's wrist to hold her still, the other wrapping a bandage around Moon's upper arm after treating the bruising of it, “I had warned you to stay back. You should have listened.” Moon, wincing still at the feeling of the bandages being wrapped tight, bit at her lip. Lusamine caught it. “Now now,” she locked her eyes on Moon's, Moon looking away, “there's no need for that. You are a strong Trainer, are you not? You don't need to cry.” Moon held her eyes closed for a long moment before opening them dry. Lusamine smiled. “There, see? A strong and beautiful young girl. And you know now to listen when an adult tells you to, yes?” A slow nod. Lusamine nodded back. “There,” she stood, bandaging of Moon's arm done, “Wicke!”

Wicke nodded and immediately bent down, offering a hand for Moon to take. Moon stood on her own. Lusamine gave her order. “Have these two taken back to where they came from, we must assess the damages done by the Ultra Wormhole's manifesting.”

“Ultra Wormhole!?” Hau, hovering nearby as Moon was bandaged by Lusamine, yelled the words quite loudly. “Then! Then! Was that an Ultra Beast?!?”

“You're quite learned.” Lusamine turned a smile on Hau, the same smile she'd worn before all this. “Yes, that was indeed an Ultra Beast, a Pokemon from another world. They, too, I wish to protect. And I fully intend to do so. Such is my love.”

“Wow...” Hau nodded, “that's really amazing Miss Lusamine!” Lusamine kept her smile for him. Then nodded back to Wicke. “Wicke.”

“Yes, Madam President!” Taking charge, Wicke set to escorting Moon and Hau back down to the docks. As they approached the lift, it dinged, Faba emerging from it.

“Ah!” He approached the trio, holding out a hand to Moon, “I am glad to have caught you. As promised, I deliver this unto you.” Moon, reaching out with her left hand, right arm kept slack, curled her fingers around the Ride Pager so that no-one could see what it was. Hau looked curious but didn't get to see. Moon slipped the item into her bag. “Well then,” Faba stepped on, “as you were.” And made his way over to Lusamine.

The lift containing Wicke, Moon, and Hau descended below.

“You're late.” Lusamine's cold stare at Faba was one of a person looking down upon a particularly unpleasant slug. “The Ultra Beast is already gone.”

“My apologies, Madam President,” Faba bowed deeply, “the security protocols upon the capture jamming system are quite complex, it took me a moment to bring them down.”

“Hmph,” Lusamine blew out a breath, turning her eyes away from the man, “leave it off. Should an Ultra Beast return, I do not want anything getting in my way. And release the UB Catalogue, it's about time we have the Pokedex Holders around Alola pull their weight.”

“Yes, Madam President,” Faba bowed again, taking steps backwards. All the better that the Beast Balls were not used. At least now he'd have the time to finish their development. Oh a device that cared nothing for the Bonds between people and Pokemon, how drastically it would change this world. He couldn't wait to complete it and sign his name into history.

Faba, known throughout the world! To that end, he absolutely could not let anyone else interfere. Not Jace, nor the Madam President, nor the former head of research Mohn. Only him.

Only him.

Lusamine, looking out over the conservation area, Pokemon timidly emerging from hiding places
below, clicked her tongue. “Oh daughter,” she spoke to herself alone, “just hold on to that Pokemon for now. The Ultra Dimensional Divider is soon to be complete. Then you will return to me what is mine.” She closed her eyes. “Soon I will have all that is mine.”

Wicke saw Moon and Hau off, the two boarding a ferry travelling to Ula'ula Island, carrying Aether Foundation workers home for the day. Hau, excited about the encounter with an Ultra Beast, insisting they tell Professor Kukui as soon as they found him, was replied to only blankly by Moon as she stared out the window of the boat.

Onwards the ferry went, carrying the two on, Ula'ula Island ahead, home of more Trials. The third stage of their Island Challenge. The continuation of their journey together. Full of new people and new Pokemon to encounter. Truly, her excitement should know no end.

...  

Her arm hurt.

Chapter End Notes

And so the Arcala comes to a close. In total the Akala Arc of Eldritch ran from the very end of May to a week into September, slightly over fourteen weeks and just as many chapters, coming to a grand total of just under 115,000 words! By comparison the Melemele Arc ran for ten chapters over eight weeks and just under 55,000 words. Wow! That's more than twice as long!

I won't make the foolish choice of saying the Ula'ula arc won't be similarly large, maybe even larger, but I will say there's definitely no way it will double in size from Akala. There is a lot to it though - there's a lot of people and a LOT that happens on Ula'ula. Please look forward to it. There's going to be a slightly longer gap between this chapter and the next, probably two weeks as opposed to one, as I prepare for this arc which I don't yet have a snappy name for, and then we'll be diving right into it. I'm sure you're all excited. I know I am.

This is, without question, a chapter I've been looking forward to for a long time. There's a lot that happened in it I've known weeks and months in advance, and so I've been sitting on it silently never breathing a word to anyone until the time came. I'm sure it's no surprise that I enjoy weaving subtlety into my works, so some of you have likely already had some presumptions about how Lusamine is, but now you have a clear picture of where I'm going with her. I hope my depiction and take on her is striking, if nothing else. I was struck by it when first concepting how this would go.

There's a lot to this chapter, both in characters and plot, and that is ultimately something to be discussed through future chapters, not through here, so I will close these notes for now. Thank you all for reading, we've successfully completed two of Eldritch's five arcs together. The Akala arc, as I've said so many times before, is the Moon and Hau arc, whereas the Ula'ula arc will be the Hau and Lillie arc. Things will be different.

There's still so much more to go.
“...and that concludes the broadcast from Aether Foundation President Madam Lusamine, announcing the next major breakthrough in research on the Ultra Wormhole done in collaboration between the Aether Foundation and Dimensional Research Lab of Alola. Pokedex-holding individuals are advised to visit the nearest Pokemon Center and download the newly released Ultra Beast catalogue.

In further news reports of localised eclipses across Alola have continued over the past two months, now understood to be light distortion events created by appearances of the Ultra Wormhole. A number has been set up for reporting these events to those tracking the Ultra Wormhole: please calmly contact this line should you witness such. While the darkening of the sky can be disorienting, no reports of injuries or harm from the Ultra Wormhole have been made, and it can be considered an ultimately harmless natural phenomenon at this time.

Scheduled for opening in the first week of next year's Spring, the first Alolan Pokemon League remains on track, construction of the Pokemon League Stadium atop Ula'ula Island's Mount Lanakila continuing unabated. While this initial tournament will be held as an invitational event for many of Alola's famous Trainers, as well as a number of League Trainers from other Regions, excitement remains high amongst the general populace of Alola. Still, some doubts remain with a portion of the people concerned that the League will compromise Alola's Island Challenge traditions, with town halls across the region continuing to be held by Alola's Professor Kukui. Later this week, Professor Kukui will be attending the annual Alola Culture Council meeting in Ula'ula Island's Malie City, and is expected to address many concerns there.

Three weeks on from the passing of Poni Island's Kahuna Koa, a new Kahuna for the Island has yet to be chosen by Island Deity Tapu Fini. Captain Mina of Poni Island, who is considered the primary candidate to become the next Kahuna, has continued to decline comment, leading to some concerns Tapu Fini may never name a Kahuna at all. In the absence of a fourth Kahuna, Island Challenges are unable to be completed, with some Challengers ready for their Final Trials left frustrated at being held up. An interview with one such is scheduled for later this afternoon.

Team Skull activity around Alola has increased in previous weeks, with the number of gang members sighted in all major Alolan cities on the rise. While the majority are still known to reside in the gated Po Town of Ula'ula Island, concerns are being raised that the group are attempting to create footholds for their presence beyond the sealed location. Reports from Malie City about Team Skull actions have--”

“This is your Captain speaking, we are now approaching Malie City. Thank you for travelling with us this afternoon, and please consider using the Alola Ferry Service again. I repeat, we are now approaching Malie City, all passengers please prepare for departure. Thank you and have a good day.”

“Hwaaaaaah!”

With a loud sound of satisfaction Hau stretched once off the ferry he and Moon had ridden from the Aether Paradise, cracking joints and enjoying the afternoon light of Malie City now that he was here.
Turning he looked at his fellow Island Challenger Moon, who stood just a few steps behind him. She'd lifted the brim of the wide hat she wore, something covering her caramel-blonde hair, hiding the majority of her dark-skinned face. Though she looked little like Hau had originally met her, dark-haired, a strange red chicken-combed hat, wearing bright flower patterned clothing, he still felt the same from her as he did when they'd first met. The sensation of his friend. He smiled at her.

"We made it, huh Moon?"

Moon didn't answer.

Malie City of Ula'ula Island had a strong Johtonian demographic, the result of which was that the overall style and design of the city resembled the Johto Region as well. Moon had travelled to Johto once, a trip with her mother and father in younger years of her life. This place reminded her of it. Maybe too much.

"Moon?"

Hau's tap upon her shoulder drew her eyes, slowly focusing on him as Moon realised she was being addressed. She still seemed shaken to Hau, not a surprise given the events at the Aether Paradise; the appearance of the Ultra Wormhole and Ultra Beast; and whatever it had been that grabbed the Ultra Beast and nearly Moon too. And... Hau's gaze drifted to Moon's right arm, knowing that beneath the sleeve bandages were wrapped, Moon injured when being pulled out of danger by the Aether President Lusamine. He looked back to her eyes. "Are you okay?"

What were they doing next? Moon gave no answer to Hau's question, simply focusing on what was ahead of them. Hau turned with her, looking down the streets of Malie City from its docks. Remembered.

"Professor Kukui said he'd be waiting at the Malie Garden in the afternoon, right?" Now that Hau said it, Moon remembered the same. She nodded. Hau started walking. "Then let's go see him! We have to tell him all about the Ultra Wormhole and Ultra Beast too!" So Hau set off, Moon in step behind. Each thinking their thoughts.

Hau knew he had to tell Moon. Had to explain that he wasn't going to be able to race her to the next Trial, that his Pokemon's growth meant he couldn't keep up with them anymore. Malie City was a nice looking place, he could see himself staying here for a bit! And if Professor Kukui was staying here, that means Lillie would be too! It wasn't all bad! Just that... they couldn't race like they did anymore. Hau couldn't keep up. Moon... was going ahead.

He had to tell her that. He... had to.

Malie City's colour was red. Rather, red was the official colour of Ula'ula Island, as pink was for Akala and yellow for Melemele, but for Moon right now it was the city. Red banners. Red signs. Red clothing. Red hats.

Her eyes locked onto a person passing her by, wearing such a red piece donned with bright flowers. It set quickly within her a feeling of missing something, of being under-dressed, for she was not as she wished to be. But that hat she loved, it was far too iconic a thing. She'd be recognised in an instant if she was seen. And then the people would be upon her.

... come to think of it, her parents had bought her that hat when they'd visited Johto back then. Moon's thoughts caught on that and did not move forward. She walked after Hau in silence. Both in silence.
It wasn't long to find the Malie Garden, the location well signposted and residents of Malie happy to give directions to the young children asking the way. Hau and Moon, travelling together for the moment still, entered the Garden's threshold and took in the sight before them. A sight most welcoming and embracing indeed.

Built to remind all those of Johto birth or breed, the Malie Garden served as a reminder of the home left behind, a connection between old and new. Though all of Malie City held influences of the Johto Region, the Malie Garden was so accurate as to feel like one had returned to the Region itself. Moon, eyes wide and staring in every direction, felt the memories of her own time in Johto returning even stronger still. It really was like she was there.

Back then.

“Wow!” Hau, impressed with the wide gardens, watery pathways with small bridges stretching over them, plantlife and architecture from the Johto Region itself, and in general just incredible feeling of tranquillity this place brought, had no reservations about loudly announcing it. “This place is beautiful, isn't it Moon?”

Nodding, Moon walked forward, almost trance-like. It was so easy to close her eyes and go back. So easy indeed...

“Oh hey! I think I see the Professor!” Hau's hand shaking her shoulder broke Moon from her reverie, following the direction he pointed to a small cluster of buildings past a bridge stretching over one of the waterways. There was a figure there, standing and waving, tall with a white coat and tanned bare chest. Yep. That was the Professor.

Moon and Hau made their way over to him.

“Hey there Moon! Hey there Hau!” Smiling, Kukui waved 'Alola' to them both, “Good to see you, yeah!”

“Hey Professor!” Hau waved back, racing over to him as Moon followed behind, “You'll never guess what we saw today!”

“Oh?” With a look of curiosity Kukui waved for Moon to hurry up and join him and Hau, “Well let me get you all something first, yeah, then you can tell me about your day!” A small shop in the middle of the Garden, marked with the Vanillish ice-cream brand, was happy to provide a cone each for Hau and Moon, Kukui paying their orders. The two children sat and ate, Kukui watching over them with a smile. Ula'ula Island, they'd really done it! He'd been sure he'd seen great potential in Moon and Hau when first handing them their Pokemon, but this really had defied all beliefs. It was still incredible to think about. And once he was past this Culture Council meeting in a few days, he'd be better able to lend his hand to them too. For as much as he could do on Ula'ula Island, considering. He shook his head to forget about that for the moment. Later. Hau finished his ice-cream first.

“Okay!” Bounding to his feet, Hau's eyes shone as he announced his and Moon's discovery, “We saw an Ultra Beast!”

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“Really?” In response to Kukui's question, Hau pulled out his own Pokedex, showing the scan he'd taken of the unknown creature: the Ultra Beast his Pokedex had recorded, but knew nothing of. Kukui's eyes got even wider. Really! Wow! He looked over to Moon, who nodded and confirmed.
Finished the last of her ice-cream. An Ultra Wormhole had appeared in the Aether Paradise and the Beast had come out of it. Kukui was almost shaking as he pulled out his phone.

“Okay, okay,” he held up one hand, the other making the call, “let me just...” Moments later he had his wife on speaker, and begged Hau to tell the story from the beginning. With each of Hau’s words the two professors grew more entranced, before Moon cut in to tell her own version of the finale, describing the hand that pulled the Ultra Beast back into the Wormhole, but leaving out anything that happened to her in the moment. Hau gave her a weird look for it. She met his eyes and he looked away.

“That's...” Burnet's voice through the phone sounded as amazed as her husband was, “I really don't know what to say, that's amazing you two! I was wondering what prompted the Aether Foundation to release the UB Catalogue we'd been developing by scanning the Ultra Wormhole, but that... wow. The two of you should make sure to stop in at a Pokemon Center and get a copy of the catalogue on your Pokedexes, so you can send the data you've collected back to it. All of the Trainers in Alola will be working together to help capture any Ultra Beast information we can get, after all!” Hau nodded and loudly agreed, before Kukui pulled his phone back to finish the call with his wife. Hau sat down next to Moon.

“Are you okay?”

She didn't answer again. Pointed instead at the skyline, two great mountainous peaks framing the west, the sun beginning to approach their embrace. She hadn't been to Ula‘ula Island before, were those mountains part of the Trials? Hau shook his head, not knowing for sure. Kukui finished his call.

“That one there's Mount Hokulani,” Kukui pointed to the northern-most of the two, “while the other is Mount Lanakila.” Mount Lanakila stretched taller than Hokulani, with more white frost wreathing its cap as well. “Mount Hokulani is the site of the fifth Trial of the Island Challenge, while Mount Lanakila is where the Pokemon League will be held! So you'll be heading up the first of them soon, but the second a lot later!”

So she had to go to the top of Mount Hokulani next. Kukui and Hau both noticed Moon locking onto that. She was really determined to go right to her next Trial without a missed beat. Well... “I have the Alola Culture Council meeting coming up,” Kukui spoke again, drawing Moon and Hau’s eyes back to him. “Kahili and I have been really building up to that. But if you do want to go up to Mount Hokulani, Moon, let me know. I have a friend up at the observatory there, so I'd love to go see him and introduce you. Sound good, yeah?” Moon nodded, which Kukui smiled at. He stretched a little in the fading afternoon light.

“Okay, I should probably head to the Pokemon Center nearby – that's where Kahili and Lillie are too! Are you coming with, or-?”

“We'll stay here a little longer!” Hau spoke for both him and Moon, who looked at him in curiosity at his intent. Kukui nodded.

“Okay, I'll see you there later, don't stay out too late now! I'm sure Lillie wants to hear all about your day too!” Receiving nods from Hau and Moon, Kukui took off, thoughts of the Ultra Beast the two had encountered swirling in his head and making a mess of all the words he was attempting to prepare for the Culture Council meeting upcoming. He slapped a hand to each cheek. Focus, Kukui! Time enough for that on the other side. Nothing was going to explode in the few days beforehand.

He really and truly believed that.
Back in Malie Garden, Moon looked at Hau for what he was planning as Kukui disappeared through the gates leading back to the City. Hau nodded, more to himself than to anyone else, before turning to Moon.

“Okay Moon!” He spoke with such confidence, such belief, that she didn't question anything he said at all, “Let's have a Pokemon Battle!” Moon, who hadn't been sure what Hau wanted, spent a moment processing before grinning at him. Yeah! They hadn't had a proper one in ages, and this was the next step of their Island Challenge! They had to know how strong they'd gotten!

To that, Hau agreed. They did.

Every city, every town, every place where people gather in this world has space for Pokemon to meet in battle. It is one of the cores of this world, a defining piece of reality, and so a place for it is always ready for those in need. The Malie City battling fields, near enough to the Garden for Moon and Hau to walk, awaited them, rather sparsely populated at this hour as the sun began to set and most people were making their way home for the day. Taking position, Moon and Hau stood opposite each other, a five minute argument about the number of Pokemon they should use ending with a game of rock-paper-scissors and a predetermined result. Hau laughed at Moon as she stared at her closed fist, their count a firm four zero. It was time for their rematch.

Hau knew how this would go. Moon’s growth was unlimited, whereas he had reached a wall. If his Pokemon got any stronger right now he wouldn't be able to support them all. He, he himself, was the limiting factor. Had to improve, and grow stronger, to support his Pokemon more. He could feel it now, that limit, and knew for sure he'd never pass his next Trial. Olivia had told him so. Sina and Dexio had enforced just how absolute this moment was. He'd get through it, they all said, believing in him, he just needed to give it time. Time to grow himself. That was all it took.

But for now he'd reached that limit and Moon was limitless – she'd crush him with her Pokemon who grew without her holding them back, and understand the difference between them. Understand that she could go on and leave him behind. That he was going to hold her back. He knew that was how this battle would go.

He really and truly believed that.

Each opened with their Eevees, an unplanned battle of opposites but their smiles showed it was not unwelcome. Hau gave it his all, commanded as best he could, so Moon wouldn't be able to claim he was holding back. So she could understand his limit. Moon did the same, not backing down, for holding back was something she'd promised to never do. So she gave it her all. They both gave it their all.

Few battles could be considered more even than this.

Hau's Eevee won by a bare inch, exhausted, battered, but still, shakily, standing whereas Moon's had collapsed. Each called their Pokemon back, Hau aware his would only be hurt by whatever Moon used next. Moon chose Larvesta.

Hau paused in confusion.

He’d given it his all and so had she. He knew that. It was so obvious in Moon's commands, her directions, that she was going at full force. She was delighted too, smiling so widely, this battle validation for her that the only thing that was right was to go all out every day. But that should have meant she'd beat him. Should have meant she'd crush him. Because she had no limits. So then why, why!
Moon called out to Hau and he sent Brionne out. The moment Larvesta took one strong hit Moon called it back, knowing the Torch Pokemon stood no chance against Hau's best. Instead she sent forth Dartrix, always intent to have starter meet starter. The type advantage was hers now, and so Moon was sure Hau would back Brionne down soon enough. Underestimated the Pop Star Pokemon's threat.

It breathed out a thick mist of ice when Dartrix dived upon it and Moon felt her eyes widen at the strength of Hau's attack. Called Dartrix back to her only for Brionne to use a quick water-propelled tackle, injuring the Blade Quill Pokemon more. Shamed by her poor strategy Moon accelerated her commands, Dartrix making use of its speed but Brionne as equally well – if not better – trained and keeping pace more than enough to make the battle a brutal one.

Moon held her Grassium-Z, but Hau's pressure, Brionne's closeness and that dangerous icy breath, never gave her the moment to use it. She fought for openings that Hau forced closed, and in the end the battle ended in Hau's favour still. That was the second time he'd beaten her starter with his own. Shocked, she congratulated Hau, who was equally shocked himself. He was strong, Moon smiled. The two of them, they'd have no trouble at all with what came next. But their battle wasn't yet over. Moon sent out Flaaffy. She was not yet done.

Flaaffy bested Brionne, who Hau had not called back. His Pikachu emerged next, the Thunderstone Hau had been given still in his bag. If he evolved Pikachu he'd never be able to support his team, not right now. He had to work up to it. He wasn't strong enough yet.

But then why...

The two Pokemon using electrical moves made it difficult to threaten one another, Flaaffy's larger bulk giving enough resistance for Moon to use a Z-Move – another Breakneck Blitz as she had no other suitable Z-Crystal. Hau didn't counter with his own Z-Move, the demand upon him by his Pokemon so great a Z-Move would ground him, and so Pikachu was unable to escape the attack. Two to three Moon's way.

Wimpod was the last of Hau's four Pokemon, Moon calling back her Flaaffy – not wanting to continue battle with a Pokemon that had used a Z-Move – to unleash her Bagon to fight. The Dragon-type Pokemon held far greater strength than Hau's Turn Tail Wimpod, but the superior speed of Wimpod made it difficult for the Rock Head Pokemon to hit it. Hau, thinking as fast as he could, kept Wimpod close but evasive, punishing attacks from Moon with counter-attacks as best he could form. It added up.

When Moon called the Bagon back it stunned Hau. She admitted it, she didn't have a good counter with that Pokemon against his own. Chose instead to send out Larvesta again, whose surging fire across the field was far more difficult to evade. The battle burned down in Moon's favour, Eevee and Dartrix beaten before swapping Pokemon pushed her above Hau, but in the end their abilities and their Pokemon had been far more equal than Hau could believe.

Or be ready for.

How then, was he to explain? Tell Moon that if his Pokemon got any stronger he'd fall apart? She was meant to crush him and feel comfortable moving on, but somehow she was no stronger than he was. But if that meant he was going to lose his next Trial, then didn't she also-

“You have done well. Truly.”

A clear voice broke Hau's thoughts, Moon's steps forward to congratulate him on their good battle coming to a halt. Each turned to see a figure approaching, determination and focus in every
movement about her. Each stared. She came to a stop before them.

She was a woman of Johtonian features, skin well tanned by Alola's light as so many were. Head shaved, clothed in a robe of pale orange with a deeper Ula'ula red wrapping above it, prominent features about her stood out one after the other. First her shaved head. Then the golden jewellery she wore, the rings around her neck and large earrings hanging from her lobes. The red dragon patterned upon her robes. And the white Z-Ring clasped around her right wrist, a stormy sea-blue Z-Crystal set within it. She nodded to the two children. They stared back at her. She smiled.

“My name is Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers. It is a pleasure to meet you both.”

A flash of memory in Moon's mind surfaced the name, mentioned during the dinner in Heahea City where Professor Kukui had spoken of other competitors in the Pokemon League. Asuka of the Pokemon Schooling System. Jackson of the Alola Pokemon Rangers. And Pitaya of the Dragon Tamers in Ula'ula. It was knowing this name, that this figure was significant, that kept Moon's guard from fully raising. She wasn’t just some random stranger approaching Moon and Hau for her own curiosity.

Moon hoped.

“The two of you have grown impressively for the time you have spent as Pokemon Trainers.” Pitaya spoke with a soft voice up close, but nothing about her gave the impression that softness was anything but a choice she dabbled in. She felt imposing. “Your Pokemon have done well with your experiences so far. I am sure that the two of you would have no trouble completing your Island Challenge in record time, without question.”

Hau and Moon looked at each other after Pitaya spoke, unsure what she wanted. Then back to her. Pitaya nodded at their focus.

“But it won't be enough.”

Silence settled hard on the shoulders of the two children, each hit by those words in a different manner. One bristled, insulted at the statement. The other retreated, aware that what was said reeked of truth. Pitaya shook her head and raised an open palm.

“I mean no offence,” she focused her eyes on Moon, who was staring daggers at her. Such aggression... “But please believe me when I say it is truth. You wish to compete in the Pokemon League in eight month's time, yes?” Moon, suspicious, nodded all the same. Pitaya shook her head again. “You'll lose.”

There was a chill now, Moon's displeasure at Pitaya's words radiating from her. Hau stepped back, surprised by Moon's expression. He... hadn't seen that before.

“That is why I came to see you,” Pitaya continued, not cowed by the angry youth before her. “Moon, you are a Trainer of incredible potential, but the Trials of Alola, this Island Challenge, cannot sharpen you fast enough to stand against the League. The growth you will experience in following this path, it is simply too slow for your Pokemon to become strong enough. In short, they are growing too slowly for your ability. That is what I mean.”

Hau was still. Pokemon growing too slowly... that was the opposite...

“I am sorry,” Pitaya bowed her head, Moon still staring furiously at her, “for any insult I have made. I only wish to offer you the aid of the Dragon Tamers of Ula'ula, my aid, in growing stronger. We have many powerful Trainers under our name, all willing to assist you. Please consider it.”
Moon snapped back sharply. She didn't need help. She was doing fine. She'd beat her next Trial, then the one after it, and go all the way to the League. Pitaya sighed, only stoking Moon's upset further. Hau blinked at the venom with which his friend asked the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster to leave them alone.

“Hey...” stepping back in, Hau tried to mediate, “Moon, it sounds like she only wants to help.” The look Moon gave Hau was one trying to push the anger she felt aside so she could show only care to her friend, but Hau still felt her gaze sting. He'd never seen that from her before. “And besides!” Shaking his head, Hau forced a smile to try and calm things down, “we could train together then! If the Guildmaster wants to help us both get stronger, we can prepare for our Trials together! Wouldn’t that be great?”

Hau looked to Pitaya for reassurance. Flinched at the shake of her head she answered him with. “Hau,” her voice was still so soft, but so iron-forged all the same, “what can I do for you?”


“His Pokemon are growing beyond him,” Pitaya said it simply, explaining Hau's situation to Moon with ease, an explanation she'd had to give so many times before. “Until he rests and grows with his Pokemon, he will not be able to support them in greater battles. There is no way for Hau to continue his Island Challenge until he takes the time to rest. He cannot grow any stronger at this time.”

Moon snapped. What did she know? Moon and Hau were racing together! And they were just as strong as each other!

“Yes,” Pitaya acknowledged that, “you have had the same experiences. Is it any wonder your Pokemon have gained the same strength?”

Both children went silent.

“This level of strength,” she continued in the silence, “cannot take you further. Neither of you are prepared for what comes next. But I can help one of you.” Pitaya's eyes drew back to Moon, “and I believe I need to as well.”

Moon said something cruel.

“Hey!” Stunned by this Hau called out, Moon looking at him in surprise. “Moon... she's right!” Moon now stared blankly at Hau. “She's right that I need to stop, I can tell! Don't yell at her for saying that! She's telling the truth!”

Moon’s expression, head turning from Hau to Pitaya and back again, darkened.

Forget it then, she turned on her heel, walking away.

She wasn’t backing down.

In the wake of Moon storming away, Pitaya let out a deep sigh, head bowed. Then looked to Hau. “I do not believe I helped.”

Hau looked at her morosely, still shocked by the words and expressions he'd heard and seen from Moon. He'd never seen her mad like that before. It felt bad. Pitaya knelt and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“Though there is little I can do for you,” the Guildmaster of the Dragon Tamers had deep grey eyes,
looking intently into Hau's brown own, “believe me when I say you are a Trainer with great potential. I am sure you will find your way.”

“Th-thanks,” overwhelmed by everything, Hau nodded, smile nowhere near as energetic as usual. “I'm sorry... about Moon-” Pitaya interrupted, promising Hau he had nothing to apologise for. He still forced himself to say it. “If you can... please help her? I think... maybe she really needs it.”

“I will,” Pitaya stood again, looking with focus in the direction Moon had gone, “after all, in Alola we look after one another, do we not?”

At this, Hau's smile regained some of its usual light. He nodded.

“Yeah!”

As wind whipped against Moon's face, carried north from Malie City by the Charizard in her Ride Pager, she remembered something. Remembered the journey with Jace to the Aether Paradise that morning, and the man describing something she hadn't understood. Being together and happy making you ignore things that hurt. She couldn't understand it.

Hau had said he did.

Flying wasn't a comfortable thing for her, but she didn't even notice this time. Only locked onto her thoughts, of Pitaya and Hau's words, as she flew. What was right was going ahead without holding back. She knew that now. But now everyone was telling her it wasn't going to work. That it hadn't worked and she wasn't strong enough.

Had she hurt Hau somehow?

She was meant to be incredible. And meant to go all out. If she gave everything to this gift and it didn't work then, wasn't something wrong? But she wasn't wrong, she'd decided that.

Right?

So excited to welcome Moon back to the Poke Pelago after so long, Mohn frowned when she only barely acknowledged his greeting, instead wading into the Pokemon populating the small island and releasing all of those with her to join them. Surrounded herself and disappeared amongst their number. Much like last time.

Mohn began to wonder if Moon only came here to escape what troubled her.

Back in Malie City, Moon's disappearance quickly became noted. Hau, last to see her, admitted to Kukui and Kahili the meeting he and Moon had with Pitaya, the two adults shocked to hear what had occurred. But where was Moon now then, if she had run off? No-one knew. Panic set in.

One with the answer appeared.

“No worries no worries!”

Having walked into the Pokemon Center of eastern Malie, a teen girl of small stature, clothed in patchwork purple, black, and grey, with a swathe of purple hair partially pinned up by a Captain's symbol, waved her hands, fingers held up as v's.

Acerola, one of the two Trial Captains of Ula'ula Island, had observed the Charizard flying north
from Malie City. Knew the same as every other Captain of Alola, understanding where Moon had gone. Kept the promise the Captains had made.

So she reassured the worried group, insisted that Moon was fine, and let the night pass for her away from it all. Though still impatiently awaited her return. Honestly, Acerola was excited to meet the young girl too.

She'd been looking forward to this.

Beyond the setting of the sun Moon ate with her Pokemon, Mohn preparing food for everyone on the Poke Pelago. With excitement, seeing Moon more talkative after surrounding herself with her Pokemon, he described the work done with the Pelago, the extensions built to other nearby islands, of the deep tunnels found filled with rare materials that would enable him to do even more for this place. Yes, the Pelago was on the verge of taking off! Moon promised more catches, more Pokemon, and that by not holding back she'd do what was right.

It was what she believed.

She really, and truly, believed it.

Chapter End Notes

New arc, new refresh of the character tags! While a number of stars from last arc are taking a backseat now, we'll be meeting plenty more characters, new and old, in this arc. Please look forward to them.

First off the bat, may I introduce you to probably the most notable of the original characters I will be using in Eldritch, Guild Master Pitaya of the Alola Dragon Tamers. With the importance I've been placing upon the Dragon-type, as well as the nature of it being difficult for many people to raise, I created a faction that every region needs, a group who take responsibility for the Dragon-type, lend their aid to those struggling with raising Dragon Pokemon, and generally act as a force of responsibility for great power in their region. In Alola, this faction is based on Ula'ula Island, first referenced in chapter 9 I believe, when Kukui was talking about trying to raise a Dragon Pokemon in his younger years.

Pitaya has a lot of thoughts and opinions that have brought her to this point, and we'll be hearing more of those going forward.

Other than that, welcome to the beginning of the Ula'ula Arc, third arc of Eldritch! Once again, knowledge of the Sun and Moon or Ultra Sun and Ultra Moon games will give you a rough understanding of the overall passage of this arc, but there will be plenty more that will surprise you. I can promise you that. I was surprised. By what? Oh you'll see. You'll see.

As we kick off this new arc, I want to extend my warmest regards to all readers, from those with me from the beginning to those of you who've just arrived! Thank you for reading Eldritch, it is absolutely a passion project of mine, and I'm thrilled to be sharing
it with you all. A kudos or comment is always delightful to receive, so please don't hesitate to shout out your thoughts, I'm always happy to hear them. The next chapter will be along soon enough, continuing Moon's path through the Island Challenge. Please look forward to it.

Many things await us still.
Heavy clouds hung over Alola the next morning, the Charizard Moon rode remaining below them, the grey swirling mass not thick enough to threaten rain, yet neither thin enough to allow anything but a dull light to filter through. It was a dreary beginning to the day, doing little to lift Moon's mood. Staying with her Pokemon, being away from it all, had helped alleviate the immediate heat of her anger, but in its place left only a coldness behind. She'd promised to go all out. That promise had been what had allowed her to keep going, to ignore all the people looking for her, the way she had to appear to wander freely, and the way she was treated by those who did recognise her. That one promise, the belief that as long as she was giving it her all she'd make it through, it was the pillar upon which she relied to keep moving. Pitaya telling Moon she'd never grow fast enough doing so was bad enough.

But Hau telling Moon their competition was over hurt so much more.

What did he mean when he told Jace he understood? Was Moon hurting him? He was the one who told her to go all out. Why would he then tell her they couldn't? Why had he stood up for Pitaya when she told them both they couldn't keep going as they had? She didn't understand. She couldn't understand.

Even knowing of Trainer's Bonds, being aware of the theoretical drain they could be, Moon lacked the understanding of just what that feeling was. She couldn't picture the wall Hau had reached, the need he had to slow down. In her eyes all he needed do was keep trying and things would work out. That was what she'd grown to believe in, the one truth that would see her through all challenges. That singular, fragile, belief.

The Charizard flew down towards Malie City, returning Moon to the point she had left the day before.

It was time for her to move on to her next Trial.

“Oh Moon!” Lillie's greeting, given only when Moon had approached her and Hau so as not to alert the Pokemon Center entirely, was answered back by a smile from Moon that almost completely hid the mood she was in. She looked at Hau as she sat down at the table Lillie and Hau were at. Hau didn't meet her gaze.

“Professor Kukui and Ms. Kahili are out this morning,” Lillie, aware something was wrong, nonetheless told Moon what had passed since the morning had begun. “They were really worried about you yesterday afternoon, but one of the Captains,” Moon immediately focused on Lillie in interest, “came by and said you were okay.” Lillie looked around the Pokemon Center, before turning back to Moon. “She's not here right now either – we didn't know when you'd get back.”

Moon nodded, intrigued that a Captain had appeared and spoken for her. Lana had said the other Captains would be told about the Poke Pelago; Moon supposed it made sense. Either way it didn't change what she had to do today: travel up Mount Hokulani to do her next Trial. That was all she needed to focus on. Hau still hadn't said a word. Lillie looked between them.
“Moon...” cautious, yet determined, Lillie reached out to her friend, “are you okay?”

She was going to go and do her next Trial today. It was important for her to continue going, so she'd head out soon. Moon's eyes settled on Hau, who still hadn't met her gaze. She didn't want to occupy the Captain for too long so Hau wouldn't be held up.

“Moon!” He finally looked at her. Finally spoke. Since the day before Hau had been struggling with it, having seen just how angry Moon could become. It felt like something was wrong. Something missed while he and Moon had been travelling together. Jace's words, about friendship hiding one another's pain, had stuck with him. All that struggle, all that racing together and motivating each other and having so much fun but... now that all Moon thought about was going forward it didn't feel that way anymore. Not fun. And not like an Island Challenge. Hau shook his head. “Let's take today off.”

Moon's stare was cold. Lillie, still looking between the two of them, found it unnervingly similar to one she'd struggled under before. Fought to speak up. And failed.

“I'm going to be staying here,” Hau continued, facing what he'd decided. “I don't know when I'll be doing my Trial, when I'll feel ready for it, but until then... let's take it easy. We don't have to race today.” They'd had so many good days before. Wandering Hau'oli City together, just the three of them, to see what was there. Racing back from Wai'oli to Iki. Exploring Heahea. Competing at the Battle Royal. Travelling together to Wela Volcano. Times they'd enjoyed Alola because it was Alola, not fought to take on their Trials. They could have more days like that. They should have more days like that.

Wasn't that what the meaning of the Island Challenge was?

Moon stood up.

She was going to go and take her Trial, just like she'd promised. She wasn't going to break that promise. She wasn't going to hold back. Because if she held back, if she didn't give it her all every day, that would mean she didn't respect those with her. That was the promise she'd made. Hau struggled under her words. Lillie placed a hand on his arm to reassure him. He looked back up even as Moon was turning to walk away. And called out.

“Moon, I-”

Come with her. Hau went silent when Moon turned back, holding out her hand. They could go together to the Trial Site. Find out what it was. Maybe train together for it. Wouldn't that be best? Wouldn't that be continuing to give it their all every day? Wasn't it right? For a moment the coldness in her expression wavered, a more concerned Moon behind that mask. Wasn't she right?

At the end of their battle yesterday Hau had felt it. The warnings he'd been given had been preparation, foretelling the sensation, but only then had he known for sure. The strength his Pokemon had taken in that fight to keep up with Moon, the tiny growth of their Bonds, becoming stronger every day, Hau had reached his limit. If they became even slightly stronger, even the barest fraction more powerful, he wouldn't be able to support them all. Returning one to the Pokemon Storage System had relieved the tension, but the others had already filled in that gap. One battle and he'd have to surrender another. Another battle and his team would shrink again. He, he himself, had to stop here and rest.

He didn't take her hand.

The rapid changing of expressions on Moon's face, from almost desperate hope through recognition
she'd been rebuffed, to mounting anger at being left apart – the distance between them created by her but blamed upon others – kept Hau and Lillie both silent. Moon turned and marched out of the Pokemon Center, never looking back. Moments of silence passed before either left behind chose to breathe.

Hau put his arms on the table and laid his head down upon them.

“Ughhhhhhh.”

“Oh Hau...” Lillie spoke quietly, still struggling with the way Moon had appeared. Never before had she seen that from Moon, that cold anger and disappointment in another for failure to measure up. Expressions and feelings she'd never wanted to see from anyone else. She patted his arm again. “She was wrong.”

“She doesn’t know that,” came the muffled voice of Hau, face pressed into his arms. “And it's my fault.” Lillie shook her head.

“Then I am at fault as well.” A noise from Hau emerged when Lillie said that, but he didn't quite look up at her. Lillie sighed. “During her Grand Trial I encouraged her, told her she should give it her all, that it was what was right. I didn't realise that-”

“Now she thinks she has to do everything without ever stopping!” Hau finally lifted his head, sadness the only expression he wore. “She's my best friend and all I did was make her want to fight the Island Challenge and nothing else!”

For a moment Lillie held back, Hau's outburst more morose than loud. But she did offer him a smile. Pointed out the one thing he'd said that truly mattered. “Your best friend?” Hau looked for a moment genuinely surprised.

“I-” looking back away, he struggled putting the words together. “In Iki Town everyone knew me, because they knew my gramps too. So I was always sometimes the Kahuna's grandson, even my friends got all nervous around me when Tutu passed by. It's fine, I didn't mind it but... Moon didn't have any of that. She just wanted to race me. To challenge me. Being the Kahuna's grandson didn't mean anything to her so she just treated me always like me, and wanted me to keep up and go with her. I feel like... it was chasing her that got me here. She's incredible.”

“She is.” Lillie nodded. “Moon... I always felt like trying harder because of her. That I could go further following her.” The bag Lillie kept, sitting beneath the table, emitted a quiet 'pew'. Lillie gently pushed her foot against it, allowing Nebby to push back upon her. “I think maybe I only had the courage to keep going to different places, trying to help Nebby, because she inspired me to do so.”

Hau nodded back, each aware Moon's determination and drive had helped them make it this far. In that quiet moment, Lillie watched as Hau retreated back into himself, arms pulling against his chest, shrinking down in his chair. She called out to him. “Hau?”

“It's not her fault.” He said it so quietly Lillie had to ask him to repeat it, Hau doing so only reluctantly. “She didn't ask to be so amazing. To be so incredible. It's not her fault. I'm not blaming her. I'm not mad at her. She's my best friend, and when she's around, when we're all together, it's always happy. I like it when she's here. It's not her fault I...”

The words stopped quickly, Hau shaking his head, not wanting to make real the thoughts and feelings that had haunted him in quieter moments on his own. Lillie waited for him, aware now of what he must feel. Giving it his all every day yet always feeling like he was chasing Moon's back,
was it any surprise that...

“Hau,” she tried to reassure him, tried to reach out, “it's okay.”

He leapt to his feet.

“It's not!” This was the loudest he'd spoken since the morning began, eyes of bystanders in the Pokemon Center turning towards the young boy. Hau only looked at Lillie. “It's not her fault! She's my friend and I like it when she's around! It's not her fault she's so incredible! I'm not mad at her! I'm not!”

“I'm the same.” When she said that, when Lillie expressed the feeling she too had faced, Hau quietened. Sat down heavily, looking at her for understanding. Lillie looked down, feeling Nebby still pressing against her foot. “Moon... she picked up Nebby after the Trial at Lush Jungle. And I took them from her. Because I didn't want her to hold them.” With a sad expression Lillie looked up at Hau. “Because I didn't want her to take them away from me.”

Hau blinked. “She wouldn't-”

“I know.” Lillie said it firmly, making room to continue talking. “I know she wouldn't. But when I saw her, holding Nebby, I felt like... like she could. Like she'd do a better job caring for Nebby than I ever could. And it felt bad and it made me angry. At her. Even though it wasn't her fault.” The sound of breath exhaling from Hau, knowing Lillie understood, was one of extreme relief. He wasn't alone.

“Am I... a bad person?” He shouldn't feel anything but friendship towards her. The way she made him feel, blaming her for that, it wasn't fair! Hau struggled with the thought. Lillie answered with truth.

“If you are, then I am too.”

The two sat quietly for a time after that, struggling with what it meant, the complexity of their feelings towards Moon the person, tainted by Moon the concept. It wasn't an easy thing for anyone to shoulder. Eventually Hau asked.

“What should we do?”

Lillie didn't really know. The only thing she could think of was...

“We'll be there for her.”

And hopefully that would be enough.

“Dude hurry up and grab the sign already what are you waiting for?”

“It's kinda fixed on the dang pole man I'm working it already!”

At the base of Mount Hokulani was a bus stop. Intrepid hikers may task themselves to conquer the mountain on foot, but that was hardly a requirement to reach its peak. Travelling from Malie City to this point, in this case for Moon by Ride Tauros – stations in the city itself as well as nearby the base of the mountain – was more than good enough. She stood there, tapping her foot, waiting for the two Team Skull Grunts, one on the shoulders of the other, attempting to pry the sign for the Exeggutor
Express off of its pole. Eventually she spoke up. The one on top turned to tell her to shove off.

The words died on his lips.

Somewhere behind the chill mask Moon had donned to weather the emotions within her a twinge of enjoyment took place at the wide-eyed expression and stammering sounds of fear coming from the Team Skull Grunt. He rapidly slapped down at the head of his buddy, until they turned around too, catching sight of Moon as well, equally aware of just who she was.

“Hey let's just go!”

It was almost comical, watching one run off while carrying the second on their shoulders. Impressive sense of balance to the one on top to be honest. Moon turned back away from them and approached the sign. The next bus was in ten minutes. She sighed, impatience threatening to uncork the lid she'd pushed down on her own emotions, before withdrawing Rotom-dex from her bag. It saluted with an electronic smile.

“Zzt! UB Catalogue loaded! Data from the Aether Foundation now available!”

Moon flicked through what was on offer. Scans from the Dimensional Research Lab, probes from the Aether Foundation successfully passed through the Ultra Wormhole, had gathered a small fraction of data on the creatures known as Ultra Beasts. Each had been numbered, given a codename, and registered for investigation. UB-01, Symbiont, was the first recorded. Moon recognised it immediately, the white jellyfish-like creature that had come through the Ultra Wormhole, appearing at the Aether Paradise. Memories of it mixed into the encounter with Lusamine, and lingering resentment that had only fanned Moon's mistrust in others. She moved on to the next. And the next.

Then paused.

UB-06, Adhesive. A small and fast purple creature, more observed in blurry captures than any specific record. It was somewhat reptilian, bipedal with short and stubby limbs, a long tail and an oversized head, three pointed tips emerging from it. Moon stared. She'd seen it before. Once in the Hau'oli Cemetery, causing a ruckus amongst quiet graves. Once just before the Ruins of Life, the being willing to defend her from Plumeria – Moon still recalling the danger the woman had felt like to her. That creature... was an Ultra Beast? Rotom-dex noted the same.

“Recorded data of UB-06 Adhesive available, zzt! Beginning upload to UB Catalogue!”

For a moment Moon prepared to tell Rotom-dex to stop. To not give anything up. Then caught herself, and shook her head. That wasn't right. Professor Burnet had asked her to trust in the UB Catalogue. Professor Burnet who'd said the same as Kukui after the scan of Moon's Mental Pattern. Did Moon have a reason to trust either of them? She frowned. But the upload was already done.

The bus arrived.

When the decision had been made to move to the Alola Region – a moment that felt so long ago now – Moon had begun to learn about the Pokemon there. Alola Forms, Pokemon changed by their location from what was believed the norm, intrigued her. She and her mother had cooed over the Alolan Meowth. Oohed and ahhed at the Alolan Ninetales. Laughed with interest at the Alolan Dugtrio.

Been absolutely dumbstruck by the visage of an Alolan Exeggcutor.

A Grass and Psychic-type Pokemon in the Kanto Region, Exeggutor, evolution of Exeggcuter, stand
at a rough two meters, consisting of a wood-like body with two legs, three round heads, and a large wreath of spiky leaves emerging from its crown. Alolan Exeggutor, in many ways, was similar.

In the ways it was different were three-fold. Firstly its typing, Grass with Dragon as opposed to Psychic. Secondly a fourth head, mounted at the end of a tail emerging from its rear. Third, and globally most notably, its size. The length of the neck that extended from its body and held those three heads atop it. In total, an Alolan Exeggutor was almost eleven meters tall, more than five times the size of any other of its kind. It was stunning.

Another part of Moon, unable to be silenced by the moroseness that had settled upon her, reminded her she was still so excited to finally see one on her journey. She smiled at that.

Smiled at the Alolan Exeggutor-branded bus that would take her to the peak of Mount Hokulani, where her fifth Trial awaited. Holding up her Island Challenge Amulet, waved aboard by the bus driver, Moon sat and waited to be taken there. To be brought to her next Trial.

To continue her Island Challenge.

The journey from Malie to this point where the Exeggutor Express began had been an uphill one, a trip that would exhaust any who took it on foot. Even the Tauros Moon had rode had happily stumbled into its stall and drunk deeply from a trough once dismounted. She'd thanked it for its aid.

But the trip to the peak of Mount Hokulani was far steeper still.

Slowly, with grim determination, the bus continued up the road, Moon's gaze out the windows quickly changing from her own determination to shock at the height she began to see from. Edges of the road became dangers, the path ahead one that would scare any for the first time. The sheer nerves of steel Moon was sure the bus driver must have, guiding this large vehicle up the path every day, had to be unbreakable. She tried to focus on anything but the windows, though found curiosity warring with concern often. She looked up, then down again, many times along the journey.

Until one moment, roughly half an hour in, that the bus travelled along a small flat and she saw the building constructed upon the mountainside.

Building was a disservice, it was a temple, large and ancient, ringed by walls. A stone path of perfect geometrical pattern led from its entrance to the main doors of the temple, heavy dark wood gates opened to allow one to gaze inside. Moon looked, the bus slowing as it prepared to approach a turn. Slow enough for one outside of it to look back.

Moon stared at the one standing in the entrance of the temple, the woman of tanned skin, shaven head, yellow and red robing, with shock. Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alola Dragon Tamers, this their temple within Ula'ula, stared back. The moment of eye contact lasted more than long enough for Moon to be sure she had been seen.

She ducked down in her seat and closed her eyes and tried not to think of anything as the bus continued on.

The peak of Mount Hokulani was not so high as for the effects of great altitude to set in, but more than high enough for Moon, emerging from the bus to look out and see the world around her, to immediately crouch down from vertigo. She was sure that even when riding Professor Kukui's Braviary, searching for Lillie in the north of Melemele and the moment she'd almost fallen that had left its mark on her mind, she had not been this high up. She breathed, rapidly, trying to adjust. To
force herself through this. This was part of the challenge. She had to face it head held high and keep going. She couldn't fail here.

She wouldn't allow it.

“Excuse me but... are you Moon?”

At the sound of a man's voice, a calm and inquisitive tone behind it, Moon looked up. He was tall too, competitive to Professor Kukui, wearing a simple light blue shirt and black pants, deeper blue jacket over his shoulders. His hair was a messy crop of brown, with thick hexagonal glasses worn over his face. He crouched down, offering a hand to Moon who'd remained like that even when looking up at him. He smiled.

“My name is Molayne, a friend of Professor Kukui's. I was sure he was going to notify me when you were coming.” Moon glanced away. She'd... wanted to come on her own. A small sound of surprise came from Molayne. “Well, far be it from me to tell someone how they should do their Island Challenge, it's a unique experience for every last one of us. Maybe it's for the best anyway: Kukui really should be focusing on the presentation to the Alola Culture Council. He and I can catch up after.”

Slight rambling which didn't specifically address her helped Moon calm and she pushed against her own legs, returning to a stand, ignoring the hand Molayne had offered to her. He seemed put off by that. “Well,” standing as well, towering over Moon, Molayne turned to a large blue building, a sizable dome atop its right wing and a satellite on its left, “welcome to the Hokulani Observatory.”

With its high elevation, dry environment, and stable airflow, the summit of Mount Hokulani served as one of the best locations in the world for astronomical observation. The Hokulani Observatory, constructed to make full use of these conditions, offered perhaps an unmatched peek into the heavens, at least when the day wasn't so overcast as today was. Molayne, proud of this location he'd spent so much time with, happily explained all this to Moon as he escorted her to its entrance, the building at the end of the road the Exeggutor Express had brought her to.

“Kukui and I did our Island Challenge together,” Molayne was happy to tell Moon this, to recount the time he and his friend had spent together. Some parts of the story redacted, of course. “We're best friends, though both way too busy these days! We don't get to spend time together nearly enough!”

Could you be best friends without spending time together? Moon's question brought from Molayne a moment of stunned silence. He frowned. “Of course.” But the answer didn't seem to satisfy Moon. She entered the building first.

Where was the Captain.

“Well...” following after, Molayne's frown stayed with him. Moon was... focused. Something felt off. And not just the sensation of her, but now that he thought about it that was weird too. Molayne was experienced enough, grown enough, to sense a Trainer's Bonds, the strength of their Pokemon with them. Moon had six of impressive strength for her age, though not quite up to the measure of this Trial. But something else was up with her. Like there was a blur, some kind of overlay that made it difficult to see Moon when focusing upon the sensation she gave. Like she couldn't quite be seen when looked at. Molayne blinked to clear the vision of Moon's Bonds. Saw only a young girl before him. Shook his head. “Captain Sophocles is working further in, I can introduce you to him but-”

Molayne didn't even get the chance to continue, Moon immediately requesting he do so. She was hasty, far too much so, and the result of this Trial felt predetermined already. But maybe... that was for the best? Many Trainers, hot on the heels of completing their Akala Grand Trial, butted heads
with the Mount Hokulani Trial and were humbled by it. Maybe it would help.

Something still felt off though.

Deeper through the corridors and pathways of the Hokulani Observatory Molayne led Moon, eventually passing through a pair of Trial Gates, an odd sight to Moon. Every time she'd seen them before, they'd been framing nature: the entrance to Verdant Cavern; the beginning of Brooklet Hill; the stage within Wela Volcano; and the path into the Lush Jungle. Here though, the gates were inside of a building, not even a window nearby to allow any of Alola's light inside. It felt wrong. But she didn't say that.

If she had Molayne would have felt far more relaxed knowing she could think such.

“Hey Soffy!” Molayne's call echoed through the room he'd led Moon into, a darkened site filled with the blue glare of monitors. A noise of acknowledgement came from deep within them, but Moon couldn't quite tell from where. Someone was buried in their work here. Molayne called again. “Moon’s here for her Trial!”

“Ah!” Now came the voice of Trial Captain Sophocles, younger and louder than Molayne, but still with the same intonations he used. The two were alike. “Already?”

From out of the mass of computers stumbled a small boy, smaller than Lana and perhaps even Hapu to Moon's eyes. He had a bright mess of orange hair, thoroughly uncombed and spiking upwards, with a large white shirt stretched over his torso bearing the logo of an old game system. A Pikachu-themed scarf hung from his neck. He looked at Moon for a moment before glancing back at his computers.

“Can you come back later?” The request immediately had Moon bristling, ready to take her Trial now. Sophocles sighed. “Next month would be ideal, we could have a really good Trial the-”

Now. The sharpness with which Moon said it made both Sophocles and Molayne look at Moon in surprise. Molayne frowned deeply. That sort of demanding attitude, expecting the world to conform around her, it reminded him of...

“You can't wait?” Sophocles tilted his head. “Didn't you just do your Grand Trial the other day? You won't be ready for this Trial in that time.”

She'd finished all her other Trials.

“Well, that's...”

Give her her Trial.

Silence settled in the room for a moment longer.

Sophocles threw up his arms and walked past Moon.

“Alright! Follow me then!”

To Moon's surprise she was led back past the Trial Gates, further down through the observatory, down a flight of stairs to a different room entirely. This one was far larger and more open than the one the Captain had been in before, machinery ringing the walls and scattered about, but more than enough space for a battle to be had within. Moon looked at the Captain with curiosity. He shrugged.

“I've been working on a new Trial,” Sophocles answered her silent question, “so the Trial Gates
have been moving around a lot. We haven't brought them down here yet.” Molayne, following behind, considered the number of variations on the Island Challenge's fifth Trial Sophocles had gone through already, searching for the perfect one that felt right to him. This one... was pretty good. He waited for the youth he'd nominated to be Captain to explain.

“It's a simple Trial!” Sophocles stood before a small raised platform in the area, not nearly large enough for a battle to take place. Large enough for a Totem Pokemon to stand though. The Captain activated a Pokeball and unleashed a small round silver and yellow Pokemon, who chirped happily to be let loose. Rotom-dex identified it in a snap.

“Togedemaru, zzt, Roly-Poly Pokemon! Electric and Steel-type, it absorbs electricity through the needles lining its body and uses it for greater and greater attacks!”

Moon nodded, not having known the Pokemon before, but happy to meet it all the same. New experiences, and new Pokemon, helped. She looked back to the Captain.

“Togedemaru live throughout the Hokulani Observatory,” Sophocles explained, “and help charge up our systems when more power than normal is required. A Totem Togedemaru is going to show up shortly, and you're going to battle it.” Moon nodded, ready. Sophocles continued. “During the battle, other Togedemaru will appear and begin charging the Totem. The stronger it gets, the harder things will be for you, so you'll need to defeat them as well. But the Totem won't let you fight its allies that easily. It's a very hard battle. Are you ready for it?”

She was. Moon answered without even thinking, without even considering the strategies or methods she'd need. Everything she'd done so far, everything she'd overcome, had been by facing it with head held high. So she'd do the same here and everything would go fine. She'd decided that, and refused to believe otherwise.

Molayne, watching over this Trial, knew that would not be the case.

“Ohay, now then, just one minute and...” plotting out the arrival of the Totem he cared for, Sophocles mistimed it, the Togedemaru, twice the size of a regular one though still only coming up to just below Moon's waist, jumping down from the rafters to land heavy on the generator room floor. Its needles bristled, Totem energy radiating from it. It was ready.

Moon didn't waste a second more and unleashed her first Pokemon. Let the fifth Trial begin.

Eevee led, Moon quick to realise the typing of Togedemaru, electric and steel, made it resistant to a wide variety of attacks. Still, she had abilities she could make use of with the majority of her Pokemon, and remained confident she'd be able to face down this challenge, the same as she had every one to come before. So she commanded and Eevee ran forward and sunk its jaws into the hard shell of the Togedemaru. First damage hers.

The Totem electrified and Eevee fell back with a loud yelp of pain. Moon frowned, the defense unexpected, and looked for a better angle. Sophocles and Molayne both caught her discounting the damage her Pokemon had taken. That... wasn't good.

Then lure it, Moon commanded, Eevee trusting in her despite the last order leading to a pained reprisal. The Evolution Pokemon formed stars of energy, launching them at the Totem, but each did little, pinging off of its steel form with barely any damage to show for it. Still Moon commanded, looking for ways she could take the advantage in this fight. Against the Totem Lurantis Hau had dropped tree branches and eventually an entire tree itself upon it. Could Moon find parts of the machinery to throw against the Totem? She paid no heed to the thought this machinery might be valuable, instructing Eevee to continue pulling the Totem with it so she might open a pipe and
unleash steam, or collapse a propped up generator upon it.

A surge of electricity crossed the room, crashing into the Totem, and it sped up, slamming into Eevee, who then slammed into a wall, faster than either Moon or her Pokemon had been prepared for. The Evolution Pokemon gave a weak cry and then faded from consciousness. Moon stared blankly.

“That's the first of the ally Togedemaru!” Sophocles's call directed Moon's attention to the smaller Roly-Poly Pokemon nearby, who was now firing periodic bolts of electricity into the Totem, who only glowed brighter and brighter because of it. “You'd better do something quick!”

Jolting back to action Moon unleashed Bagon, directing it to attack the smaller Togedemaru, knowing its stronger bite and resistance to electricity would help it avoid painful reprisal. Bagon charged across the field from where it had manifested. The Totem caught up with it and slammed into it too.

Bagon took the blow, but lacked little to do about it, snapping at the Totem who backed off at high speed, already charged up to a dangerous level. Moon continued to order Bagon to ignore the more threatening target, pushing against the Pokemon's instincts, to go towards the ally charging it up. Behind the Rock Head Pokemon, the Totem began to float, electrical power lifting it off of the ground.

Bagon's jaws seized around the smaller Togedemaru, lifting it from its feet and slamming it down on the ground again, over and over, from side to side, fiery puffs of breath emerging from it as it did so. Despite being able to breath both fire and dragon-aligned attacks, the small form of Bagon lacked the ability to project them far or with force, the attacks better mixed into others making use of its stronger physical body. Still, as the Totem Togedemaru charged itself up, spinning faster and faster in the air, Bagon quickly beat down the ally Roly-Poly Pokemon. Moon smiled. There. That was better.

A bolt of electricity from another Togedemaru arriving on the scene charged up the Totem further, who finally surged across the room, collected Bagon with it, then carried it all the way to the ceiling, slamming the Rock Head Pokemon upon it before letting it fall. Moon stared, the floating Totem's speed already beyond her preparation. Bagon hit the ground hard. Moon made an annoyed sound at having a Pokemon knocked out, paying little attention to the Pokemon itself. Molayne sucked in a breath. He hadn't been told about this at all. Moon wasn't in a right state. He gestured for his cousin's attention.

“Soffy, do you think we should-”

“You can't win without working together with your Pokemon!” Sophocles's clear instruction surprised Moon and impressed Molayne. It had only been a short amount of time since Molayne nominated his younger cousin to be Captain, and Sophocles still showed a measure of self-doubt about it, but once he was in the zone he was everything a Captain should be. Molayne was proud of him.

By comparison...

Moon's short response, that she was working with her Pokemon, drew only a shake of the Captain's head. Sophocles gestured and another Togedemaru showed up, two now actively charging the Totem. “It looks like you're only telling them what to do without thinking about them!”

Moon snapped annoyance and chose Larvesta next. The Torch Pokemon was part Fire-type, and would be able to use a Fire Z-Move to clear the field. A good angle and Moon could knock out both ally Togedemaru so she could deal with the Totem. Directed Larvesta to move into position,
avoiding the Totem's attacks by bursts of fire. It did so, and the strategy worked, and Moon waited for the Totem to miss an attack before beginning her Z-Pose, lesson from Olivia already learned. A fully powered Inferno Overdrive emerged from the Torch Pokemon, the first Z-Move Molayne and Sophocles had seen from her. Both noted its strength, and the lack of its effect upon Moon. The fireball washed over one Togedemaru, then continued on to the second, the strategy sound.

In the moment of recovery from the attack, Larvesta could do nothing to resist the Totem Togedemaru slamming down upon it. It cried out and went silent. Moon called it back, three members of her team already beaten. But she'd stopped the Totem from charging.

Using a Pokemon in such a manner, for a single Z-Move then letting it be hit and knocked out, neither Molayne nor Sophocles were happy to see that. Everything Moon was doing was wrong, too focused on winning to consider her Pokemon. Was this really what had brought her this far? Had the other Captains, and Kahuna, allowed it? Or was it new, a rash new nature appearing only now?

It was a concern, without question.

The remaining members of Moon's team, the same team she had used against Olivia, were each unsuitable for such a battle. Even then Moon didn't consider herself at risk of defeat. Didn't acknowledge the threat at all. Simply sent Dartrix out, the Pokemon neither weak nor resistant to electricity, and commanded it to begin blowing a black wind down upon its foe. Still thoroughly charged, the Totem floated up through the barrage without even appearing to be affected by it, crackling with electrical energy. Moon commanded Dartrix to dodge, to beware of the next attack.

The Totem shone like a glowing sun in the middle of the room, Moon, Molayne, and Sophocles all covering their eyes. In the wake of the action it had taken, electricity crackled in the air. Moon stared, silent, as the feeling brought her back to another's. One felt once before, five weeks in the past.

With the power it contained, the Totem Togedemaru had infused the environment around it with electricity, bolts dancing through the air, playing out over floor, walls, and ceiling. Only once before had Moon seen this, when the Island Deity Tapu Koko had appeared in Verdant Cavern and challenged her. Electrical terrain... Moon was caught in the memory of it a moment too long.

The Totem slammed into Dartrix and lit up with power just as bright as before. The Blade Quill Pokemon hit the ground without even a cry. As Moon stared, aware her strongest partner was now beaten, another small Togedemaru emerged from the shadows of the room and began to charge its Totem brethren. Moon hissed at the sight and changed for the next of her Pokemon. She wasn't done yet.

Weak to electricity it may be, Wishiwashi was still a powerful Pokemon when in its Schooling Form, and water was an effective enough type to use against the Roly-Poly Pokemon. Moon commanded the Small Fry Pokemon, floating through the electricity-wreathed air, to blast the ally Togedemaru with its full power.

It didn't get the chance.

The Totem Togedemaru was charged far too much now, turning its electrical bolts upon the next of its opponents. The water covering of the Wishiwashi, forming the shape of its Schooling Form, broke apart in an instant, the tiny Pokemon within dropping to the ground as well. Moon, calling it back, reached for her sixth Pokemon.

Realised she was about to lose.

The shock left her still, unable to even move, to let Flaaffy face this opponent. Another Togedemaru
appeared. Moon couldn't beat this. She held there, like that, as moments ticked by. Molayne nodded to Sophocles.

The Captain raised his hand.

"The battle is over!" The declaration, the call for a halt of the Trial, was what shook Moon from her stupor. She yelled, furiously, that she wasn't done. But she was and she knew it and she hated it and she was meant to win, if she gave it her all she'd win, and then it'd be okay because she could keep going and Hau and Lillie would stay with her and she'd be their friend and even though everyone else was against her she'd have them but even they weren't with her now and she...

She...

A tear ran down her face.

Sophocles, a Captain for a short time as well as a Captain of Ula'ula Island, which Trainers would only face in the latter half of their Island Challenge, found himself unprepared for this. Not ready for the crying girl before him who'd been unable to pass his Trial. He'd seen Trainers fail before, some becoming determined to grow stronger and return able, others growing despondent at the overwhelming challenge they faced, but someone breaking down like this... he looked to Molayne for help. He didn't know what to do.

Molayne, shocked time and time again by the way Moon had been acting, still stepped towards her. She became aware of him the moment he moved.

Turned and sprinted out of the observatory as fast as she could go.

Molayne followed, but despite his lanky form Moon's speed was beyond him – the torrid emotions storming within her lending great power to her need for escape. By the time Molayne was through the doors of the observatory, sure Moon had gone this way, she was out of sight. He pulled out his phone.

Kukui had to be told about this.

Choked orders failed to communicate, Moon's Flaaffy, last of her able Pokemon, unable to fight any of the wild Pokemon lurking the paths of Mount Hokulani. Every command Moon gave, every order filled with sharpness and a need to be able, to be capable, did not carry and the Wool Pokemon lost its fight. Had to be called back as well. Moon's Pokemon all bested. No victory in any form this day.

She yelled.

Yelled and yelled because she'd failed, just like she'd been told. Because she couldn't keep going. Because she'd given everything, just like she'd been meant to do, and failed. And her need to overcome, to keep going and moving, consumed her too much to ever accept a moment's pause. It hurt too much.

So she yelled at nothing and everything and when her voice cracked and her chest heaved with a sob she looked away from the field, from the view over Ula'ula Island below. Back to the road.

Back to the woman standing at its side watching over her.

A sharp hiss and then furious yell were the response to the appearance of Pitaya, Guildmaster of the
Alola Dragon Tamers. Pitaya took a step down from the road towards Moon.

It was her fault! Moon pointed, ready to blame Pitaya for all of her woes. She's the one who did it! Who made Moon lose, who stopped her from being able to go on! She was the one who held her back, another who grabbed onto her because she caught their attention. Pitaya ignored the yells further, continuing forward. Moon took a step back.

If it wasn't for Pitaya she would have won. If it wasn't for Pitaya Hau would have come with her. If it wasn't for Pitaya everything would be fine. The same as it always had been. Nothing changing. Pitaya was standing before Moon now. The woman moved down to a knee.

Moon was meant to go on. To win whenever she gave it her all. That was what she was meant to be, the reason she was the way she was. The reason she had to hide herself because everyone wanted to see her. The reason the Tapu kept approaching her. The reason everything kept happening to her.

Pitaya held out a hand.

If she didn't keep going... if Moon didn't beat every challenge, she'd have nothing. So she had to win. She had to.

She... had to...

A soft voice embraced her.

“I am sorry.” Pitaya watched as the girl before her shook with uncontrolled misery. “It is wrong, what was done to you.” Moon sunk to her knees too. The Alolan woman kept her hand outstretched. “Please. Let me help.”

Moments passed. Silence fell around them. Moon choked out a sob. Then raised and placed a small hand in the one before her.

The morning of Kukui and Kahili had been spent in meetings, preparation for the Alola Culture Council to be held in four nights' time. As soon as they'd found the time for a break, returning to the Pokemon Center of eastern Malie, it had been to see Hau and Lilie, somber and concerned. Moon had gone on to her Trial, they'd told Kukui, who'd been stunned to hear she'd left without him. He'd made noises about heading up there, Kahili reminding him they had more meetings to come.

Then the call from Molayne came in.

The mountainside of Hokulani Kukui swept over, searching for Moon. Trainers he quizzed, asking for information. One hint he finally got, the sighting of a girl matching Moon's description with an older woman, one Kukui knew as well. What the hell was...

“Pitaya!” The Guildmaster of the Dragon Tamers was waiting at the entrance to the temple built into the side of Mount Hokulani, unsurprised by Kukui's appearance. He stormed up to her, stressed and concerned by everything he'd heard today. She was unmoved. He didn't care. “Where's Moon?”

“She is under my care.” Pitaya answered in a tone of steel, her posture as unbreakable as her words. “I have taken charge of her growth, both emotional and ability.”

“You weren't even aware, were you, of the state she was in?” Pitaya's words came one after another, forming a wave of displeasure crashing down upon the Professor. “Did you do anything to care for her in her journey? Did you watch over her? Did you consider the effects of her abilities upon her, or the great stress her constant success had placed on her shoulders?”

He... had. “I-”

“Then how did you let her get to such a state? Where a defeat leaves her broken in tears? Where she commands her Pokemon without considering them at all? Where she's so desperate and needing to win that she is unprepared for anything else? She became obsessed. Did you not notice? Did you even consider that she was so unwell?”

“I-”

“She has been suffering under the need to continue without halt for some time already, and you have been too busy with your League plan to care for her, but too proud to ask another to either. I had intended to offer her my aid, as one Dragon Trainer to another, when she came here, but obviously it requires so much more than that. Moon will stay here. And I will care for her until she is well. Do you understand?”

Stunned by the tone Pitaya had addressed him in, Kukui lacked rebuttal. Had he... been neglecting Moon? Failed to consider her situation? Let her down? He... he didn't know.

Pitaya turned away.

“Go back to working on your League in full, instead of pretending you can care for these children while doing so. Good day, Kukui. I wish you luck with the Culture Council.”

Step by step Pitaya walked the path, through the temple grounds, towards the main building where the Dragon Tamers of Alola stayed. Kukui, standing in the entrance, could only watch as slowly, with ancient weight behind them, the heavy wooden doors of the temple gates moved.

And with a mighty sound closed before him.

Chapter End Notes

Without question this moment has been a long time coming, but even now writing it I felt it. No doubt you all did too. I'd apologise for the repeated body-blows but honestly? I wouldn't mean a word. This chapter is important. And I'm happy to have shared it with you all.

Notewise, I only have a comment to make on Poipole, or rather its UB registration. In USUM, the new Ultra Beasts added didn't get UB numbers, just codenames, but I wanted numbers so I put them there. That's the power of authorial intent baby! UB-06 it is!

Some good advertisement posts of late have helped me draw new readers, and I'm happy to have you all along for the ride - thanks so much for deciding this is a story you want to follow. If you end up sharing it, please let me know, hearing that I'm able to continue reaching people means a lot to me. My intended chapter schedule is roughly once a week, but I can't lock down a specific moment, so ultimately it'll be at my own
pace. Luckily my pace is, in my opinion, pretty good.

That's it for this chapter, the next will, probably, be fairly sizable. But I won't know for sure until it's written. When it is though... hoo boy.

We're going places.
The First Precept: Dragons must be raised with care, for their untamed power threatens all around them.

“I'm sorry.”

Bowing his head, Professor Kukui of Alola completed his full apology to the two stunned youths before him, legendary Trainer Kahili and Trial Captain Acerola behind him watching over the conversation. Neither spoke, first having to process the shock of Kukui’s revelation – that Moon had experienced a breakdown after failing the fifth Trial, then been taken in by Pitaya of the Dragon Tamers Guild – and then secondly their culpability in it. Each stayed quiet.

Kahili had never been prepared for any of this. She'd been so confident, so proud, when Kukui reached out to her. An Alolan Pokemon League? Yes, absolutely. She'd been waiting for this since the day she'd finished her Island Challenge. Going out into the world, visiting distant lands, competing in their Leagues; she'd found so many forms of happiness beyond her island home, but Alola was her home all the same. To come back and help it gain this thing she loved? Without question she would do it. That had been her promise.

What had she done then? Backed up Kukui in speaking with cantankerous elders? Had to mollify people assuming the Pokemon League would tear every last bit of Alola's culture to shreds? Stop misinformation, calm the distressed, and present a relaxed yet focused appearance to anyone who doubted her? It was what needed to be done, she understood that, but in the end it felt like she'd done so much less than she'd thought. An attachment, clout for Kukui to show he was on the good side of Alola this time. But her abilities, her specialities, those hadn't been on show at all. How could they be?

Golfing and Pokemon battling weren't the keys to winning here. What else did she have?

She'd had so much free time! So many chances to talk to these young Trainers she and Kukui kept following in the footsteps of. She knew, she knew that Hau and Moon were both special. Moon moreso of course, she had an ability that seemed singular in the entire world, but Hau was still so much more capable than any his age should be. What had she done? The same as Kukui, assumed they'd be just fine wandering on their own without anyone ever properly checking in. Left them be.

She was so proud as to think she could help Alola, but so ignorant that she couldn't even help two children in need. Sina and Dexio, of all people, had taken more care in managing Hau at least, giving him advice and training that prepared him for the wall he would soon come to. Of course in the reverse they'd indulged in giving Moon a Keystone and Salamencite, an incredibly irresponsible and dangerous decision, but... neither Kahili nor Kukui had made the effort to explain that to Moon and try and ask for it from her. Had they thought she'd reject them? Had they doubted her?

How strongly had they failed?

Acerola, second of Ula'ula Island's two Captains, her jurisdiction its southern side while Sophocles took the north – even if that meant he mostly just spent all his time atop Mount Hokulani – didn't frown visibly. A little internally though – she'd have to message Soffy later for the full breakdown on what went on today. Still, she kept a smile and tried to be a reassuring figure; difficult given the two
adults in the conversation were both looking incredibly morose right now. No good, no good.

Would she have fixed things? Honestly? Probably not. That thought bugged her. She'd been so excited to meet Moon, hearing all the stories about how she'd powered through Akala Island. She would've pushed Moon to give it her all against the fifth Trial so Acerola could take her on to the sixth. And if Moon had failed then, pushed even further than she already had been...

The conversation would have to extend to the other Captains. She knew Lana, she knew Mallow, she knew Kiawe: there was no way even one of them would have let Moon go if they'd seen even a hint of what Kukui had repeated from Molayne. But... maybe they'd still missed the seeds. Maybe their excitement to motivate and help Moon along had involved assuming she'd be fine with any challenge.

Maybe the Captains of Alola were at fault too.

She'd ask them about that later. For now though...

“All good all good!” With a smile Acerola raised a hand, two fingers stretched out in a reassuring 'V', “Auntie Pitaya’s one of the best trainers of Trainers in Alola! She’ll help Moon out for sure!” Neither Lillie nor Hau looked particularly reassured. Lillie understandably for she'd never even met Pitaya, and as for Hau... Acerola walked over to the two. “So smile when she gets back, okay?”

Though shorter than Lillie and Hau by a good few inches, despite being a few years older than them too – sometimes life just wasn't fair! – Acerola once close enough still had them looking at her with trust. She was a Captain! She grinned at their slow nods. “That's how you do it!”

Kahili nudged Kukui, who looked at her as the young Captain took care of helping reassure Lillie and Hau that Moon was going to be fine. The Flying-type Trainer raised a hand to cover her mouth. “Are you alright?”

“No really,” Kukui whispered quietly back, slowly and mournfully pulling his phone out of his coat pocket. “I'm going to have to call her mother.”

The Second Precept: To do so oft requires assistance. Both request and accept help with the challenges you cannot face alone.

The next day dawned as dreary as the last, the cloud cover over Ula'ula Island seemingly taken with the location and happy to remain overhead for as long as it might stay. Only after reassuring Kukui and Kahili that he had no grand plans for the day, was only going to rest and maybe see what was around Malie City, was Hau free to go his own way, the two adults now overly nervous that their inattention had left Hau at a brink as well.

Honestly, he still didn't know what to think about it all. Hearing the story of Moon's Trial, that she'd basically broken down after failing it, still rattled painfully inside of Hau's head. Because he was sure that so much of that was his fault, that he'd been the one who'd pushed Moon to the point where she couldn't accept anything but the need to win every time without fail. It was hard to think about and he hoped just going around the city and taking it easy would help.

Lillie, bag over her shoulder, joined him.

Malie City lacked the long lengths of Heahea or Konikoni, nor did it stretch over as wide a territory as Hau'oli had either. But there was a denseness to it, a closeness of everything together, that caused
it to still feel bustling and larger than could easily be parsed. Each street had so much on it that by the time you'd gotten past the shops and parks and packs of people and Pokemon you couldn't even remember what had been on the street before. A well-designed grid city, intersecting roads made it easy to know where you were, but difficult to tell each individual street from the last. Quickly walking back and forth became overwhelming, the city appearing to shift around you so you were always in one place while everything else changed. It was all quite overstimulating.

Hau, unerringly, found a malasada shop.

Sitting together at one of the outside benches, each enjoying their meal – Hau passing malasada around to each of his Pokemon, Lillie occasionally opening her bag and sticking a hand holding some broken pieces of the pastry inside for Nebby to eat up – the two tried to relax. But it still felt awkward, just the two of them here.

Without Moon.

“Um... Hau?” The first to open conversation, Lillie drew the young boy's attention. “Are you... okay? With your Pokemon I mean!” She wasn't asking about Moon just, with everything going on with Hau and the limit he'd reached – something she'd read about in books but had no context to understand beyond that – she was worried about him too. Hau gave a grin back but it lacked his usual high-energy.

“Feels bad, y'know?” He shrugged, one hand running over the head of the Eevee nestled in his lap. “When I put Wimpod back in the Storage System it was like a weight off my chest, ya? But that's not fair, a Pokemon shouldn't feel like that. With only three I can breathe a little easier but... I dunno. I don't like having to store one just because they got a little stronger.”

“That...” she had read about it, “Hau as far as I know that happens to almost everyone. I don't think there's a way to avoid it.”

“I guess,” Hau didn't seem reassured, “just wish it hadn't happened to me. I feel bad having to put a Pokemon away until I'm ready for them.”

“Would you... rather you hadn't caught them?”

The moment of shocked stare from Hau almost worried Lillie, before he shook his head fast enough for Lillie to be sure it had to be rattling him. “No way!” With an almost full return to the boy she knew, Hau gave a grin, “They're all my friends and we're gonna go together, y'know!” Smiling back, Lillie enjoyed the brief moment of confidence before Hau quietened again. He sighed.

“Just gotta wait I guess. For my Bonds and for Moon.”

“Excuse me, did you just say... Moon?”

The voice that intruded upon the conversation of Hau and Lillie, whose heads both snapped to stare at its owner, came from what appeared to be a girl of similar age to them, standing before the pair seated at the malasada shop bench. Even shorter than Acerola had been, she wore what looked to be a farming outfit, tan with purple patches, a purple bonnet barely handling the voluminous mass of black hair emerging in long bushy tails hanging to her hips behind each shoulder. With deep blue-grey eyes, sun-tanned skin, gloves of light purple, boots of dark, and equally bushy black-haired eyebrows, she managed to appear quite imposing despite her small stature.

Perhaps it was backed up by the huge Pokemon towering behind her.

Hau and Lillie could both recognise Mudsdale, the Draft Horse Pokemon, the eight feet from hoof to
head equine Pokemon known to be one of the more powerful of Alola's population. But more than that Hau, looking between it and the girl, felt something more. Something intense. Wow. That was...

“Hey...” not even paying attention to the question asked, Hau had to ask his own, “how come your Pokemon's so strong?” The girl looked at him with genuine surprise.

“It was...” she paused, the question personal but then she was approaching these two to ask them about the Trainer Moon, who no doubt others had harassed them to hear about already. So she owed them her good graces. “My grandfather's Pokemon. He passed her on to me.”

Just that alone had Hau's attention, but he was sure he was forgetting something even more important. He got stuck on it. The girl looked over at Lillie and held out her hand.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself before,” she kept her hand outstretched, Lillie hesitantly taking it, not distracted enough by the powerful Mudsdale to forget the first question asked. The small girl shook Lillie's hand with a firm grip. “My name is Hapu, I am sorry for approaching you so brazenly, but I couldn't help but overhear the name of Moon. If we are thinking of the same person, I met her on Akala Island some two weeks prior. I was hoping to see her again if she were here.”

“She's...” Lillie eased her hand back from Hapu's grip, making eye contact with Hau so he'd pay attention instead of focusing on whatever it was he was trying to remember, “not here right now.”

“I see,” Hapu nodded, accepting Lillie's words without question, “I apologise again for inconveniencing you.”

“You said you saw Moon on Akala?” Hau focused on Hapu now, no longer trying to remember whatever it was he'd forgotten. Hapu looked back to him and nodded.

“Yes, just outside of Royal Avenue. Team Skull had set up some kind of barricade upon the path, and Moon assisted me in convincing them to move it out of the way.” The way Hapu said that, easily describing what had to have been some form of conflict in such calm and non-aggressive terms, stuck with Lillie. This girl was... intense. Hapu nodded. “Moon then directed me to Brooklet Hill, so I might see Captain Lana. I would like to thank her for that as well.”

“Are you doing your Trials?” Hau leaned to the side, blatantly looking for a Z-Ring on either of Hapu's wrists. None evident.

“Of a sort,” Hapu replied evenly. “It is like an Island Challenge for me, but not the Island Challenge itself. It is... complicated.”

Hau and Lillie both made noises that roughly translated as 'oh' without a single signal they understood at all what Hapu meant. She smiled gently. “I am attempting to prove myself to someone, and become a strong Trainer in the process. Travelling with Mudsdale has helped so far, though when she battles it still quickly becomes difficult for me. She is very strong.”

“Yeah,” Hau agreed quickly, once again looking at the giant and powerful Draft Horse Pokemon. “It's kinda the same for me right now. Can't handle my Pokemon's strength.”

“I see,” nodding, Hapu paused a moment. Looked at her Mudsdale. Then back to Hau. “Perhaps we can help one another then?”

Watching Hau's posture change, from easily going with the flow of all things to actively interested and almost riveted, finally remembering to introduce himself to Hapu as well, Lillie glanced back to the small girl. Having a stranger just approach them and start talking about Moon wasn't exactly the best opening, but then if Hapu truly had met Moon before, it made sense. But how could she...
“How?” Hau asked the same, though was still sitting straighter, hands pressed against his knees, the Eevee in his lap having hopped down when Hapu appeared and by now, while its Trainer was talking with the new arrival, successfully climbed up the back of the Mudsdale. The Draft Horse Pokemon accepted the presence of the far smaller Evolution Pokemon happily enough. Hapu spotted it sitting on the back of her Pokemon and smiled.

“There's no proper way to strengthen our Bonds but to wait, but there are ways believed to help. Meditation and focus upon them, which my grandfather taught me. I had been thinking for a while now I might need such, though the thought of simply sitting quietly on my own did not appeal. With company though, I feel perhaps I might have more success. We both have powerful Bonds to rise to, why not both attempt to do so?”

Hau nodded. He didn't even fully get it, but he nodded without a thought because a way, any way, that might help him with the weight of his Bonds was worth it. He wanted to have Wimpod back on his team. And he wanted to be better able to go on. So that when Moon came back, even though they'd no longer be racing, just journeying together, he could. They could go out and see exciting places around Alola and if they had to battle they could. That's what he wanted now.

To be able to go on.

“Okay!” He agreed so quickly Lillie found herself shocked, still unsure as to this person who had appeared before her. But... looking, Lillie caught Hapu looking back at her with a smile. She bobbed her head in acknowledgement and introduced herself. Maybe waiting together for Moon... wouldn't be so bad.

Hapu, pleased as punch, nodded back to Lillie before turning back to Hau. “Should we go find somewhere to sit down?” A malasada shop was all well and good for food, but it was hardly a peaceful place. No, she'd like somewhere a little quieter, a little easier to relax and rest. She'd come to Malie City to meet with the Captains of Ula'ula, but taking this time, working with another to improve, she was sure that this was ordained, this meeting destiny. A part of her had hoped to find Moon again, but this, maybe this was even better.

Yes, she was sure now, she and Hau, each grandchild to a Kahuna, would help one another go on. It was perfect.

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The Third Precept: Only a dragon may be treated as a dragon. The power needed to guide them will only bring ruin upon another.

Ragged gasps forced their way out of Kukui's heaving chest as he collapsed into one of the seats in the staging room he and Kahili had claimed, home-base in the minutes before and after their presentation to the Alola Culture Council. Kahili had remained outside after the meeting, continuing to handle curious and dismissive figures, but Kukui had needed a moment's break. The stress of standing in front of that crowd, all expecting him to be unable to convince them of anything, had been too much. He held a hand over his beating heart and forced his eyes shut.

That hadn't been fun.

“You know for someone who spends so much time dancing around on stage in a mask, you're a real coward without anything to hide behind.”
The rough and dismissive voice Kukui knew full well opened his eyes, the professor forcing his breathing to be just a little quieter as he stared down the man who'd just let himself into the room. The figure wore a shirt of red, a black Z-Crystal hanging from a string around his neck, similar black trousers and sandals over bare feet. A vest of the Alola Police Force remained clutched in one hand, the heat of this evening a little too much to be fully dressed for most anyone. Lifeless dark eyes and similarly lifeless looking flat grey hair accented his head. Kukui spent only a moment maintaining eye contact before shutting his eyes again and leaning back with a groan.

“Good evening to you too, Kahuna Nanu.”

“None of that formal garbage from you,” Nanu walked across the room and hauled a different chair from a desk, turning it to face away from Kukui before sitting down the wrong way, propping his arms upon its back to look over the professor. “Makes me sick to hear.”

For a few moments Kukui enjoyed the thought of just keeping his eyes and mouth closed before sighing internally and opening them again, focusing on the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island. A pitiless stare answered him back. Kukui grimaced. “Not a fan of my speech?”

“Pfft,” the noise of dismissal was the usual to be expected from Nanu, who didn't treat much of anything with reverence or respect, “that's none'a my business, I don't really care whether you make that League or not. Doubting yourself the second you're out of sight? You were practically proclaiming you'd received mandate by the end of that presentation.”

Kukui looked away. “They seemed willing to let me go forward.”

“Then don't ask me for something you already know.”

Another bout of silence, the Kahuna's presence oppressive enough for even that to bring no relief. Eventually Kukui looked at him properly. Nanu arched an eyebrow at the sight of a little spine. “Would you... reconsider?” Kukui knew this was a losing battle going outright, but he still felt he had to ask. “It would do everything to have all the Kahuna of Alola acting as our Elite Fou-”

“I told you,” Nanu cut through Kukui's request, shaking his head in the same moment he spoke, “I'm not interested. So I take it back, I do care about you getting that League off the ground, cause rolling the Final Trials into the Elite Four means I won't have to do them anymore either. A little more pressure off me; would be nice.”

Kukui's glare glinted a little. Nanu smirked to see it.

“You're a terrible Kahuna, you know that?”

“I'm the best Kahuna this island's had in a long time now,” Nanu answered back lazily, “Unlike some people I could name, I'm not going to get a town destroyed.” Kukui shut his mouth and looked away. Nanu's lop-sided grin stretched a little further across his face. “Yeah that's what I thought.”

Standing, the Kahuna looked over Kukui, who was looking away from him, seemingly shamed by his words. Nanu shook his head. “You damn brats were so cocksure, following her without questioning a thing. Now we're all picking up the pieces of the mess she made and you're still here begging for forgiveness. You're real audacious, boy, running around Alola saying this League's for the best. The fact you're actually convincing people... charisma's wasted on the stupid.”

“That's...” Kukui continued to look away, unused to people confronting him directly about this. When he'd made his apologies, sought repentance, a quiet acceptance of not mentioning it had settled across Alola. Even those most distrustful of his plans for the League had kept that specific point to
themselves. Hearing it from Nanu was... “it's in the past.”

“Nothing’s in the past,” Nanu drawled, drawing Kukui to look up in surprise at the Kahuna lecturing him. “Everything that ever is was and will be is built on the past, and it's only a matter of time before the unpleasant things you buried come back up again. You've spent too much time pretending to be different things, boy. Are you fooling anyone? Are you fooling yourself?” Kukui had no answer to that. Nanu sighed. “Look,” the Kahuna rubbed the back of his head, not intending to lecture the way he just had, “just remember the deal. You can fly up to Lanakila whenever you want, but if you cross south of the mountain I'm not gonna help you if the Tapu catches you. Keep to the north, got it?”

A muttered “I know” accompanied Kukui’s nod. Nanu accepted that.

“So Pitaya's got hold of that kid huh?” The change in topic came quick enough to throw Kukui off; who looked up but didn't say anything. Nanu shrugged. “If she's not a monster right now she will be by the time the old lady's done with her. Scary scary.”

“Don't talk about her like that.”

The steel in those words, the strongest Kukui had ever said anything to the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island, made Nanu smile so wide it looked like his face could open on a hinge. The Kahuna laughed dryly and turned.

“Fair enough. We'll see how she does when she gets to me, however soon that is.”

With a half-hearted wave Nanu left the room, the loud sound of the door closing marking his exit. Kukui, still seated in his chair, groaned, leaned back, and placed his hands over his face.

If he was lucky, this would be the worst he'd have to go through to make the Alola Pokemon League a reality.

If.

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The Fourth Precept: Dragons are proud, their Tamers must be humble. Do not use the power you hold to place yourself above others.

In the span of a week Hapu and Hau had changed little, but in the little they had changed it was significant. Most days were the same, quiet meditation surrounded by their Pokemon, focusing upon the feelings of the Bonds connecting them. As Trainers grew, both in experience and simply mental and physical age, they became more aware of these connections, more able to interact with them. For both of these children those abilities came naturally, able to feel and ruminate upon their Bonds far sooner than their experience should possibly allow.

But then, it was difficult to define their relationship with Pokemon as starting when they'd received their first. Hau and Hapu had both been raised around powerful Pokemon all their life, taught to consider Alola and their place in it, been able to hear the song from the moment they were made aware of it. That they had the ability to understand their Bonds and think on them, give them focus and attention in meditation far sooner than any their age should... was it really that much of a surprise?

Not to either of them at least.

There is no truly understood way to grow one's ability to handle the concept known as a Trainer's
Bond. As Pokemon grow Bonds grow too, but the Trainers themselves, one half of this connection, do not grow by this manner. Perhaps a little, when the edges are pushed, but it is a slow growth, and the faster a Pokemon grows the more impossible it becomes to keep up. But even with that truth, the focus Hau and Hapu had given, it had helped. The strain of the Mudsdale Hapu kept, her sole Pokemon passed to her by her grandfather, had slackened. Hau too had returned to keeping all four of his Pokemon with him, delightedly carrying around his Wimpod at all hours, and admitted that he didn't feel the same stress now as he had the week before.

Though, if either put themselves to battle, often testing their progress against one another, soon enough it became apparent they still only had the barest room to move. The slightest little bit of exertion before the weight of their Bonds pulled taut once more. More focus. More taking it slow. The two, with Lillie alongside them, spent as much time simply experiencing the city of Malie and its surrounds as Hau and Hapu did in meditation – an act of calmness and peace that neither could possibly have the patience for alone.

At times Lillie sat with them. Nebby, she still kept in her bag, Hapu's curiosity answered that Lillie was caring for a Pokemon she needed to keep safe. But Nebby grew restless quickly and Lillie never remained for long. Had to find quiet places to give the Nebula Pokemon a little freedom of its own.

The heavy cloud cover over Malie had moved on in the week to pass, the true heat of the season now beaming down upon the city. By mid-afternoon most everyone took shelter in the shade, and this extended to this trio as well, who'd returned to a peaceful tree-covered corner of the Malie Garden. Sitting together they spoke, Hau playing around with a large green stone, somewhat rounded, with a yellow sharp-shaped core. Lillie and Hapu both observed it.

“I wouldn't say yet,” Hapu shook her head. Hau clasped his hands over the stone when she pointed it out.

“Oh, no,” he nodded back, “no way. A Raichu would be way too much for me now, even if I do have a psychic... what's it called again?”

“Bias.” Lillie answered, aware of Hau's ability to bond with Psychic-type Pokemon to an easier degree than others. Hau looked over at Hapu.

“Do you know your bias?” The girl shook her head.

“I cannot say I do, though I would assume it is the Ground-type. I have my doubts I could bear the weight of Mudsdale without such.”

“It is pretty heavy,” Hau mused agreement, his words both figurative and literal. Hapu smiled lightly. Lillie looked over to her.

“How are you?”

In the week to pass since Hapu's appearance, Lillie had found her initial doubts of the girl stripped away. Hapu was honest to a stark degree, speaking her mind in all things without a second thought. It was... refreshing, and Lillie enjoyed the girl's bluntness. Hapu was a reassuring figure, dependable, someone Lillie could see herself relying upon. Like a pillar of stone, or a mighty tree, despite her small stature. She was a good friend to have.

“Well,” Hapu, whose initial opinion of Lillie had not changed once in the week to pass, spent a moment with her thoughts. “I would say there is still a long way to go. Many of the Captains of Alola have given me fine advice so far, but most of what each told me was that I simply had to improve as a Trainer. Though there are many paths to that end.”
“Captain Kiawe told me that!” Hau, remembering his own experiences, nodded at Hapu's words. “He said that even when we feel like we’ve come to a stop, that's because we just haven’t noticed other avenues opening up to us!”

“Yes he told me similar,” Hapu nodded back. “Rather, he expressed that I tend to think of things as straight lines, from point a to b, and that I then disregard the world around me besides that. I am hopeful that this slower pace, and time of introspection, will help me break that habit.”

Hau and Lillie slowly nodded, each slightly wide-eyed. Hau expressed the thought they both had. “You sound so mature,” his words Lillie agreed to. “Kinda like a Captain already!”

“Well,” Hapu smiled thinly, “there's still a lot further I need to go.”

The Fifth Precept: Dragons are fierce, their Tamers must be caring. Neither use their power to place yourself apart from others.

Moon's visits to the Poke Pelago had become common-place. More often than not each night now she stayed here, the heat of the season and the year itself so high as for it to be no trouble for her to camp out surrounded by her Pokemon, their number having increased slightly over the past week and a half since her last visit.

But more than their number, what had grown was their power.

Moon's Pokemon grew without her direct presence. Pokemon always grew, never stopped throughout the course of their life, but even with the majority of his memories non-existent Mohn knew that these Pokemon were growing far faster than their wild equivalents. Honestly, some wild Pokemon had even started moving to the islands, joining the mass of Moon's own working the land. They didn't respond to orders as readily as the ones Moon had asked to follow Mohn's words, but they did appear to enjoy going with the flow of things.

So when Mohn called harvest time and a number of Pokemon prepared to strip clean the berry trees growing on one of the many islands making up the Poke Pelago, it wasn't just Moon's Pokemon doing so. It was amazing, watching all of nature working together, and only reassured Mohn that the Poke Pelago was right. What he was doing for Moon was right.

His dream... was right.

When they started evolving he was still momentarily taken aback.

And that was how it continued on. The days passed, Mohn worked the islands of the Poke Pelago with all the Pokemon working together with him, and they grew. Some evolved, while others' personalities developed. Those who'd been active members of Moon's team before, the Meowth for example, or the Poliwag turned Poliwhirl, liked to take command, while those who'd only been embraced by Moon followed behind. It was all wondrous and somewhat otherworldly to behold.

Much like Moon herself, Mohn supposed.

It was a clear day, and Mohn happily scouted the horizon when at rest, despite knowing if Moon was to visit it would likely not be for many hours still. Yet for a moment, when a flying shape appeared on the horizon, he was sure it was her returning once again to see the work he had achieved.

It was not.
Sophocles had kept his promise to Moon, to the letter. He, like every other Captain, had not mentioned the Poke Pelago to anyone. Had not discussed Moon's incredible, unbelievable, inconceivable ability to maintain a seemingly unlimited number of Bonds. But one part of their discussion had been to tell one person one thing, and that was to tell Molayne, former Captain of Mount Hokulani and current maintainer of the Pokemon Storage System in Alola, about the system intrusion orchestrated by the man known as Mohn to allow an unlimited number of Pokemon withdrawals from the terminal he'd established at the Poke Pelago.

Asked to leave the modification without explanation, Molayne had put a close watch on the connection point, an extra layer of security to make sure no more modifications were going on after checking over the changes made, and then left it at that. For a little bit.

But Molayne had been a Captain, and even before that a friend and rival of Kukui. He was a talented Trainer and a clever man, likely the cleverest of his friend-circle: the only one of them to become a Captain. So seeing a Charizard, a non-native Pokemon of Alola, flying in the same direction from Mount Hokulani every evening, returning from that direction every morning, and the obvious shape of a young girl on its back, honestly, was it any surprise?

So one day when Sophocles was buried deep in his work and Molayne's curiosity peaked, he took a Pokemon of his own through the sky in that direction too. To see what he could find.

And find something he did.

“So this is what you messed with my system to do.” The very first words from Molayne, feet settling on the soft and rich soil of the central hub island of the Poke Pelago, drew from Mohn a hasty gasp and then bowed head and apologies. The tall and lanky maintainer of the Storage System – noting that this man before him was not only as tall but clearly extremely built from however long he'd spent working the land – looked around. Pokemon everywhere, a whole cornucopia of the creatures, a collection from across all of Alola.

Well...

Molayne paused. Melemele natives. Those were from the Meadow, the yellow Oricorio obvious. Actually there was a pink one too, an Akalan version. None red though. This collection had yet to make it to Ula'ula Meadow. Those were Pokemon from Wela Volcano. And Brooklet Hill. Lush Jungle too. Even some unique to the fields on the slopes of Mount Hokulani. Nothing from Blush Mountain though. Nothing from the abandoned Tapu Village.

This collection, it started at the beginning of Melemele Island, the beginning of an Island Challenge, and stretched all the way to the territory of its fifth trial. Gears quick to spin in the mind of Molayne put piece after piece together. His eyes widened more than ever. He looked back to Mohn, and had to ask.

Really?

“Moon's?”

Surprised by the directness and accuracy of the question, as well as the presence of the man he'd gone behind the back of, Mohn could give no mistruth. He nodded, slowly. Molayne looked around again. They were all growing strong. As if they were still receiving power. But for that to be the case, for this many to grow like this, that would mean... he looked back to Mohn again.

“And she comes here?”
Another nod. That had to be the case then. She had to be...

Molayne felt his knees grow weak for a moment, almost wobbling where he stood, the floating Magnezone that had carried him here holding him up. Oh... oh my. “I...” he looked around again. She really was... “I should head back.”

He needed to talk to Soffy – to Sophocles – about this asap.

Moon already had the world's attention. This would have their obsession. They needed to plan for that.

They all did.

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**The Sixth Precept: Power confers responsibility. With this strength when called for aid, answer. When aware of those in need, reach out.**

The second week bore fruit.

With seven more days Hau felt... good. Even when he and Hapu battled – a struggle that always ended four zero in Hapu's favour, her Mudsdale ridiculously strong – Hau didn't feel exhausted by it. Training... wasn't active, he wasn't pushing his Pokemon to increase in strength, but allowing them to use their strength wasn't exhausting him either. It seemed ridiculous that facing this wall, the moment one's Pokemon's growth truly exceeded them and they had to struggle to regain the ability to maintain them, was over so fast. A mere two weeks.

The deck, of course, was stacked in his and Hapu's favour. Both incredibly gifted children, with a long history involved with powerful Pokemon, and working together to help each other proceed. The rules for strengthening one's ability to handle Bonds were not known, but that interacting with others, working together to better yourself, helped was believed. The two had already gained back this much ground.

Today Hau was on his own, Hapu with Lillie in the Malie Library, awaiting Captain Acerola who had mentioned bringing a book from her home for Lillie to see. Hau wasn't too into that, so instead took the chance to wander. Headed to the north-west side of Malie, where the roads ended and instead a grassy path led up to a cliff overlooking the sea. Watching the waves from there sounded nice.

At least that had been the plan.

“Are you serious, boy? If you never try to do anything you'll never do anything!”

“But father, sir!”

“But nothing! You may have bowed out of the Island Challenge already but that doesn't give you the excuse to bow out of work! If you can't handle this then work harder so you can! We're all doing our best here, slacking off won't be tolerated!”

“Everything okay?” Raised in Alola as part of Alola, Hau knew that the core meaning of this region was to share one's troubles, and so felt no concern in approaching this loud conversation to offer an ear and maybe a hand. Both figures, one in their middle teens, another adult, turned to him. The adult's eyes quickly spotted the Island Challenge Amulet hanging from Hau's waist.
“An Island Challenger huh? Good to see you!” Taking a step forward, he held out a hand to Hau, Hau smiling and doing the same in greeting. “My name's Shawn, I'm head of the plant back there.” Behind Shawn and the younger man was indeed a building, listed as a recycling plant. A road led out from its back and down to Alola. Hau was pretty sure he'd seen some garbage trucks moving along it in the days he'd been here.

“Hi!” Hau smiled back, “I'm Hau!” The younger man reacted.

“Hau?” He said the name with obvious recognition, “Like the Trainer with-”

“Boy!” The loud bark of Shawn's voice made Hau and the other teen jump. “Where're your manners, asking all these questions without even giving your name? Is that the Malie way, a city famed for its hospitality? Apologise right now!”

Face burning red, the teen bowed his head to Hau. “Sorry, I'm... I'm Chase, the son- an employee of the boss. Sorry.”

“It's- it's okay,” Hau waved the hand he'd retrieved from Shawn's strong shake, trying to calm things down, “are you okay?”

“Don't mind him,” Shawn spoke over anything Chase might've been about to say, “he's belly-aching about a lack of confidence again. Honestly.” Shaking his head, Shawn paused. Then looked at Hau with a glint in his own eye. “Actually, you might be able to help us, if you're willing.” Both Hau and Chase looked at Shawn for that. Shawn grinned. “Hey young Hau, since you're on your Island Challenge, and here on Ula'ula Island at that, you must be doing pretty well for yourself. Why not give Chase a battle, help him learn a little something about standing up for himself?”

“That's-” Chase tried to object, “fath- boss! Hau has to be super strong, he'd crush me if we fought!”

“Enough!” Shawn had a sharp and loud voice, something that reminded Hau a little of his grandfather's lectures when he was younger himself. “If all you do is give up without ever trying to do anything, you'll spend the rest of your life without ever having lived. You're going to battle this young man and you're going to do it now, got it?”

Somewhat pushed into this situation, Hau gave Chase a concerned look, something that quietly communicated a 'you don't have to if you don't want to' message. Chase, catching it, prepared to back out.

Then got snagged on a piece of his own pride and stopped still.

“...okay.” Both Shawn and Hau focused on Chase when he nodded, when he pulled a Pokeball from his pocket, “Hau, would you have a Pokemon Battle with me?”

Well... Hau glanced between the father and son, boss and employee. It really felt like an entire thing he'd just stumbled into, but since he'd been asked... “Okay!” Hau withdrew a Pokeball of his own.

In the wake of the battle, bested, Chase bowed his head. He'd tried and failed, just like he believed. He really did have no worth. The effort he'd given, it hadn't amounted to anything. No good. He was no-

“Good work, boy!” The heavy hand of his father clapped on his shoulder, Chase jumping from the interaction, looking up at the older man. Shawn grinned at him. “You gave something your best
effort and that's what matters! I've been waiting, hoping, you'd find the will to do that, to go into something no matter how daunting it was, and I'm proud to see you've done such! That's the attitude that'll let you go on in life, and that's the attitude that'll let you take over this plant from me!"

Chase blanched. “Father?”

“I'm not your father I'm your boss!” Shawn's snap-back had Chase step backwards, Hau looking between the two constantly. Shawn continued. “And as boss I'm saying you're hired! And promoted! And you're going to do a fine job of it too! Because you know what it means to try at something no matter how hard it seems! Understand?”


“I caught you up in the need to help my boy learn a thing or two, sorry about that.” Hau nodded slowly as well, the entire exchange rather forceful to his eyes. Chase seemed happy though. Invigorated.

“Good luck!” With that wish given, Hau went on his way, back to Malie, plans to visit the cliffs best saved for later. Chase might not have beaten him, but Hau's Pokemon had still taken a beating themselves. A visit to the Pokemon Center was in order. Back to Malie, to the nearest Pokemon Center, Hau went.

A group of figures in white were in line before him for healing.

“Here you are,” the Pokemon Center nurse was returning a Pokemon, a small black and white creature, to one of the Aether Foundation members before her. The woman took the Pokemon, who grabbed on tight to her chest. She sighed.

“Thank you,” bowing her head, she and the rest of the Aether Foundation members thanked the nurse. “I suppose we'll need to take it back to the Aether Paradise.” The group turned around, Hau catching sight of the Pokemon in the woman at their head's arms. He knew that one! A Pancham. It seemed very determined to keep hold of the woman. Hau tilted his head.

“Is that Pancham okay?”

“Oh,” the woman, hearing Hau's question, stepped aside so he could move up to the nurse, handing over his Pokeballs for recovery. She didn't miss that there were four of them. That was unusual for a child so young. “This Pancham was attacked by Team Skull sometime back – we at the Aether Foundation took charge of its recovery, and recently tried reintroducing it to the wild but... it lacked confidence, and wasn't able to secure food around other wild Pokemon. We'll just have to keep it at the Aether Paradise, and hope it eventually finds the strength to continue in the wild again one day. It's unfortunate but that is how it is.”

Hau stared at the Pokemon in the woman's arms.

He'd fought so hard to gain even the faintest amount of room to move. With four Pokemon he'd only just regained the ability to battle safely with them, where their growth wouldn't immediately make their Bonds exhaust him again. The thought of pushing that, of evolving one of his Pokemon, still daunted him. The thought of taking another... still daunted him.

But...

'No matter how daunting something is you still tried!'

The message Shawn had been trying to impart upon his son surfaced in Hau's mind. He stared at the
Pokemon some more.

Reached out a hand.

“Can I?”

“Oh, uh, of course.” The woman bent down, allowing Hau to touch the Pokemon, who clutched tighter to her before feeling no danger from Hau’s hand. Slowly he placed his other upon it as well, pulling slightly, the Pokemon relenting to let go of the Aether member it was holding onto. Hau turned the Pokemon around, so it was looking at him instead. It blinked. Hau considered deeply.

“Do you...” was he sure? He didn't know. But... “want to come with me?”

A moment passed. Then another.

Then the Pokemon wiggled out of Hau's grasp just enough to jump onto his chest and hold tight, Hau shifting his arms to support its weight against him. The Aether Foundation workers all smiled. The woman knelt down before Hau.

“Will you be alright?” Her question was one of honest concern, knowing this Pokemon would make five for this boy. Hau looked at it. Then back up at her. And nodded.

“Yeah, we will.”

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**The Seventh Precept: To use power requires wisdom. Always consider what will come of the choices you make in acting.**

While Hau took his day outside to enjoy the city, Lillie and Hapu both entered the Malie Library, a two-storey building located in the city's north, nestled somewhat beneath the cliffs that curved up behind it which Hau would soon seek out. Lillie had visited the library of Malie City multiple times already during her weeks here, reading ancient texts about the history of Alola, searching for any hints as to Nebby's origin, or why the Pokemon might have some relationship to the ruins spread about Alola inhabited by the Tapu. Little had been found in answer though.

Acerola had visited the city now and again, checking in with Lillie and Hau that Moon had yet to reappear, and having her own conversations with Hapu that neither Lillie nor Hau were privy to. There were mysteries to the small girl that had befriended Hau and Lillie, but Lillie could not blame Hapu for keeping her own privacy. Lillie had her own secrets she guarded as well.

The point of this was that, on her last visit to Malie, Acerola had overheard Lillie talking about the research she was doing and made mention she had books herself that might help. Promised to bring them for Lillie to see. Today was that day, and Lillie had received invitation to join Acerola at the Malie Library, Hapu happy to come along. First into the library they went, then up the stairs to its second floor. From across the room Acerola waved and called out to Lillie.

A passing librarian shushed the Captain quite fiercely.

“Over here Princess!” Cringing after being shushed, Acerola continued to wave as Lillie and Hapu approached. The Trial Captain of Ula'ula Island's southern side had taken up using the moniker of 'princess' for Lillie all on her own, something Lillie found herself completely unprepared for to the degree she didn't even know how to address it. So she just let Acerola say it and continued on as normal. Hapu followed along as the two approached the table Acerola was at, a collection of books
“Okay okay,” Acerola grinned, waving a hand over the books, “here's everything I could get from my dad's collection – it was about time I moved it out of our old home anyway! Take a look!” Shushed again, Acerola shrunken into her chair as Lillie thanked the Captain and picked up the first of the books, somewhat ambiguously named 'The Light of Alola'. She set to reading.

By the time the afternoon settled in fully, Lillie had made her way through a majority of the books, reading key chapters and coordinating investigation for interesting facts with Hapu and Acerola both. She had a picture now, not too clear, but built on reasonable suspicions, of what she needed to do for Nebby. A goal. She nodded.

“Then I really will need to go to the Ruins of Abundance.” There was a tie between Nebby and the Tapu. So Lillie needed to seek them. That much was clear.

“Well that's no problem,” Hapu gave Lillie a smile, a reassuring pat on her arm, “with my Mudsdale there's nowhere in Alola we can't go together. I'd be happy to take you there if you'd like?”

For a moment Lillie considered it. Then shook her head. “Thank you Hapu,” she smiled back at the friend she had made, “but I'd like to wait for Moon to return to us, so that she can come with me there. It's important to me.”

Hapu nodded and withdrew her hand.

“Sounds like a plan, princess!” Acerola found herself shushed for the nth time that day, a librarian on almost constant duty managing the enthusiastic Trial Captain's tone. “The Ruins of Abundance are pretty close to my Trial Site, so just come with Moon when she's heading there and I'll take you to visit them too! Sound good?”

“Yes,” Lillie nodded, “thank you, Captain Acerola.” Acerola grinned and held up a hand and two fingers for another celebratory 'V'.

Sounds like they had a plan.

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The Eighth Precept: The temptation of power is to embrace anger and rashness. First hold peace of mind and calm of heart before acting.

In the passage of three weeks since realising how far behind the person she wanted to be she was, Kahili Hano had witnessed much. She'd watched Hau grow, pushing through the wall that could stunt Trainers for months, some forever, with this as in all things unnatural speed and ability. This was a legendary Trainer in the making, someone who would be one of the brightest stars in Alola's history, providing the weight of the world did not first smother his light. The weight of a world looking at interesting figures she was only now becoming fully aware of.

Kahili Hano's history was as thus. Only daughter of her father, owner of the Hano Grand Resort, she grew up with everything. Practised golf from the youngest of ages and excelled. Practised Pokemon from the day she formed her first bond with a wild Pikipek and in that too excelled. Passed her Trials with ease, time spent in rest and training mixed with continuing her golfing practises, before she'd visit another stretch of Alola and barrel through all its challenges as well. Golfing competitions slowed her progress, and she completed her Final Trials at seventeen, though private words amongst those concerned felt that without the sport Kahili would have done so a full three years earlier.
With the demands of her life as a sportswoman upon her, Kahili passed up the offer of Captainship of Melemele Island, spending time with her Pokemon and her sport equally, and as such never having enough time to devote to such a practise as the role of Captain.

Continuing to excel as a Trainer, even past her Island Challenge, Kahili visited other regions for golfing tournaments, only to spend what time she wasn't golfing in battle with notable Trainers, even facing random gyms not as part of the Gym Challenge but simply to face strong Trainers. When it came time for her to visit Kalos, to take part in the Grand Open hosted there, she decided that there was where she would stay. When not golfing took on the Gym Challenge as well. Beat every trainer to face her.

Took part in the Kalos Pokemon League.

To the semifinals of such she arrived, drawing attention by her skills as a Trainer, and her notable role as an Alolan Trainer, possessing the ability to use Z-Moves. Equally using Z-Moves and Mega Evolution, the Pidgeot she had raised considered an impressive member of its species indeed, Kahili made her mark and her name as a Trainer, only further gathering attention from those who'd watched her win the Grand Open Golf Tournament a year prior. Indeed, she was one of Alola's most famous Trainers, and often found herself approached or questioned when not actively projecting an aura warning others off.

This life she'd grown into.

But Hau, and Moon, had been thrust into it. From day one they were demanded. From day one they were wanted. Kahili, who'd eased into such an environment, matured at a rate that let her handle its strain upon her, could handle it. But they were children. She'd somehow deluded herself into believing they would do as well as she had. So stupid! Calls to those she missed in Kalos had consisted of her repeating that fact, the one on the other end reminding her what was important was that she go forward. Ahh, without her Kahili...

Hau had continued to push forward and, each day she saw him, Kahili said hello and asked him to tell her his thoughts. He'd done so, now and again, describing how he wanted to keep up with Moon but also felt bad about being pressure on her. How he was doing with his Bonds, at first stressed about their weight, later confident he was adapting to them. When Kahili saw him a week ago, holding a Pancham to his chest, she'd been honestly shocked by his confidence. But Hau had maintained that confidence and even today was still keeping those five Pokemon well. His pace really was without equal.

Besides...

Kukui was out, visiting Akala, spending time with his wife. The result of their presentation to the Alola Culture Council had been, as far as things could be considered, as good as they could get. The majority that made up the Council's board, as well as those attending the meeting, had decided they'd let Kukui continue on with the League. The results of his actions, and the League's effects upon Alola, would be heavily monitored, but this first tournament, this showcasing of Alola's talent, would be accepted. They really couldn't ask for better than that.

The relief of pressure on Kukui and Kahili was unequalled. Taking time, each had tried to relax, to ease themselves of their stress while still being there for Hau and Lillie. Kahili knew full well she had to be the main presence watching over the children when they eventually went south, aware of the situation with Kukui despite having been overseas at the time it had all gone down. She'd need to train more too, the threat of those taking part in the first League significant. Kukui, Pitaya, and Ryuki, as well as the Kahuna – well, only Hala and Olivia – were enough to worry her. They were all very strong and while she was confident, she wasn't foolish. She'd need to sharpen herself even
more to push through. She was fully aware of that.

Those were Kahili's days for now. Being there for Hau and Lillie when they needed her. Training her Pokemon. Waiting for Kukui to return.

He'd taken the brunt of Jewellery's frustration when reporting what had occurred with Moon. The girl's mother had demanded the contact information for Pitaya, and evidently had a very long conversation with the Guildmaster indeed as it was a full three hours later that she called Kukui back, yet Kukui swore Jewellery had most definitely contacted Pitaya immediately after their prior call. Kahili still felt like she owed the woman, and Moon, an apology. She'd definitely do so when Moon returned.

When.

Kahili had raised Dragon-types before, now and again. Those that shared the Flying-typing she could handle well enough, thanks to her Bias. She still preferred not to though. The weight pulled on her a little too much all the same. It made those who could bear the weight, especially those without the right Bias of their own, truly impressive to her eyes. She'd met the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster Pitaya before, but not often. Pitaya seemed to accept Kahili's words that she was fine on her own.

But she'd gone out of her way to take Moon under her wing.

Every day Kahili mused when not deep in her training, strengthening her Pokemon, and never shirking the basics of her golfing skills either. She was both, Trainer and golfer, and she wouldn't let one fall for the sake of another. There were other tournaments ahead of her for each and she'd face them head held high. This time here, in Alola helping with the League, was a rest-stop in her own life of challenges.

Yet somehow the challenges she'd found over these past two months had been far more intense than most she'd ever imagined before.

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**The Ninth Precept: The power you hold gives you no right to change the unwilling. Never act to force your will upon another.**

Ten days and Hau had already adapted to what should have been an incredible overreach. Taking on that Pancham, a Pokemon rescued from the damage of Team Skull, most any would assume the boy was overexerting himself. Maybe he was.

But he did it all the same.

Today he sat alone at the malasada shop of Malie City, his favoured hangout spot, eating with the Pancham. Even compared to his Wimpod the Pokemon was somewhat of a non-confrontational sort, the Luxury Ball given to him by the Aether Foundation worker helping the Playful Pokemon's nerves a little, but the experiences she'd had in her past still enough to leave her somewhat lacking in confidence when it came to battling. The rest of Hau's Pokemon had helped though, and the Pancham had at least become more comfortable around Hau's team. Baby steps.

Pancham had a taste for the bitter malasadas this shop specialised in, while Hau preferred the spicier variety. Both enjoying their food, the two ate happily and contentedly side-by-side. A little moment of peace, just for them.

Until someone else arrived on the scene.
“Thank you, please enjoy your meal!”

“Yeah cheers!”

The loud cry of the girl exiting the malasada shop, bag stuffed with the pastries in hand, raised Hau's head, her voice familiar. He looked, caught sight of a head of vibrant pink hair, and shot up to his feet. Hey that was! “Ah!”

Riley of Team Skull, though her Team Skull insignias were shelved today, no pendant, no bandanna, no beanie – a white sports cap worn to the side instead – heard the voice of surprise and turned, looking for what was so interesting. Quickly her eyes caught the boy standing at a nearby table, and quickly she realised just who had seen her. A moment passed.

She turned and booked it.

“Hey wait up!”

Even carrying his Pancham under his arm, the Pokemon happily chewing on a malasada as Hau ran, Hau kept up well with Riley, evidence of the effort he'd put into his Island Challenge, wandering the land of Alola so often on foot. Riley, more knowledgeable of Malie's layout than Hau, attempted to lose him, but Hau, far more athletic, only managed to learn a few secret passageways around the city instead.

In the end, crossing through one of Malie's parks, Hau basically running side-by-side with the Team Skull Grunt, Riley came to a raggedly breathing halt. Hau, breathing a little heavily too, was still in far better condition than Riley. She sat down hard.

“You... hah...” word by word she choked out her opinion, “are too... hah... fast...” Slapping her cheeks Riley coughed, spat on the grass, then staggered to her feet, stumbling to a nearby drinking fountain and filling her mouth with water, before choking on it as she attempted to drink far too quickly, Hau forced to pat her on the back until she was able to breathe and try again. Eventually she got back into a talkative condition. Hau stood calm as she rounded on him.

“What's your deal, huh?” She was snappy, but Hau had dealt with far worse ire already than Riley's cranky expression. “Just chasing down innocent people going about their day? That your thing, huh? Harassing poor girls trying to get some food? That it?”

Hau held up the Pancham under his arm, who'd quite enjoyed the run around carried by its Trainer all things considered. “Were you one of the ones who attacked this Pokemon?”

Riley took a step back. Hau's eyes, looking over the top of the cute – wait no not cute not cute! – black and white Pokemon, were focused. She didn't feel comfortable. She looked away. “Not me,” her voice was somewhat quiet, though her expression far easier to read without the bandanna over her mouth, “that's not my thing.”

“So when you were in the Diglett's Tunnel?” Hau's question prompted Riley to flinch. She shook her head a little faster.

“I just wanted to fight some Pokemon to get stronger, I don't beat things up for no reason.”

“Did you fight this Pancham?”

She looked. She looked and narrowed her eyes then shook her head again. Hau's tense posture relaxed a little. He believed her.
Riley sat down on the grass again. Remembered, after this long, she was holding a bag of malasadas, and pulled one out, breaking part off and popping it into her mouth, before fiddling with a Pokeball and unleashing her own Wimpod who also accepted some of the malasada offered. Hau kept on his feet, but placed Pancham down by them. The Pokemon held onto his leg.

“Why're you in Team Skull?”

Riley looked up at Hau's question with an almost offended expression. Made a scoffing noise. Ran a hand over her Wimpod and fed it some more first.

“That's a stupid question,” she didn't look up from her Pokemon as she rebuked Hau's curiosity, “Alola turned its back on us so we turned our back on Alola. Duh.” Hau blinked. Then shook his head. He didn't get it.

“I don't get it.”

“You wouldn't,” the girl – she was a teen as well, maybe a similar age to Chase – kept her eyes away from Hau's. “It's my business. Keep your nose out of it.”

“You care about your Pokemon though.”

The flinch from Riley was far more internal than external, but Hau still caught her pausing for a moment after he said that. She called her Wimpod back. “That has nothing to do with it.” And stood up.

“Hey!” Hau reached out, but Riley was faster this time, swinging her hand around and knocking his away.

“Keep it to yourself!” She had a snarl, taking a step back, “And don't act like some kind of hero. Someone like you doesn't get us at all and never will. So just go do your Island Challenge and stay out of our way, got it?” The sudden intense venom stunned Hau, who stood still even as Riley began walking away.

He didn't understand.

He really didn't at all.

The Tenth Precept: Accept that there are things you cannot change in this world, and that there will be times the power you hold means nothing.

Hau was sleeping.

A sleek-furred cat-like Pokemon of lilac colouring kept watch over him, its power able to open the door to his room in the Pokemon Center, but doing so only for Lillie alone to see he was alright. Just resting off the sudden change in demand. Lillie nodded as it wordlessly communicated to her, expressing that it was keeping watch over him, and left him for the day. She'd check back later to see that he was alright.

Today she went out into Malie City on her own.

It had been four weeks since Moon had been taken in by the Dragon Tamers Guild of Alola, and in those four weeks Lillie had watched much change. The intense heat of the season's midpoint had
washed over Alola, changing the activity of the day to be so much less from its mid to afternoon. Hau had grown, his team expanding, and even now one member evolving. Despite the intense weight of the Bonds he must be shouldering, he remained strong through it, having adapted over these past weeks. She was, always, impressed by him. He had done so well indeed.

Hapu had taken her leave now, having spent a number of days upon Mount Hokulani before returning and mentioning she would move on to the southern half of Ula'ula Island. Knowing Lillie, along with Moon and Hau, would be visiting the Ruins of Abundance, Hapu hoped to meet them then, but needed to continue on with her own path now that she felt ready. Lillie, and Hau, both thanked her for the time she'd spent with them. Hapu happily answered that there was no thanks necessary, because they were friends now and that's just what friendship was.

Friends...

Two and a half months since Lillie first met Moon. Five and a half since Nebby and she had appeared on the shore of Hau'oli City, discovered by Professors Kukui and Burnet after Tapu Koko summoned them to her unconscious form. Only a small fraction of her life so far. But also filled with the most life she'd experienced yet.

In her bag was Nebby, the Nebula Pokemon displeased at all times with its confines, yet also accepting Lillie's requests it bear it. At least it was by her side. That was contenting enough. Lillie continued on with her day.

She'd wandered Malie City now and again, with Hau, with Hapu, with Ms. Kahili, even with Acerola when the Trial Captain had visited. Professor Kukui had returned again, though was also spending time up on Mount Lanakila during the day, lending a hand to construction of the League going on there. He'd told Lillie Professor Burnet would love to visit as well, but the Ultra Wormhole was continuing to challenge both her lab and the Aether Foundation and they were working strongly on that. There had been a day last week when the darkness had settled over Malie City, that moment where the light was all gone, before it moved on once more. Manifestations of the Ultra Wormhole, the reports said.

It made Lillie feel uncomfortable.

Today was the first day Lillie was wandering on her own. She understood needing to stay by others, that alone she could not properly protect Nebby, and was more than aware that sightings of Team Skull in Malie City had begun to rise in the past few days. But she still wanted to do this, to set out on her own and do something. She had a goal. Somewhere she wanted to go. Something she'd been thinking about for weeks now. So she was going to do it. She was.

Onwards she went.

Within the central sector of Malie City, the grid city well packed at its core, there was a clothing shop Lillie had visited before. It had been with Kahili, who was hoping for some lighter clothing for the heat of this year, something more intense than she remembered since spending so many years over in Kalos. An outfit had stood out to Lillie, though she did not move to buy it. Walked away but did not forget it. Could not forget it.

Now returned.

“Oh, greetings young miss! May I help you?”

“Oh,” Lillie shook her head, “no thank you.” Moved with purpose instead to find the clothing she had seen last. There it was. Like it was waiting for her. She stood before it, and imagined herself in
“Ah, that's our last in stock actually,” the clerk had remained watching over Lillie, and quickly pointed out that now was the time to buy. “And do excuse me if I may be so bold but I am sure you would look most lovely in it!” Lillie flushed, shaking her head at the saleswoman. But didn't say a word otherwise.

In all her life she'd never controlled her own appearance. Worn what was chosen for her by her mother, styled herself as advised she should. But she'd seen this outfit and wanted to know how she would look in it. Seen Moon's hair, tied back at the beginning of her Island Challenge, and thought it looked lovely that way. She wanted to change. But...

The thought still scared her.

In the changing room Lillie sat, the clothing hung on a hook before her. From her bag she withdrew a box, a makeup kit she'd had with her for some time now. She remembered being given a copy of it, a reward for being a milestone visitor to a similar clothing store in Hau'oli City, and remembered passing that on to Moon. A little something the two had in common. Inside the small changing room Lillie held the box against her head, eyes closed, and thought.

They'd both come so far. Had Lillie ever imagined she would have the confidence to go to the Ruins of each Tapu, to see them before her and remain on her feet? To go all across Alola for Nebby's sake? She had never even wanted to take a step away from Professor Kukui or Professor Burnet when first found by them. Now here she was, on her own making her own decisions. It was all so much.

Moon had gone even further. Without a moment's pause raced through the Island Challenge to this point. But in doing so... she'd pushed herself to do it. And hurt herself too. Lillie hadn't noticed. Hadn't thought of it at all. Just assumed Moon was invincible and unstoppable, like everyone else had. She'd let her down.

Imagining Moon as an all-powerful being had been what stoked her fear, convinced her Moon could take Nebby and save them in a way Lillie never could. But believing Moon could do everything, that she could shoulder anything, that was hurting her too. Lillie hadn't thought right of her. Facing that, over these past few weeks, had been difficult.

But necessary.

So that when Moon returned, when Lillie saw her again, she could greet her as just Moon. Not Moon the impossible trainer, or Moon the incredible power, or Moon who could do anything. Just as Moon. Her friend. That would be nice.

That was what she wanted most.

Lillie left the clothing store with a bag containing the outfit she had been thinking of, purchased and now hers. But not worn yet, not even tried in the fitting room. She didn't yet feel up to that. Not alone.

But maybe, when Moon came back, she'd find the confidence then. To change a little more.

Yes. She was sure she would.
The Eleventh Precept: You are part of this world and its people. Treat all you encounter with dignity and respect.

“Woah!”

In a quiet park of Malie City Hau and Lillie had been sitting together, Hau's Pokemon forming a perimeter so Nebby might enjoy the filtered-through-tree-leaves light of afternoon. It had now been almost the length of a month since Moon had been taken in by the Dragon Tamers, and the repeat of days working to better himself had become ritual for Hau, making sure to spend time with Lillie during them. Both still felt the absence of Moon, especially with Hapu having moved on as well, but both remained determined to remain here until Moon returned all the same. They knew she would.

They knew she'd come back to them.

It was now, in this quiet afternoon, that Hau shot to his feet and pointed, stunned by the one he saw. Lillie, remaining sitting, stared as well. Surprised, but restraining that surprise. The one Hau had pointed at heard clearly his loud exclamation. Turned and made their way over to him.

And sat down before them.

“You really only have one volume, don't you?” Gladion, enforcer of Team Skull, blonde-haired and green-eyed, wearing clothing of black patched over with slashes of red, frowned at Hau, who still remained standing, pointing and somewhat open mouthed. “Sit down already, you're making a scene.”

Hau sat. Looked between Gladion and Lillie and completely skipped over the obvious similarities in features by his sheer surprise at Gladion's appearance. Went for the introduction instead. “Woah,” he said again, “hey, Gladion, I uh. Wow hey I didn't expect to actually see you again! Uh, Lillie, this is Gladion, he's Moon and I's friend.”

Lillie looked at Gladion. Gladion looked back at her and arched an eyebrow. A tiny giggle laced her voice as she spoke. “Hello Gladion.”

He genuinely paused for a moment. Then shook his head with a shrug. “Hello Lillie.”

“Okay!” Hau, thrilled for one friend to meet another, clapped his hands. “What are you doing here, Gladion? I kinda figured you were off doing ’secret Team Skull things’ or whatever.” Hau waggled his fingers in the same moment to show his opinion of whatever Gladion did as part of Team Skull. Lillie looked at Gladion very sternly.

“Haven't you been paying attention?” Gladion answered back coolly, avoiding the judging gaze coming from his side. “Team Skull are multiplying in this city, they’re looking to set up shop here. Apparently been having trouble with their base in Po Town.” The increasing presence of Team Skull had been noted in Malie City, regular daily reports about it going by, the group continuing to appear on every street corner and in every back alley. Gladion sighed. “They’ve also been hunting a certain Pokemon. You might've heard of it. It goes by Cosmog.”

Hau turned his head to look clearly at Nebby, who'd scurried behind Lillie when this stranger appeared. Lillie remained blank-faced. “Is that so?”

“They’ve had me out looking for it,” Gladion continued. “I've been feeding them false info though. Sending them off to everywhere else in Alola.”

“Why?” Hau's blunt question earned a cool stare from the green-eyed boy. Gladion didn't give an
“Anyway, if you happen to find that Pokemon, I'd recommend keeping it out of the way. I don't know how they found out about it, or know what it's capable of, but they're looking and we'd all be happier if they didn't find it.”

Hau frowned. “You say that like you're not part of Team Skull.”


“Hau,” she used a requesting tone, something to ask on her mind, “did you see the ice-cream cart near the entrance of the park?”

Hau turned back to her, thinking for a moment before nodding. “Yep! It is still really hot today, huh? I can go get some if you want- oh wait,” Hau looked back at Gladion, “is he-”

“It will be fine, Hau,” Lillie said it firmly, surprising the boy, “please?” Still surprised, Hau nonetheless stood, nodded to his Pokemon to keep watch, and set off, looking back as he walked to make sure Gladion was staying put all the same. The boy sighed, seeing himself so mistrusted. Smiled slightly.

“It's good he's looking after you,” he turned his attention back to Lillie, “though I would have picked a better bodyguard.”

“He's my friend.” Lillie answered back sternly. “He and Moon both.”

“She's not around?” Gladion turned his head, looking about the park, but made no eye contact with the mysterious Trainer. Lillie shook her head.

“No, Moon has been away for some time.”

“Hmm.” A one noise answer. The two sat in silence for a moment, Hau's Pokemon still gathered about, watching over the intruding boy. “Are you well?”

“I am,” Lillie nodded, thinking on the weeks that had passed. The months as well. “More than I ever was before.” An almost surprised sound came from Gladion, a slightly wide-eyed expression. Then he smiled a little more genuinely.

“Good, that's... good. I... sorry.”

Lillie waited a moment, thinking deeply. Then answered.

“It's alright.”

Silence for a little longer. But Hau would only be away debating what ice-cream flavours to get Gladion for a little longer. Gladion spoke again. “Cosmog, do you know about it?”

“Yes,” Lillie replied, “I've seen legends that make me believe it has something to do with Alola's Legendary Pokemon. With Solgaleo and Lunala.”

“Yeah,” Gladion answered back. “I don't- I don't know why Team Skull wants it. They shouldn’t even know about it. But if Cosmog can call on those Legendary Pokemon they'll-”

“I'll keep it safe.” Lillie used a stronger tone than Gladion had ever heard from her before. He went silent. “I,” she continued, “appreciate what you've done. And what you're doing. But please consider
staying. You don't need to stay with Team Skull to help me any more. Please.”

Gladion stood. “If mother is involved with Team Skull I—” he shook his head, “I need to know. I'll come back when I've found out for sure. Stay safe, Lillie.” The boy took off, heading a different way to not meet Hau on his return with ice-cream in hand. Lillie watched him go.

“Stay safe, brother.”

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**The Twelfth Precept: The call of destiny is to be answered, but neither feared nor lauded. We each have a duty that is part of us, but that duty does not define us.**

She walked with unpaued steps, through the streets of Malie City. Noise surrounded her, people in motion, but none paid attention to her. How could they? They couldn't recognise her.

Everywhere there was complaints, and action. Team Skull had struck in force, the week of their build-up exploding in this day. They were everywhere, on every street, doing nothing more than exerting their usual thuggish presence. No-one felt safe though. Complained about this presence in Malie no-one was helping with. Where was the Kahuna? What was going to happen to Malie?

No-one knew.

She walked on. Followed the paths she'd barely learned, moving against the flow of people towards what she did not know. But something was ahead.

There were words of a fight in Malie Garden. The leader of Team Skull, facing off against Professor Kukui. Words of support of the Professor, hoping he would chase off the man, reached her ears. Those around her approved of him. That was good.

She continued, step by step. The world raced around her in high speed but she measured her own and was never pushed nor hurried. Through streets. Past buildings and people. To gates. And beyond.

The grassy paths of Malie Garden she walked. Encounters, combat, surrounded her. But she didn't stop. Didn't pause. Made her way to the Garden's core. There were fights here too. One member of them caught sight of her. And stared.

For no matter how much she changed, Hau would always recognise her.

“...Moon?”

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**Chapter End Notes**

Here is the new record-holder of longest chapter in Eldritch so far, but I'm sure you understand that it had to be this way. At least separated into twelve discrete parts, it's easy to go through - I hope at least.

I'm excited about a lot of this chapter, and excited to hear your thoughts on it. I hope you each enjoyed, we got to take a number of dives into different characters, and I'm pleased I was able to do such. Really got to set up a lot of points I've been wanting to,
not to mention interactions I've been waiting for. While the general Ula'ula arc structure is similar to the games, you can see clearly I'm also taking my own liberties. I'm confident in them though.

Before I wrap up, I have two shoutouts to make. Firstly to my good friend and excellent writer Alexilulu, who wrote an Eldritch-themed date night for a certain pair of ladies for my birthday a little while back. Check out One Night in Akala here: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15949256
Then check out the rest of Lexi's archive too!

Secondly, my buddy ScruffyTurtles, who's advertised this fic before and I'm very thankful for, drew a Pitaya during a recent stream: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/181059555638 (rip his blog, you can find his twitter here: https://twitter.com/ScruffyTurtles)
Here she is, in the midst of a Dragon Z-Move! I feel bad for whoever she's facing :p

That's it for this chapter, I hope you all enjoyed. The next one will be along when the time comes, as is the rule for every chapter. I'm sure you know what, and who, is coming. Look forward to it.
As if pursuing the notorious leader of Team Skull, heavy clouds had swept in from the north coast of Ula'ula Island, stretching all the way from distant Po Town to Malie City itself. With it came pressure, only further raising the tension of the city as those sensitive to it felt their stress mount – the seeming assault by Team Skull well underway. In essence little was combative across the majority of the city: just the presence of Team Skull everywhere about, refusing to be chased off or cowed by those who might disapprove. But the saturation of their presence was the first step of their takeover, and those refugee from Po Town knew that well. The population wasn't happy with it.

But he had never once cared.

The Malie Garden was where the real action would be. Where those who wanted to keep damage from spilling across the city would take their fights. That place was large enough to play host to some really messy battles and still be repaired, so that was where those too scared of hurting their surroundings would go. And that was where he went too.

After all, he couldn't beat them down without first gathering them up, right?

The most notable of the Trainers in Malie Garden was in battle. A tall man, though not as tall as he, tanned skin, white lab-coat worn over bare chest. Kukui had never once been a fan of the concept of a shirt, but honestly that look was just ridiculous. It was enough to make a man scoff. He scoffed and approached the conflict just as Kukui was finishing putting the beat down on two of his Grunts. Little punks biting more than they could ever chew.

Well, whatever.

“You having fun there, Kukui?”

Oh how their eyes turned upon him. Kukui's wide then narrowed in a stare. The Grunts so excited to see him. The populace, those so pitiful all they could do is stand around and cheer as others fought for them. All looked at him. He laughed and announced himself.

“Greetings, cowering public!” The area around him and Kukui cleared, a far wider circle than what had been before. Even the Grunts were pulling back, though cheering for him all the same. 'Get 'em boss', they were saying, 'crush that guy!'. He smiled. “Yes that's right, the hated boss who beats you down, and beats you down, and never lets up... yeah. Big bad Guzma is here!”

Guzma of Team Skull met Kukui's eyes, their stares level thanks to the slouch the boss of Team Skull almost always held. Messy and rough white hair crowned his head, accented by the large pair of gold-rimmed and black-tinted sunglasses he'd lifted to rest in them. Skin lightly tanned, showing he'd spent long enough in Alola, but not nearly as often under its sun, he wore the same stylings as the rest of Team Skull – black and white – but instead of a black top his was white, a short-sleeved black jacket over it. The insignia of Team Skull could be seen on him four times over, once printed in white upon the back of the jacket he wore, twice again in the purple tattoos marked along each forearm, and once more in the large golden decoration hanging from his neck. Heavily dark ringed eyes and a cocksure grin stayed locked on Kukui.

Kukui wasn't smiling.
“Been a minute, huh?” The boss of Team Skull folded his arms, for a moment straightening up so all could see he was the peak around here. No-one else. “You've been having fun running all around Alola I hear, trying to make that League of yours. Now shaking up this mouldy old region, that's not a bad idea, but did you really have'ta prostrate yourself to the Tapu to do it? Pretty pathetic man, I gotta say.”

“I don't remember asking your opinion.” Kukui took a step to the side, trying to start that thing where two badasses circled one another. Guzma scoffed again and didn't budge. “What are you doing here, Guzma?”

“Whatever I want, remember?” Guzma's loud bark of a response was accompanied by the insistence in his posture that he wasn't moving from where he stood before Kukui, blocking the way back to Malie proper. “Don't be bound to them. Don't be their slaves.' You taken one too many hits from those Pokemon of yours to remember? Huh?” Kukui's silent stare almost pricked at Guzma's skin. Good, he was mad. He should be. “We never did settle things, did we Kukui?” With a grin Guzma brought out a Pokeball, Kukui full-well aware what was lurking within it. “So this seems pretty overdue. You who turned your back on Alola then decided to crawl snivelling back to them, and me who'll never be beaten or broken! Let's see how things add up this time, huh?”

Kukui raised one of his own Pokeballs, from it emerging the Wolf Pokemon Lycanroc, Midday Form, the man's oldest partner. Guzma hadn't seen her in even longer. He almost felt nostalgic doing so. But forget that. He was the hardest guy in Alola and didn't bow to anyone! Guzma unleashed his own Pokemon. The heavy thud of its feet hitting the soft grass of the Malie Garden echoed in the silence of those watching.

The Hard Scale Pokemon Golisopod stood even taller than Guzma, though much like him had a slouch to its posture. Standing on two legs, silver plating covered its body in heavy armour, massive black spiked claws extended from its main arms, four more smaller arms emerging from its upper carapace as well, the purple antenna wrapping around and extending up from its mouth parting slightly as a series of deep and threatening clicking noises emerged. The Lycanroc, who well remembered her foe, mouthed back at it. The two spoke a series of insults and challenges they'd repeated many times before.

“So this is what it comes down to,” Guzma with a grin squatted down, enjoying the sight of his towering Pokemon menacing over those before it. “Just two rejects from the past putting things to an end. One of us who stuck with their convictions and the other one a coward on every front. I think we both know how this is going to go.”

“Speak for yourself,” Kukui called back, remaining tall on his feet, watching over his Lycanroc and the Golisopod before her. “I found a better way and apologised for my mistakes, you're the one too stubborn to ever admit you were wrong. What I've decided to do I'm going to do, so the Pokemon League of Alola is going to happen, and you're going to get out of this city, yeah!”

Cheers from the crowd still watching erupted at Kukui's declaration, some folks among them already with phones out recording the clash. The boss of Team Skull was rarely seen, and always akin to a disaster when he appeared, leaving destruction in his wake. But this time he was facing Professor Kukui of Alola, known to be a powerful Trainer indeed. And with their relation the way it was...

Kukui and Guzma remained focused on one another. Each gave their orders clearly. It was time to settle this. Golisopod and Lycanroc both raced forward.

The beginning of their fated battle at last.

At speed that only Pokemon of strength and experience such as this Golisopod could react to an
arrow raced through the air, the Hard Scale Pokemon pulling short its attack and raising a massive armoured claw, the projectile bouncing harmlessly off of it. Guzma's head whipped in the direction of the attack. So did Kukui's.

This is what they saw.

A young girl stood a few dozen meters behind and to the right of Guzma, a Pokemon looming beside her. The girl was dark of skin, short shaven black hair only barely showing tips once dyed caramel blonde. She wore a tanktop of faded yellow, the colour of the Alola Dragon Tamers Guild, a pendant around her neck ending in a rainbow coloured jewel, recognisable as a Key Stone to any who knew such. Her shoulders were covered by an Ula'ula red cloth shawl that stretched down to her wrists, the shape of a dragon defined in darker red across it, a similarly red skirt worn to her knees, marked by patterns of flowers and leaves, six Pokeballs set around her waist. Sandals of white completed the look, one which was unmistakably her own, yet bore the touch and colours of the island and those she'd learned under. Coolly, she watched the scene before her. As did the one beside her.

The Pokemon any resident of Alola could recognise in a glance.

It stood just slightly taller than she did, a Pokemon of brown feathered wings and cream-coloured down along its body and legs proper, ending just shy of sharp taloned feet. A green leaf-like layer shrouded its head and shoulders, concealing an avian beaked face, bright orange eyes within seeming to glow in the shadow it cast. Its pose was that of an archer having just loosed an arrow, for that was what it had done, one extended wing pulling taut a vine growing from its shroud to act as bowstring, the other drawing an arrow-like quill back upon it before release. Such archery was a known feat of the Arrow Quill Pokemon, the Grass and Ghost-type Decidueye, evolution of Dartrix and final form of the starter Pokemon known as Rowlet.

The voices of the crowd immediately hit fever pitch.

When she'd walked through the streets of Malie City none had recognised her. The majority knew her hair as being long enough to tie back, and people in a hurried panic as so much of this city was didn't have the time or focus to imagine her with anything else. Those few who'd listened to the rumour mills and understood the change in appearance she'd taken on before, hair dyed caramel blonde and tied into two tails, they'd never recognise her as that person again either. And in garb she wore the yellow and red of a Dragon Tamer; a young one perhaps, but people weren't in the mood to dwell deeply at this point. She'd been allowed the freedom to make it to this place.

But from here on her name and appearance would only spread across Alola again.

“...Moon?”

Moments ago locked in battle with another Team Skull Grunt, lending his aid to Kukui in chasing them out of the Malie Garden, Hau's attention was wrenched from it by the appearance of Moon, and the Pokemon beside her. To his luck his opponent was stunned too. Everyone was.

That was a Decidueye. That was a third stage evolution of a Pokemon, and a starter Pokemon at that. The requirement to raise such a thing in less than three months... it was impossible! Well, clearly not true.

Guzma rose up to his full height and stepped forward.

“So you're the kid that's got this whole region in a fuss, huh?” For as confident as his stride was approaching the young girl, Guzma's eyes kept flicking to watch the movements of the Pokemon by
her side. He smirked. “Plumeria told me all you had was a big-head and a bunch of Pokemon, seems
that ain't the case.” A silent stare was all the answer he got, the girl looking up at him but neither
moving nor reacting in any way. Guzma's smile slipped a little. “Well, whatever you've been up to,
lemme tell you now, don't go getting ahead of yourself. The name's Guzma, big bad boss of Team
Skull and Alola's strongest, don't you forget it! Consider yourself lucky!”

Moon began to move.

Her eyes slid easily from focusing on Guzma to Kukui in the distance, her steps carrying her past the
shocked Team Skull Boss, her Decidueye walking in pace with her, its gaze keeping watch over
Guzma as its Trainer went. The silence lasted, Moon's approach to Kukui complete so she could
look up at him instead. Kukui blinked, and finally realised his mouth had been hanging slightly. He
shut it.

Then opened it again.

“Moon, I—”

“Hey now!” The loud and abrasive voice of Guzma echoed over Malie Garden, the fuming man
taking steps back towards Moon and Kukui. “You not teaching any of these brats doing their Island
Challenges manners, Kukui? They're already not getting any real strength out of it, you could at least
teach 'em to be polite!”

Moon turned and looked back at Guzma, her expression still so neutral, eyes still so cool. It was
annoying him. He was really annoyed.

“You know kid I was thinking someone who cut loose like I heard ya did would be a good recruit,
but first thing's first I think I gotta teach you a thing or two. Getting a little power and letting it go to
your head like that, you're just asking to get beat down. So square up, I'm putting you in your place!
Watch and learn, Kukui, this is how you teach a brat what strength is!” Stepping up behind Guzma,
the Golisopod hunched down, as if preparing for a charging tackle. Kukui put a hand on Moon's
shoulder.

“It's okay, Moon, I'll take care of—” Moon pushed his hand off of her.

Guzma's grin widened at the sight. “Don't regret that now! Here's a first-class lesson, kid, a look at
destruction in human form! Comin' at ya, it's ya boy Guzma!” And the Golisopod with unnatural
speed launched forward.

Kukui's attempt to call for his Lycanroc went blocked as the Decidueye of Moon pushed him aside,
taking a stance behind Moon once more. A flash of red before her, a Pokemon emerging from one of
the Pokeballs at her waist, and just as the Golisopod's surging strike came within reach it stopped, the
glowing barrier that had met it slowly fading from where it had formed. Before Moon a meter tall
round Pokemon, bar for four stubby legs holding it up and flat fin-like protrusions from its upper
armour, growled deeply, the sound echoing from within its shell. If the appearance of Decidueye,
final evolution of Rowlet, hadn't been shocking enough, adding Shelgon, first evolution of Bagon,
absolutely was.

Dragons. Didn't. Evolve like that.

This wasn't a case of freakish training ability, it was raw numbers! In the time between catching a
Bagon and now, there was no fundamental way for Moon to provide the sort of energy that would
evolve such! Videos recorded, short clips already posted online to get the ground wave of hits, were
already being replied to with that. This couldn't be the case. It just couldn't!
Kukui, this close to feel the Bonds Moon had, knew that it could.

She felt impossible.

This wasn't the case of a strong Trainer. Kukui knew what a strong Trainer was. He'd battled Gym Leaders across the world. Gone all out with the Kahuna of Alola. Observed a Pokemon League in person in preparation for proposing Alola's own. He knew what a strong Trainer was.

It wasn't like a Totem, or a Tapu, either. Those were both different too, the first wrapped in Z-Aura, the second possessing the pure power that made a Legendary Pokemon what it was. No, the sensation of Moon was something else, unique and hers alone. Even before, when she'd felt strange to Kukui's eyes, he'd still been able to understand her as another Trainer. She'd made sense then and he could tell her Bonds and Pokemon apart.

Now he absolutely could not.

Moon was a sheer font of power, no part of it distinguishable, a mass of force defined within her. Looking at her while focusing on that sense alone, Kukui found it difficult to tell it was even her. Or even a person at all. It... scared him. It really did.

“Who even cares!?” The loud crack of Guzma's words accompanied his Golisopod swinging a powerful claw around, punching through the next barrier of the Shelgon and bowling it over: the dragon's impressive weight unable to withstand the pure force the huge Golisopod could exert. Moon didn't say a thing, her Pokemon hauling itself back onto its legs and turning back to face its opponent, the commands given by her in silent thought alone. She was acting like a master Trainer indulging a child. Guzma, experienced enough in the ways of the world, could tell that too. A nasty snarl curled its way across his mouth.

He gave orders for even greater force to be applied.

Barrier after barrier the Golisopod struck and broke through, the Hard Scale Pokemon throwing the Endurance Pokemon Shelgon about the grassy field of Malie Garden's centre. Guzma laughed, even moreso at the times the Shelgon leaped at the Golisopod to be punched back down, or breathed out flames that barely licked at the shining silver scales of his Pokemon. This little brat really wasn't anything at all. So what if she had some evolved Pokemon? She still didn't have any real power! Guzma ordered another strike and Golisopod swung a claw right through the distorting form of the Endurance Pokemon.

...huh?

Kukui couldn't believe it. The elegance of the switch, the moment the illusion-clad Zoroark, bipedal black furred and red haired fox Pokemon, evolution of Zorua, emerged in disguise as Shelgon from one of the Pokeballs at Moon's waist, was exactly in time with the calling back of Shelgon and the positioning of Golisopod, after another of its attacks, to block the view of the exchange from Guzma's eyes as well as its own. It was an action of almost artistry. What had Pitaya been teaching Moon?

In the moment of confusion the Zoroark sunk a clawed fist into the Golisopod's chest, before the Hard Scale Pokemon smacked it aside with a heavy strike. A direct hit from the Pokemon of Guzma was still too much to handle, and the Illusion Fox Pokemon yelped loudly.

Moon spoke for the first time since she had appeared, calling the Zoroark back to her, another Pokemon already standing at the ready. Fox-like as well, though on all fours, a white body with pink ears, tail, and feet, ribbon-like feelers stretching from its head and neck, each tipped with pink that
matched its fur and blue that matched its eyes, the Intertwining Pokemon Sylveon, Fairy-type evolution of Eevee, stepped forward as Zoroark fell back to Moon's side. Decidueye continued to loom behind her.

Those watching remained in silent rapture.

Decidueye. Shelgon. Zoroark. Sylveon. Four evolved Pokemon and not one of insignificant strength. This should not be possible. Forget evolving such, even if she'd been gifted them there was no way any child should be able to shoulder this weight! Moon's appearance during the Grand Trial of Melemele Island, the Pokemon with her then, they were all still beginners in so many ways. This... this was a fully fledged team. Trainers at the end of their journeys would be thrilled to have such! For a child, in less than three months to...

Guzma gritted his teeth, all the words around him being about Moon Moon Moon. Not a single care that the boss of Team Skull was here to wreck house. So what? So what! Let this freak brat have all the Pokemon in the world she still wasn't keeping up with him and he was gonna show that right now! “Golisopod!” He didn't even need to say it, the will communicated clearly between them, but he did anyway, “Crush 'em!”

Wavy air tinged with pink light took shape around the battlefield, emerging from the Sylveon and spreading out to surround it. Thrice Moon had seen such an ability – the first in battle with Tapu Koko in Verdant Cavern, the second watching Tapu Lele dispatch the Team Skull Admin Plumeria, and the third from the Totem of Hokulani Observatory. That had been enough. She appreciated it. And had taught Sylveon to do the same. To infuse the air with power that would aid it.

Having a means to stand up to dragons had quickly become needed when her training with them had begun.

In every respect the Golisopod of Guzma was stronger than any of Moon's Pokemon could possibly be. For over a decade and a half it had been with Guzma, there from the beginning as once a Wimpod, and even if Guzma rarely threw himself against powerful Trainers these days, the experiences they'd had were still more than enough to put this Pokemon beyond Moon's.

But Guzma knew that full well and so believed all he need throw against Moon was power. Much in the same way she had been before.

She understood now who it was Plumeria had said she resembled.

“Beat 'em down!”

Moon didn't allow that.

Sylveon was fast, as Eevee had been fast, and the twisting air of the misty terrain it had formed made it difficult to track. For every swing of the Golisopod's massive arms, already the Intertwining Pokemon had well and truly dodged away. Sparks of light bursting through the mist, power exuded by the Pokemon to attack from afar, continued to rain down upon the hard armour of the Golisopod, who with unaffected gait strode towards the target lurking nearby. It didn't seem to have taken much damage at all from the beginning of this battle to now. Truly, the difference between them was too extreme.

But Moon didn't show that at all.

She was calm. Focused. Silent. Kukui looked down at her and not a bead of sweat, not the slightest hint of a frown, lay upon her face. She was simply watching. Clearly directing by thought alone. Her
attitude, it was that of the very best possible of Trainers. She was facing someone massively beyond
her and not cowed in the least. It was amazing.

Seriously, what had Pitaya done to her?

Somewhere along the way, Guzma realised he was being outplayed.

“Get rid of that mist!” That order alone was enough, Golisopod raising a massive claw before
slamming it into the ground, water bursting from between its scales, a surge of liquid in all directions
washing out, drenching Kukui who was still standing nearby, Moon sheltered by the wing of her
Decidueye wrapping around her. But the attack had cleared the mist, and without it to hide within
Sylveon proved unable to dodge the next strike. Golisopod lifted it into the air before slamming it
into the ground. Moon called the Pokemon back.

“Th-that's right, kid!” In truth Guzma was rattled, though he'd never admit it. This kid and her tactics,
she was proving annoying. It wasn't like he was going to lose, but he wasn't crushing her right now
either. What was her deal, acting like she was some sort of master? And that prissy better-than-you
attitude she had by always being so 'calm' and 'focused', screw that! It didn't matter what Pokemon
she had! Or how many tactics she tried! Or how much she felt like that... Guzma shook his head.
“Doesn't matter what Pokemon you send out, I'll still crush 'em!”

Moon acknowledged that challenge and added her fifth to the mix.

The evolution of Feebas had once been considered a difficult thing to achieve. The requirement was
dependant upon the Fish Pokemon's mental state, but unlike every other such evolution, which
depended on the relationship between Pokemon and Trainer, this evolution relied solely upon the
Pokemon's consideration of itself. In that instance, a Feebas must consider itself truly beautiful to
trigger the state necessary for evolution, for transformation into the beautiful and serpentine Tender
Pokemon Milotic.

From that time of discovery, new information had revealed a second method, a trade-based evolution
requiring the use of a rare item known as a Prism Scale. The science of that, whether it was a
reaction to the item and the trading environment itself, or rather a belief that with the item it was
beautiful enough to be desired by another, was yet to be fully understood – evolution a mysterious
thing indeed. But that method, at least with the aid of the Dragon Tamers of Alola, had allowed
Moon to do such.

To now unleash the cream-scaled serpent – a antenna and long fin-like brows of deep pink extending
from its face, similar pink mixing with blue in a scale-like pattern along its tail ending in a fanned
spread. A Pokemon well known for capturing the hearts of those witness to it, the entire field
remained silent as the Tender Pokemon approached the Golisopod, all shocked by the fifth member
of Moon's team. It really didn't make sense. Nothing about it made sense.

Kukui shook himself free of the stunned moment and rummaged in a pocket, before tapping Moon
on the shoulder for her attention. This should be hers now.

Guzma, boss of Team Skull, lacked any aspect that could possibly be calmed by the sight of the
Pokemon opposing him. His frustration only mounted in witnessing it, his commands to his
Golisopod laced with further distaste. Milotic was not an easy Pokemon to hit however, and its
surging movements as it danced about the field, leading the Golisopod to the water before diving in,
using this home territory for even greater manoeuvrability, only spiked Guzma's ire further. Was this
brat trying to play with him? Just testing out what those fancy Pokemon of hers could do? Forget
that! Screw that noise! He was Guzma, hated boss of Team Skull! And he wasn't going easy on
anybody ever! “Get in the water!”
Golisopod dived in.

The precise nature of the battle, held in churning waters neither Moon nor Guzma could see into, went missed. It lasted a few moments in total, whatever intensity had taken place left as mystery when the water broke, the Hard Scale Pokemon first to emerge, dragging the Tender Pokemon behind it. Moon raised a Net Ball, the one she had used to first catch a Feebas in Brooklet Hill, and called it back. Four Pokemon bested.

Decidueye stepped forward.

The riveted crowd, aware that this had to be Moon's strongest Pokemon, remained silent, recording devices focused on the battle. Guzma, beginning to relax now as the battle was clearly nearing its end, smirked. Yeah, this kid had tried to be everything but what had she done, really? Nothing. No kid could stand up to him, even the freakiest of them. He prepared a command. Time to put this battle to an end.

Moon raised her arms, green Z-Crystal set within her Z-Ring not what any would expect.

Z-Aura flared around her.

Something was wrong.

It was like the clouds overhead had opened, but instead of raining water it was pressure, stifling force pushing down upon the world below. Those watching raised hands to their foreheads, those most in-tune with Pokemon and able to sense Bonds feeling the spike of pain just behind the bridge of their nose, the intensity in the air so much, way too much. Some grew light-headed. Looked away. They were the lucky ones.

Those staring at Moon could not move their eyes, could not look away from what they saw. They didn't see Moon, not wrapped in the Z-Aura surrounding her. Instead they saw something they could not truly parse, the edges of the power she had called up tearing at reality around her. Had any to witness the Ultra Wormhole before been here, they would have seen that Moon herself much resembled one in this moment. This concentration of Z-Power, dense enough to resemble its original form, did not belong. And what the brain could not comprehend it feared.

Those witness, feared.

Kukui had given her the Decidium-Z, Z-Crystal tied to the Arrow Quill Pokemon alone. Though green of colour, it was actually aligned with the Pokemon type of Ghost, the Z-Pose required to activate it one Moon had not yet learned. Kukui hadn't told her what it was. But she'd done it by pure instinct alone all the same, raising her outstretched arms in a haunting motion from waist height to head. In the end, looking back on this moment, that didn't surprise him.

Everything else about it was far too much as it was.

Power flowed, from Moon through the Bond between her and her Pokemon, the Pokemon that had been by her side since the beginning of this journey. Now Decidueye was the ominous presence, glowing bright, deep orange eyes shining from within the mass of Z-Aura surrounding it. With slow movements it drew back another arrow, aimed clearly at the Golisopod before it. Guzma too struggled to react.

The arrow fired. Then was two arrows. Then ten. Then twenty.

Z-Aura poured into each arrow exploded on contact with the Golisopod's armoured shell, raised arms to block these incoming strikes helping, but not nearly enough. Twenty bursts of power
transferred from the infinite well that was Moon to her Pokemon then fired upon its foe. A devastating show of force indeed. The sensation in the air faded. Those watching breathed again, sweat beading upon their faces, gasping and shaking their heads, massaging their eyes, looking away from the one known as Moon. That had been way, way too scary.

What... was she?

Guzma stared, still. His Golisopod, still standing, lowered its arms, smoke rising from twenty points across its body. Then turned back to its Trainer. Raced towards him and disappeared back into the Pokeball he carried in a flash of red.

It had had enough.

Silence. No-one knew what to make of this, of the terrifying sight they'd all been witness to. Had... the Pokemon of Guzma retreated? Well he had plenty more, right? Yeah, he'd only been pushed back a little. So he really was that strong...

Slowly, Guzma rose to his feet. Stood there for a moment, the pace of his breathing rapidly building. Kukui stepped forward, and raised a hand before Moon, knowing what would come next. It always did.

“ARRRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHHH!”

The roaring voice of Guzma shook the entirety of Malie Garden, the man holding his hands to the sides of his head, fingers digging into his skin. He screamed, bending forward, more and more pressure. When his fingers slipped red could be seen beneath them. “Guzma!” The yell of his name was pained, the man's eyes unfocused, locked on a vision of his past, “What is wrong with you?”

Kukui wished he could look away, wished that his raised arm was doing anything to stop Moon from seeing the sight of the Team Skull Boss screaming at his pain of failure. “Can you not even stand up to some... some brat? Who are you? WHO ARE YOU?” It was for the best, Kukui considered, having seen this sight before, that this battle was here in the Malie Garden, soft grass the only thing underfoot. A nearby tree, or wall, would be dented by the forehead of Guzma were it available. But he wouldn't move until he'd regained himself a measure. Slowly the yelling faded, cracks in his now hoarse voice finding their way into his speech.

He stormed across the field towards Kukui and Moon.

“You brat!” Just hearing Guzma's voice prompted others to wince in involuntary sympathy, sure of the pain his raw throat must be in. “Your name's Moon, right?” Moon, still standing behind Kukui, stared up at Guzma. But nodded. Guzma changed his point at her to be a thumbs down. “Just you wait, the next time, I'll crush you with everything I've got! Don't forget it!”

“Back down, Guzma,” Kukui stepped forward to the Team Skull Boss, the two now standing face-to-face, menace in his tone. “Do you really want to fight after your front-runner's taken that sort of damage? It won't end well.” The barest sound of a snarl came from Guzma's curled lips before he stopped trying to make the noise. Turned on his foot and began to walk away.

“We're outta here!” With that loudness he was capable of, despite the pain in his throat, Guzma gave his order. “Forget Malie. Get going!”

The rest of Team Skull fell in line behind him.

And silence fell after.
“Moon!”

The loud voice of Hau broke the moment of shock left in the wake of the Team Skull Boss's exit, the young boy racing over to Moon and Kukui now. Moon turned, emotionless gaze settling upon him, before a wide smile crossed her face and she called out his name in return. Hau's smile mirrored her own.

“Hey!” As soon as he was close enough Hau stretched out his arms, skipping the usual high-five of greeting to lift Moon bodily up in a hug, her laughing at him before he set her down. “What the heck, Moon, I turn my back and you turn into some kind of Pokemon Master overnight?” Hau grinned through the scolding of his friend as she failed to put anything but mirth into rebuking him for lifting her, the two laughing and smiling so honestly Kukui felt the anxiety and stress he'd been silently carrying since Pitaya took charge of Moon fade away. She was okay. He breathed out.

It was okay now.

In a rush of steel wings the Armour Bird Pokemon Skarmory, all metal and avian features, swept in from the sky, the woman riding on its back dismounting in an elegant and practised leap. Kahili raised her head, spotting Kukui first, “Kukui, I've dealt with—” then stopped, eyes locked on the ones beside him. Of Hau, delightedly and animatedly talking to another child. And of Moon, she was sure that was Moon. Except...

Kukui rested a hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention back to him. “We'll talk after.” Kahili nodded.

“Oh!” With a loud cry Hau clapped an open palm against his forehead, “We've gotta go find Lillie and tell her you're back! She was staying in the Pokemon Center near here while Team Skull were out and about!” To that Moon immediately nodded, completely focused on that one idea alone. They absolutely had to go find Lillie. She and Hau turned to set off, before Moon caught herself and looked back at Kukui. He smiled at her.

“Off you go, Moon, I know Lillie's going to be very excited to see you too, and the three of you need to catch up. Kahili and I will be along after we finish making sure everything's calmed down here.” Moon nodded, turned back to Hau, and the two set off. Kukui and Kahili watched them go. Saw what happened next.

A crowd still filled Malie Garden, those who'd been prepared to witness the showdown of Professor Kukui and Team Skull Boss Guzma. Instead they'd seen the return of Moon, the results of her month-long training under the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster Pitaya. Kukui would need to call her later too, to find out just what Moon had been through in that time. And also if Pitaya understood what had happened to her to be the way that she was now. The way people reacted to.

In the past Moon had always been approached. Those curious, fascinated by her unique nature, felt they had to talk to her, had to know what she was about. That was how it had been.

This crowd split before Moon and let her through, staying silent in her presence, not moving towards her in any way. The aura around them felt... fearful. Like they were afraid of her. Kukui listened to the hiss of breath intaken by Kahili as she realised just what this was. Yeah, he felt the same.

This wasn't right either.

Hau watched it happen as he and Moon walked the streets of Malie City back to the Pokemon Center that Lillie was at. Those tracking the events of Malie, watching media feeds scroll by, had
already seen the videos. Whispers, and pointing, at him and Moon as they walked. But no-one approached them, or came near. It felt weird. Moon... he could still tell it was her. Sure she'd changed a little, but she still felt like Moon to him. People treating her like she was some sort of scary monster was... he didn't like it.

But when he turned to her and saw her walking with measured pace, catching his gaze and giving him a gentle smile, he didn't mention it. He was just happy to see her again.

So too was Lillie.

“Moon!”

One who'd always tried to keep from announcing Moon's name too loudly in public spaces, this time Lillie gave no concern to that, calling out to Moon as she raced across the Pokemon Center to the entrance the two had just come through. Lillie had been watching the same videos online, seen the same as everyone else, but her experience with Moon and inexperience with Trainer's Bonds helped her see not the monster in light but the girl that was her friend. She pulled up short of running into them both, a smile on her face that Moon responded to with one even wider. It was good to see Lillie again. Lillie held back a flushed expression. “Th-the same to you.”

From there the three stayed inseparable. Lillie watched over Hau and Moon healing their Pokemon, Hau's five and Moon's six. Moon immediately rounding on Hau and demanding to know who his fifth Pokemon was. Don't think she hadn't seen the Espeon he'd been fighting Team Skull with either! He'd done so well!

“Well,” using the Luxury Ball Hau let Pancham out to introduce her to Moon, the Playful Pokemon cautious about new figures but quick to let Moon stroke her fur as long as Hau held onto her while Moon did so. “She was kind of a spur-of-the-moment decision. I don't regret it though! She's great! Very cuddly.” Lillie, who had also become quickly accepted by the partner of Hau, joined Moon in pampering her. A happy rumble came from the Pokemon clutching onto Hau's chest.

“Miss, your Pokemon are fully healed.”

Turning back to thank the nurse, Moon collected the six Pokemon, she, Hau, and Lillie moving to sit down at a table, still watched over by the contents of the Pokemon Center, but still avoided at the same time. For as much as the videos circulating painted Moon in a fearful light, it was those experienced enough with Pokemon to sense Bonds who moved to hold others back. Don't get too close to that girl. There's something wrong with her. That was what they said.

If their words reached Moon's ears she didn't once react to them.

“Seriously,” Hau intertwined his hands behind his head, leaning back against them in his chair, “I can't believe you managed to evolve all those Pokemon, Moon! You must've been working crazy hard with the Dragon Tamers!”

Moon nodded, shifting her shoulders to lift the cloth shawl worn over them, turning it around to hold out the red banner marked with a dragon of even darker hue. Hau stared at it with wide eyes. “So cool.” Moon and Lillie both giggled at his reaction.

Lillie looked over Moon. Her bared arms, no scratches or cuts. Her face, a happy smile. Her hair, so short now it bristled, only the barest hints of the caramel blonde colour left. She'd half raised a hand to touch Moon's hair before stopping herself, shaking her head visibly enough for Moon to catch the motion and turn to her. Was she alright? Lillie nodded, caught out by Moon spotting her stare. Apologised. Moon's smile slipped just slightly at the unneeded expression. Told Lillie it was alright.
Lillie... “I'm sorry for before.” Both Moon and Hau now looked at Lillie, Hau slowly realising where this was going. He leaned back from the table, aware that if Lillie was doing this now he'd have to after. He needed to ready himself for that. “I... didn't think of you properly. Got caught up by your Bonds and your Z-Moves, your progress, and failed to treat you as you. I'm sorry.”

Moon didn't understand. Lillie had always been there for her. And the way Moon had been before- Lillie shook her head. “If I'd treated you fairly that wouldn't have happened to you. That is why I needed to say this. And to promise it won't happen again.” She looked at Moon with green eyes, a beautiful colour Moon had been caught by time and time again. “I'll be there for you from now on.”

“Me too!” Hau nodded and agreed, Lillie looking at him with a smile, Moon with concern that these two were so determined to apologise to her for her own poor attitude before. “Moon, I know we had a lot of fun, racing the way we did, but also I didn't even think about how you were feeling even when I was getting stressed out. I thought you could do anything and that only made you feel more like you had to, right?” Moon paused on that. She'd spent a lot of time facing what had brought her to that point before. She didn't move to answer. Hau understood. “But this time, we'll go together. Not a race and no competition, just... friends seeing Alola. That's the way the Island Challenge should be. I'm sorry I didn't get that before.”

Then she was apologising too. Apologising for not thinking properly of those around her, dragged along by her pace. Apologising for insisting people keep up even when pushing forward was unpleasant for her. Apologising for not looking for the signs they needed to stop, and not accepting them when she was told. Hau and Lillie each placed a hand on one of her own. Moon gave them a smile.

She'd really told Pitaya off when they'd met before, hadn't she?

“You kinda did,” Hau laughed, “she's meant to be like, one of the strongest Trainers in Alola, and you just told her to get lost. It's kinda wild.” Moon laughed back and shook her head. The Guildmaster had kindly not brought up Moon's initial rudeness at all during their training. Apologised herself, once, at the beginning of it for not properly understanding how to approach the young girl before. And that had been that.

“How was it?” Lillie had to ask this, still stunned by the revelation of Moon's evolved Pokemon, having read enough to know that the rate at which Pokemon grew should not have allowed this at all. Moon nodded and confirmed. It had been exhausting. For Moon who never seemed to tire when battling, that was more than enough for Lillie and Hau to know their friend had given everything she could countless times over in the month to pass.

Maybe it really did make sense what she'd achieved.

“Alright happy to report Malie City is clear, yeah!” The announcement of Professor Kukui as he entered the Pokemon Center, followed after by Kahili Hano, drew cheers from those who'd sought refuge and healing during the seeming invasion of Team Skull. Both Trainers had cleared a sizable number of Team Skull Grunts, as well as each facing down one of its upper echelon, though Kukui hadn't been the one to chase their boss away. That said, a fight between Kukui and Guzma would've had more than enough fallout to severely damage the Malie Garden, whereas Moon simply injuring the man's pride to the point he had to retreat resulted in so much less power being expressed. She'd kind of saved the day.

But no-one around felt the confidence to approach her and say that.

“Hey there you three,” Kukui now approached Moon, Hau, and Lillie at their table, a grin on his face at the sight of the trio together once more. “Happy to be back together again?” All three
immediately nodded and agreed to that, Kukui delighted at the genuine expression Moon showed. She still felt strange, otherworldly to his sense, but without looking at her through that lens she was still just a happy eleven year old girl. That was good enough. Kahili followed after.

“I saw a recording.” The video Kukui had immediately pulled up on his phone, easily enough searched as they presently flooded the local news, had stunned Kahili. A Decidueye. A Shelgon. A Zoroark, Sylveon, and Milotic. That sort of team, people would take that to Pokemon Leagues and do well enough for themselves. And Moon was still only just beginning.

She really would make it to the top of the world.

“I hope the past month was not painful for you.”

Moon shook her head. The Dragon Tamers had taken a seeming delight in helping Moon, offering her walls to crash against and struggle with, Pitaya every day showing Moon the ways a calm heart made her and those with her stronger. They acted like one big raucous family, and had insisted on throwing a party the night before when Moon had announced she'd return to Malie. Kahili and Kukui both glanced at each other. For having a mountain temple and the stylings of a monastic order, the Dragon Tamers Guild clearly didn't have any problem with their own extravagance.

Such were dragons like, they supposed.

“Well then,” looking around, Kukui continued to gauge the cautious stares of those close by, caught between curiosity and fear at the sensation and being that was Moon. He didn't like that still. Shook his head each time he made eye contact with someone staring. “What's next?”

“Oh!” Lillie, considering that, remembered something. “Moon!” Turning to Lillie, Moon couldn't help the smile at the sheer expression of excitement on the girl's face. Lillie clearly had something special to tell her. “Would you be willing to come with me to the Malie Library? There's a book that I'd like you to see.”

Oh? Moon nodded, caught now in curiosity. Lillie stood up. Hau groaned and did the same.

“Books are so boring though,” he grinned at the dagger stare Lillie shot him, “and we've gotta be so quiet in libraries, that's no fun!”

“Books,” Lillie said with intense stress upon her words, “are very fun.” Hau stuck his tongue out at her. She huffed. Moon laughed and both looked at her and couldn't help but smile. Kukui and Kahili watching over them did the same.

He'd still have to call and find out what Pitaya had experienced in Moon's training, but Kukui would thank her too. Whatever she'd done, she'd averted a disaster that was partially of his own making. He owed her. Again.

She kept pulling him out of the fire whenever he went wrong.

“Alright, let's head to the library then. Hau, I'm sure we can find something that even you're into.” Kukui ushered the children to head out, Kahili making mention she was going to do a further sweep over Malie. Just to be sure. Kukui thanked her for that. The police force within Ula'ula were capable, but Trainers of note such as Kahili and Kukui could still make all the difference. Kukui went first, the three children following behind, and the group made their way to the Malie Library.

Kukui didn't miss a single one of the stares, whispers, or concerned movements to avoid the path of Moon going around. She'd somehow in one display converted all the fascination with her into fear. He didn't like that at all.
Even if she didn't show any of it.

Moon happily talked. Discussed evolving her Eevee into a Sylveon so she could really start fighting back against the Dragon Tamers testing her, Hau bringing out Espeon so Moon could greet the lilac-furred Sun Pokemon properly in their newly evolved form. The confident Pokemon, a trait maintained from its previous form, happily purred under Moon's touch. Moon grinned. So good.

Her sixth Pokemon was still Larvesta, she confirmed when Hau asked. Pitaya, as a number of people had before, had told Moon that Pokemon required far more power and experience than most to reach evolution. But Moon desired to do so and thus she kept the Torch Pokemon with her. Hau remarked she'd probably reach that stage before the end of the year. Moon replied that if she wanted to take part in the Pokemon League she'd need to.

Because she still fully intended to get there.

That was a point of silent consideration. Though Hau's own rate of growth was one of the fastest in the known world, he was still unsure about achieving such. He'd try, he promised Moon right then and there he'd give it his best, but he also didn't want to promise something impossible again and put painful demands on them both. Moon agreed with that. They'd just both do their best. That was all they had to, no more. Lillie felt relief knowing they'd changed to better measure their pace and health.

Kukui just thought about how completely beyond comprehension these two could and would continue to be.

The Malie Library's lower floor was rather occupied, a number of figures in coats and jackets gathered about a large collection of books. Kukui looked with interest, wondering what this could be. The head figure of the group, wearing instead of heavy travelling gear a Wishiwashi-print aquamarine shirt and faded white cargo shorts, turned, caught sight of them, and approached with a smile and a wave. Oh, that was...

"Why, hello there! Alola alola to you all!"

Moon stared, struggling with the, besides deeply tanned skin and much longer grey hair, near identical duplicate of the world famous Kanto Professor Oak. The man grinned at her expression.

"My name is Samson, Samson Oak! You might have heard of my cousin, Samuel? People say we're two peas in a pod, but personally I think I'm the more handsome," he raised a hand to whisper the last part, a conspiratorial wink and glint to his expression. Moon slowly nodded. Samson looked over to Kukui. "Good to see you again, Kukui, the last time I caught up with you was in Heahea City, just after these young Trial-goers had taken their leave for Akala's north! Seems they're doing well!"

"They are," Kukui nodded, still in curiosity at the large gathering around. "What are you up to, Professor, if I may ask?"

"Oh please, call me Samson, we're both Professors here," the dark-skinned man smiled wide. "My associates and I are just preparing for a research expedition into the mountains and hills south of Malie, to study the regional variant Pokemon that live in the area. We intend to set up camp and spend a number of days observing the life these Pokemon live. It's all very exciting."

Kukui nodded, then turned to Moon, Hau, and Lillie. "Professor Oak," he used the full respectful name of the esteemed man, "has been in Alola for a half year now, studying regional variants across the islands. I'd say no-one knows more about them and how they differ from those of other regions than him."
“You flatter me,” Samson smiled despite saying so, moving away from the entrance to the Malie Library so Kukui and co could follow after. A librarian kept watch over the group of researchers, but didn't bother interrupting their discussions as they planned investigations, aware they were sticking to one place within the library and keeping their voices as best they could. Samson spoke as he walked. “But I cannot say that for sure: those born and raised in Alola most definitely have a grasp on understanding its Pokemon more than any visitor could – even those who dedicate their life to study. I'm sure,” looking at the three children following after, Samson noted Hau, grandson of Kahuna Hala, “that young Hau here could tell me something about an Alolan Pokemon I had never known before.”

“Huh? Uhhh...” caught off-guard, Hau looked around in a panic, unable to quickly come up with something to say. The Professor laughed.

“Don't mind me, I'm not asking you to.” He considered the other two as well. Lillie had been with Kukui when Samson had met him last, though excused herself to join Kahili when Samson and Kukui had gone into deep talks. Moon... this was his first time meeting her. Though Samson had his own Pokemon, they were not of great power or used to grand battles, and so his sense for Bonds was not particularly strong. Still, even he could tell that there was something about Moon that was incredible. He'd been looking forward to meeting her for some time now. So this was she.

“But I will say,” a bolt of inspiration hitting him, Samson smiled at the three young ones, “the eyes of the world's youth often see things and truths we older folk never can. This research expedition, our camp in the southern hills to study Pokemon, would you three like to accompany us? I am sure we would most benefit from your own insight, and you would have the chance to experience the work of Pokemon Researchers first hand!”

Kukui looked at Samson very strongly. Their meeting in Heahea City, it had been arranged by Kanto's Samuel Oak, a request that came in shortly after the revelation of Moon to the world. Samson had couched his questioning in discussing Alola, its variants and his study, but eventually segued into wishing to know more about Moon. Samuel Oak had been one of the key hands in the latest and greatest investigations of Trainer's Bonds – of course he'd want to know about Moon. Reaching out to Kukui through his cousin, it was a roundabout method for the currently Kanto-bound Professor. Kukui had spent that evening enjoying imagining the reaction of the man discovering this young girl who was to have been a Kanto Trainer before moving to Alola had an ability that could change everything the world knew about Bonds. Point: Professor Kukui.

It wasn't a bad offer. Samson was a talented researcher, and field-work was a fantastic experience. Moon, Lillie, and Hau would all gain much from it, and it would help their appreciation for Alola and Pokemon to grow. Kukui wasn't against it. Not really.

But he still wanted to pressure Samson a little first.

“We'll talk,” answering for the trio, Kukui nodded to them, “they had something they came here to do.” Taking that as permission to go, Lillie led Moon to the staircase leading upwards, Hau following behind. Samson called after them.

“We're planning on leaving tomorrow morning, so I hope to hear back from you soon!”

On the second floor of the library, Lillie pointed Moon and Hau to a table, before disappearing to a shelf she knew full well, returning with the book she wished to show. The Light of Alola, donated to the library by Captain Acerola, transferred from her father's collection to somewhere far safer. So she'd said, though Lillie hadn't fully understood what the Captain meant. Not until Kahili had properly explained it to her later that day when she'd made mention of it.
“Here,” placing it on the table, opening to the passage she’d found, Lillie proceeded to read it aloud. Moon remained transfixed as she did so.

“From distant heavens descended light, its gift given through sun and moon. From peak to valley, shore to shore, all Alola embraced its boon. Behind it followed emissaries, beacons of light standing proud. Against these powers our guardians did fight, and to these powers our guardians bowed.

In recognition of noble drive, these beasts bestowed upon our lines, a child to raise under guardian care; to Alola a fragile heir. In thanks to life our ancient kings did sing, from a pair of flutes pure tones did ring. Such is praised those who gave us tomorrow, moon and sun, Lunala and Solgaleo.”

The passage was an ancient prayer, a giving of thanks to those who’d bestowed great light across Alola, and also a record of what they’d done. Descended in light. Bested the Tapu, yet been impressed by them enough to leave something with them. A tiny life to be raised with care. A life bound to the Legendary Pokemon that made Alola what it was. Lillie looked to Moon and saw the path of her gaze, to the bag Lillie had placed on the table that moved, just ever slowly. Moon saw Lillie's look and focused on her. Lillie nodded.

“I...” it was hard to even say, but ever since reading it she had been sure. “I believe that might be Nebby.” Moon nodded. She'd seen Tapu Lele caring for Nebby at the Ruins of Life too. That had to mean something. Lillie nodded back. “Yes,” she agreed, “and so I intend to travel to the Ruins of Abundance, beyond Haina Desert to the south, to see if I can learn more. Captain Acerola agreed to help us find our way there, and Hapu said she would meet us too.”

The expression of surprise on Moon's face made Lillie realise she and Hau hadn't spoken at all about their own experiences over the past month. Lillie closed the book. “We'll tell you all about it.”

The remainder of the afternoon until evening was spent with Moon, Lillie, and Hau in conversation about the past month, those they had met, and the experiences they had had. Moon was shocked to hear Gladion had approached them, before focusing upon his warning that Team Skull sought Cosmog. She promised, just as Hau had, that she'd do everything to help Lillie keep Nebby safe. Lillie appreciated that.

Beyond that, each found books to enjoy with their company. Hau dug up an old comic series about an ancient war-torn region. Lillie reread more of the Light of Alola. Moon found another book Acerola had donated and read it too. It was interesting.

Kukui, who'd finished discussing with Samson on the floor below, ascended and asked the three if they would like to go on the research expedition the Professor had planned. Each confirmed the others were interested before agreeing, the three intent on remaining together. Kukui liked that.

“You'll be heading out early tomorrow, so get a good night's rest, okay?” All three nodded again.

Kukui’s phone rang.

Only half of the conversation heard, Moon's ears pricked and she stared up at Kukui, who'd stopped pacing halfway through the call and remained with his eyes locked on her. When he finished speaking, lowered the phone, she asked him what it was. He walked towards her.

“That was Molayne, sending a message from Captain Sophocles.” Hau and Lillie looked up at Kukui now. Kukui remained focused on Moon. “He wants me to bring you up to Hokulani Observatory. It's time for your Trial.”
Back in action.

Thanks to some madcap training we'll likely hear more about as times passes, and her own seemingly growing impossible nature, Moon's team has (literally) evolved, and she's able to go far beyond what she could do before. She worked really hard for this, and it's already paying off, but the real test comes with the next chapter. We'll see exactly how far she's come.

I've been running out the clock on the evolution of Moon's Eevee - Hau's was locked in from day one, Moon's proposed, but I remained open to adapting if Nintendo decided they wanted to reveal whatever the next Eeveelution would be, as I'm convinced there will be at least one in gen 8. I also, however, suspect that it will be Dragon-type and Moon has enough dragon power already, so while it would've been fitting, I'm a little happier for team composition to have Sylveon. Boy, there would've been an even greater kerfuffle if Moon had also achieved a new Eeveelution though, huh? Pitaya would've immediately gone out to get an Eevee the moment Moon did that if she achieved a Dragon-type one, she would've been the most about it you would've ever seen anyone be about anything. It would've been adorable, trust me.

So ya boy has arrived. I ran a quick twitter poll to check the proper spelling the people wanted, as the actual in-game dialogue uses "your boy" but frankly that feels way too stilted. "Ya boy" really feels like the perfect form for Guzma. We never randomly wandered into the route 2 house that was likely his childhood home in this fic, but the backstory is rather similar. For the most part. Some things different. You know how I do.

Final note, I wrote my own version of the passage from The Light of Alola. Obviously it was important I do so, as both Legendary Pokemon matter quite a lot to Alola, hopefully it read well. I like how it went.

And that's that for this chapter! All things continuing as planned, I'll be back next week with Moon's Fifth Trial, and you'll see just what Captain Sophocles was able to come up with in the month to pass since the last attempt. It may surprise you. I'm excited about it.

Thanks for reading, your kudos and comments always delight me, I hope you enjoyed this chapter of Eldritch! I'll see you with the next one. Til then, byebye!
Transport to the top of Mount Hokulani was done through the bus service known as the Exeggutor Express, the trip from base to peak taking a full three-quarters of an hour to complete. Kukui had made the offer to fly Moon there – which would have shortened their travel time significantly and only helped Moon if she still intended on going with Samson Oak and his associates on their research expedition tomorrow – but Moon had requested to take the bus. Not out of rejection of flying, she’d reassured him when he’d first accepted her request, but instead for the time she’d have on the trip itself. She needed it, she’d said.

She did.

To the base of the mountain they did fly, Moon showing no concern in the act. Over the past month she’d flown to the Poke Pelago on the back of her Ride Charizard – retrieved from the same storage system as all Ride Pokemon now, the Ride Pager given to her at the Aether Paradise the mass produced model – many times, and pushed down any ill feelings flying gave her in doing so. Part of the training with the Dragon Tamers had been in maintaining calm in stressful situations, and Moon had grasped that well enough to do so here.

So no, the reason she denied Kukui's offer to fly her to the peak of Mount Hokulani, where the Hokulani Observatory, site of the fifth Trial of Alola's Island Challenge awaited, was not due to any concerns over the act. It was simply to claim the time on the bus, enclosed and better able to focus on nothing, so as to slip away from needing to pay any attention to what was around her. So she could prepare herself for her Trial.

Kukui watched as Moon boarded the bus, sat herself down near its middle, and closed her eyes.

From there she was non-responsive: quiet, almost unaware. Simply focusing on her own inner thoughts. Kukui let her be and walked to the back of the bus, sitting down and withdrawing his phone. From the time Molayne had relayed Captain Sophocles's request to Moon through Kukui to now, he hadn't really had a moment to rest. Honestly, not since the day began, the discussion with Samson Oak that afternoon spanning topic after topic as the esteemed Professor spoke. So only now did Kukui have a moment's free time.

He immediately spent it calling Pitaya to find out just what the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster had been up to in the month to pass.

“Hi Pitaya, this is Kukui.”

“Hello Kukui.”

The response was as neutral as could be, something that reminded Kukui clearly of Moon facing down Guzma that day. But also of Pitaya herself – from the day Kukui had met her, sheepishly showing up at the Dragon Tamers' temple to request help with his newly evolved Hakamo-o, the Pokemon's demands more than he'd ever expected. Help had ended up being allowing a Dragon Tamer to take the Scaly Pokemon on, Kukui regretful for their parting but knowing he couldn't support her properly any further himself. It was lucky, he considered in retrospect, that the moment had come when it did.
A year or so forward and barely anyone in Alola would have wanted anything to do with him.

“Thank you. For what you did for Moon. I mean it.”

“That is the nature of Alola,” Pitaya's even voice continued smoothly, “we share our burdens and struggles to overcome them. I only regret that I did not realise Moon’s own condition sooner than I did.” That felt like a stealth rock thrown in Kukui's way, given he didn't realise at all until it was pointed out to him. He ignored it. Looked out the window of the bus, the dark sky of the late evening, night stretching across Alola, greeting him in return. Distant Malie glittered like a jewel of a million lights. He turned his eyes away from it, back to the inside of the bus. It was a late service, second to last of the night, and only he and Moon were aboard – plenty departing when the bus pulled up at the base of Mount Hokulani, few moving to join it. He wondered just what Captain Sophocles had in store.

“I need to know, what did you experience when caring for her? What did she? She's so different now. Not just in attitude, the way she feels, do... do you know why?”

“The growth of her Pokemon,” Pitaya replied, “was achieved through a feat no other could replicate. As I'm sure you understand, Z-Moves transfer great power from Trainer to Pokemon, often straining at Bonds not well forged. That was the core of Moon's progress. The number of Z-Moves she has now performed... is likely greater than most Alolan Trainers will do in their lifetimes.”

Silence set heavily as the bus rumbled up the slopes of Mount Hokulani, Kukui attempting to parse just what Pitaya had said. By performing as many Z-Moves as her Pokemon could possibly take, Moon had forcibly strengthened the Bonds between them, allowing those Pokemon to draw from her at a rate most would require a decade or more with their partners to achieve. This training, it hadn't been based on increasing the power of Moon's Pokemon. It had been on increasing the power of her Bonds with them, and naturally strengthening her partner Pokemon through that instead. Pitaya was right. That was something only Moon, who could perform Z-Moves seemingly without limit, could do. No wonder.

“I...” it was a lot to process. Pitaya's voice came in as Kukui paused.

“I know.” More silence before the Dragon Tamer continued. “Rest assured, however, that despite the commonplace of Z-Moves in her daily life here, I ensured Moon still maintained a deep respect for them. They are still one of the core symbols of this land, and her Pokemon still felt heavy their weight. Moon understands that her detachment from their effects does not diminish their importance or the respect they should be treated with. She will not use them foolishly and without due consideration.”

“Right,” Kukui nodded, even though no-one could see him do so, Moon silently focused on her own inner thoughts, Kukui's voice kept low enough not to echo too far. “Thank you. She's... young for a Dragon Tamer, but you really taught her just like the rest, didn't you?”

“She is not a Dragon Tamer,” Pitaya said that quickly, words that surprised Kukui in response. “She is family to us, as she is family to all of Alola, but Moon does not dwell under our banner. I offered her our assistance, not our title. To become a Dragon Tamer is a choice that one must make themselves. And as you said, she is young. It is not yet time for her to decide that.”

Kukui stayed silent after. He didn't really know a lot about the Dragon Tamers' culture or methods. There wasn't anything he could say. So he moved to the next topic instead.

“She doesn't feel like any Trainer I've ever seen before.”
“Nor I,” came the response. “It was a slow build, the growth of her Bonds to the degree that they could no longer be told apart. But then one day I looked and realised I could no longer see them alone. Only as one great mass.”

Kukui considered that. “I didn't even think that was possible, for someone to appear like – oh hang on the bus is just passing the temple now, can you see me?”

“I am not at a window.”

“Oh.”

The Exeggutor Express began its next steep climb at the end of the road the Dragon Tamers temple was set upon. Kukui breathed out a sigh.

“Just...” picking up where he left off, Kukui tried to verbalise it. “Every time we think we understand her she's different again when we turn our backs. She'll be amazing – she is amazing – but she's so young still. I worry-”

“That is why we are there for her.” The tone in Pitaya's voice was one of a teacher lecturing a student, Kukui having heard similar from Hala before. The two were alike. “And why we will continue to support her.”

Kukui nodded again. “Yeah.” The bus continued on.

As if pursuing the notorious leader of Team Skull, the heavy clouds that had settled over Malie City that day left as he did, the afternoon one of clear skies, the night one filled with bright stars overhead. At the peak of Mount Hokulani, where an observatory existed due to this perfect location for gazing into the heavens, the Exeggutor Express came to a stop and two disembarked. Island Challenger Moon, and Pokemon Professor Kukui. The temple of the Dragon Tamers was not nearly as high up as this point, but Moon had still adapted better to heights over the month that passed. She wasn't struck down by vertigo this time.

She and Kukui looked south, out from the mountain, over the distance to one stretching even taller beyond, its peak capped by dense and unyielding frost. Kukui pointed.

“That's Mount Lanakila,” he said it with clear respect, Moon feeling it in his tone, “the tallest mountain in Alola.” It was imposing. But beautiful. Moon acknowledged the sight. “It's a sacred spot, treasured by the Tapu, said to be the peak where Alola's Legendary Pokemon first descended, where the emissaries of the sun and moon arrived in this land.”

Solgaleo and Lunala. Moon had just read about them earlier. Kukui nodded.

“That's where the Pokemon League will be held. The Tapu were doubtful at first, and the Kahuna really needed to stand up for me making my case, but in the end they decided they liked the idea of this tournament. And wanted it there so it would be under their watch.” There was something to that, the thought of appeasing the Tapu. Moon, who'd witnessed their more violent natures twice over now, frowned slightly. Kukui was too busy focusing on the cold peak of Lanakila to notice.

“It's what I believe in the most,” he spoke with conviction, “that Alola needs a Champion, someone who can stand on the world stage the same as everyone else. So we'll point the Island Challenge to this League, and have the Final Trials and Elite Four be the same thing. Then we'll have a League. Then we'll have our Champion. Then we can announce ourselves to the world and say 'here we are,
“yeah!’. That's... my dream. That's what I want to do.”

Moon nodded, staring out at the great mountain of Alola too. To battle upon its peak... she...

“Moon,” Kukui turned to her, she turning to him as well, looking up at the tall man. Kukui bowed his head. “I'm sorry.”

Another apology. Moon shook her head. Kukui didn't see it and wouldn't acknowledge it if he did.

“When this all began, when you and Hau started your Island Challenges, I thought to myself 'yeah, this is perfect'. A young Trainer who came from another region, and the grandchild of a Kahuna, travelling together, facing their Trials – I was sure when the two of you passed your Island Challenge and made it to the League you'd represent the new age. I was so taken with the idea that you'd motivate each other and get there in time. To the first open League of Alola.”

Moon paused. Kukui smiled.

“That's how it is, after all. The first timeslot we were given by the League World Association was at the start of Spring. Then the next in three years. We didn't have the time to finish preparing for a full League in a year. And waiting even longer would only lose interest. So we made plans for the Exhibition League, featuring nominated Trainers, and then we'd do an open League after. It was that open League at first that I was hoping you and Hau would make it to. You'd be there as the symbol of our opening to a new age. It was perfect.”

Kukui turned his weak grin on Moon.

“Then you and Hau took off like you did. I was so sure you'd motivate each other and make it to the League in three years. I never even considered you’d try for the League in one.” A rueful smile. The Professor shook his head. “Then when you did what you did, and kept going and going and going, I just... accepted it. Thought 'It's just as perfect if the two of you make it to this League, it will be amazing' and didn't think any more. About how you or Hau were feeling. Or how much you were pushing yourselves to do what you did.”

Moon looked down now. Kukui didn't miss the broken eye contact.

“That's why I'm sorry. I was so focused on my own big plans and my own big dreams that I didn't even bother worrying about the pace you were going at. Just assumed it was fine. It's hard to describe how wrong of me that was. Pitaya gave me a real earful for it.”

A small smile on Moon's face. Kukui knew she understood just what sort of dressing down he'd gotten. Settling down on one knee, Kukui looked at Moon eye to eye. Moon looked back.

“Please forgive me?”

With a slow nod joining the motion, Moon reached out a hand and lightly touched the Professor's arm. Kukui breathed out relief, tension and worry leaving him in the same moment. He was thankful. Truly, from the bottom of his heart, he was.

The number of second chances he'd been given in this lifetime should never be made light of.

“Whatever comes next,” continuing, Kukui made sure to show Moon his earnestness in saying it, “I want you to know that I, and all of Alola, will support you. We'll be there to help you. And keep an eye out for the chance to do so. So Moon, tell me, what is it you wish to do? Because I want to help you do it.”
She wanted to see the League. Moon's response widened Kukui's eyes for a moment, but his smile for far longer. She nodded at his expression. Pitaya had told her how strong the Trainers there would be. She'd seen that strength. Even the Captains who would be nowhere near the strongest to join were still so far beyond her. But she wanted to make it all the same. To stand on that stage. That... was her dream.

Kukui reached out a hand and ruffled her once-more dark hair. “Then that's what we'll help you do. Me and Kahili, my wife Burnet, all the Captains and all the Kahuna, all of Alola. Let's all work together and see you on that stage next year, yeah?”

The most sincere and excited smile from Moon Kukui had seen since she'd been greeted by Hau earlier that day. He smiled back and stood up.

That was that.

“Kukui!”

More energetic than Moon had ever heard his voice before, Molayne approached the two, coming from the direction of the Hekulani Observatory, the building's windows lit with bright light. Kukui waved back, calling out Molayne's name with similar excitement, the two greeting each other with a high-five of their own that transitioned into a strong handshake. Moon found herself remembering all her greetings with Hau in witnessing these two together. She smiled at that too.

“You're looking well,” Molayne's address of her caught Moon out from observing him and Kukui interacting, a moment's pause before Moon ducked her head and gave her own apology. Molayne leaned back, surprised, before nodding – an action Kukui saw but Moon could not with her head bowed. He bent down. “Thank you.” And held out a hand to Moon. “It takes a strong heart to apologise – never feel lesser for doing so.”

“Ha!” With a laugh Kukui gave Molayne's shoulder a playful shove, almost unbalancing the man bending down to address Moon. “Still a Captain at heart I see!”

“And still a showboat yourself,” Molayne laughed back, standing back up to shove his friend in return. “I thought your escapades in the ring would be enough to help you keep calm without the mask on.”

“Ixnay on the-” Kukui attempted to begin, before Moon with a grin added that even a hundred rounds at the Battle Royal probably wouldn't tire the Professor out. Kukui slumped his shoulders, looking a little defeated, as Molayne stretched out a hand so Moon could high-five it herself. The former Captain smiled widely.

“Soffy's just finishing up preparation for the Trial – he's really excited about it. It's something that's never been seen before, and honestly? Sounds amazing. I'm sure you will enjoy it.” Moon nodded in response to Molayne's words, already so curious about what it could be. But Molayne wasn't telling that, no no no. “It's only been a little while since he became Captain,” Molayne continued. “I ended up nominating him to be one, as the current Kahuna wasn't... well there were circumstances.” Moon nodded without really understanding what that meant. Molayne kept talking. “He's brilliant with computers and Pokemon, but not too confident with a lot else. He's always doing his best to make the best possible Trials though, and I'm sure I made the right choice nominating him. Trust in him, he truly wants to be the best possible Captain he can be.”

Moon nodded again. Molayne fished in a pocket and held up a silver-grey Z-Crystal. Moon's eyes locked on to it.
“This is a Steelium-Z – I’m a Steel-type specialist, so my Trial used to focus on that back when I was a Captain. When you’ve finished your Trial, Captain Sophocles will give you an Electrium-Z and teach you its Z-Pose – I’ll do the same for this Steelium. Two for one, that’s hard to beat, right?”

Moon nodded once more, still focused on the crystal, even as Molayne tucked it back into his jacket. “Well, do your best with your Trial. Kukui and I will remain here.”

“I'm here! I'm here!”

The loud cry of Captain Sophocles, emerging from the Hokulani Observatory, drew Moon’s eyes but they focused past him in an instant, locking onto the gigantic and glowing Totem Pokemon hovering behind him. From her bag was quick to emerge Rotom-dex, quick too to describe the Pokemon it saw. Moon memorised the name immediately.

“Vikavolt, zzt, Stag Beetle Pokemon! A Bug and Electric-type Pokemon, it is known to generate extremely powerful electricity which it uses for hunting prey, zzt!”

“Oh okay!” Sophocles came to a stop before the group, Kukui whistling at the gigantic Totem Pokemon with the Captain. That was seriously a biggun! “Hi Moon, thanks for coming up here tonight!”

Catching herself, Moon immediately moved to apologise to Sophocles, who she'd been rude to before as well. The Captain waved it off. “It's time for a very special Trial tonight, are you ready?”

The nod he got in response brought a smile to Sophocles’s face. He gestured to the Totem, who lowered down from where it was flying for the small Captain to climb onto its back. He gestured to Moon to follow after. “Okay, hop on! We need to go somewhere special for this!”

Moon, who'd never really had an interaction with a Totem beyond battle before, warily approached the giant bug, but it made no motion to reject her as she clambered on behind Sophocles. With ease the Totem Vikavolt rose back into the air.

Okay, Big Mo!” Waving to Molayne, Sophocles pointed in a direction, “We're off!” And the Totem, with two young ones aboard, Moon waving back to the adults as well, zoomed off into the night sky. Off to the site of Moon's fifth Trial, Kukui watching them go with a smile. Moon was no doubt in for an experience like no other. Good.

She deserved it.

Molayne placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“I saw the videos,” the friend of Kukui moved the topic to something they could only discuss alone. “Guzma's not the type to forget that. I worry.”

“I know,” Kukui shook his head, smile fading away. “But he isn't allowed south of Lanakila either. And Moon won't have a reason to go up near Po Town on her Island Challenge. Kahili will be watching over her too. It's not the best but... it's the best we can do.”

“Hm.” The former Captain pulled off his hexagonal shaped glasses, rubbing the lenses with a hand tucked into his shirt. “It still feels bad. What happened.”

“That's not your fault,” Kukui was quick to interrupt his friend's concern. “The Kahuna were right, you were the only one of us suited to being a Captain. He and I... were both too rash and stupid. Still are, a lot of the time.”

“You're getting better,” Molayne said with such deadpan delivery Kukui baulked before laughing, giving a light punch to the shoulder of his so-called friend who'd just struck him with such a killer
blow. Molayne grinned at him, rubbing his arm because seriously even a light punch from Kukui hurt. Man had some serious strength! “If you need to, ask me. The two of us can go try and stop this.”

“Yeah,” Kukui looked away, “as much as I don't want to, maybe we'll have to.” Molayne sighed and looked in the same direction, Mount Lanakila in the distance. Kukui shook his head. “I really was just hoping he'd burn out on this.” A noise of agreement from Molayne. The two stared in silence for a time.

“She felt strange before but...” when Molayne spoke again, it was addressing the mystery of Moon as she now was, “now she just... I can barely tell it's a person when focusing on her Bonds.”

“I know!” Kukui agreed emphatically. “Pitaya said Moon used more Z-Moves than most people would in their lives to help strengthen her Bonds, but even then just six can look like that? I feel like we should have seen that before from someone!”

Molayne paused. Right. He turned back away from Kukui, looking out over the mountain ranges south of Hokulani. Breathed in. Then out with a sigh. And committed.

“Hey Kukui, have you heard of the Poke Pelago?”

“There's a special Pokemon,” Captain Sophocles of Hokulani Observatory spoke as the Totem Vikavolt carried him and Moon along the mountain range that spanned Ula'ula, heading for a smaller peak to the north, “that only appears in a few places in the world. It's called Minior, the Meteor Pokemon. Have you heard of it?”

Moon had, the Pokemon one of the signatures of Alola. It was a Pokemon that could be one of seven different rainbow colours, that fell from space to Alola below. Was she going to see one?

“More than one,” Sophocles chuckled, “the place we're going, Starfall Hill, is the best place in Alola to see Minior fall. You'll see a whole rainbow of them.” Moon grinned, nodding excitedly, seated behind the Captain. Seeing rare and incredible Pokemon across Alola, she hadn't thought of that nearly enough before. She was looking forward to it.

Sophocles kept a quieter expression as he guided the Vikavolt down to the landing point below.

In comparison to the peak of Mount Hokulani, Starfall Hill was covered in thick grass, a large tree growing near to its top. As Moon dismounted from the Vikavolt she moved to the tree, running a hand along its thick bark. Sophocles called her attention and pointed.

“Look.”

High above in the sky dots of white were glowing brightly, their descent from the stratosphere gaining speed with each passing moment. Sophocles had ensured a long enough warning was given so Moon would make it in time for this moment, but she'd still managed to arrive only just before the beginning. What a protagonist, he smiled to himself. Watched the Minior fall.

From this position they could watch over the landing zone of the Minior, their heavy rock-encased forms slamming down into the ground, the semi-annual barrage wearing down the mountain range they rained upon. For a moment after the first shower all was silent, Moon staring, then looking at Sophocles for explanation. He shook his head with a small smile and stepped forward.
“Minior absorb particles in the stratosphere, their colours changing depending on their food. At the same time a thick rock shell forms around them, which eventually gets so heavy they can't stay up any longer. All those that just fell had heavy rock shells around them.”

Moon nodded, Rotom-dex in her bag sulking as she asked Sophocles and not it for further information. Sophocles continued.

“When they land, their shells soon break, and the bright cores you know emerge. See? Look!” Following the point of Captain Sophocles, Moon turned back to the place the Minior had fallen. Shining lights of red, blue and green, yellow, orange, indigo and violet, were now rising up, their encasements broken away. Except... “But Moon,” she turned to Sophocles as he shook his head, “for most Minior that's the end.”

Moon’s immediate halt, the draining of eagerness and interest from her body language to be replaced by stiffness and a cool stare, stuck with Sophocles. He'd reacted entirely differently when he'd first been taught. It took all sorts. “Minior can't survive outside the stratosphere without their shells. Those caught in Pokeballs are able to reform with healing, but the wild ones turn back into space dust, rising back into the atmosphere. That's their life-cycle here.”

Moon shook her head now. Pulled a Pokeball from her bag and turned to face the mass of rising Meteor Pokemon. Already some before her were disappearing in a rain of colour floating upwards. The sight struck her silent. Sophocles reached up a hand to place on her shoulder.

“I was really young when I learned about them – I cried a whole bunch when I found out.” He gave Moon a soft smile. “Seeing it still makes me sad, even if it's beautiful too.” Moon stayed silent, staring at the shimmering rainbow of space dust, the second rain of Minior from above now piercing through it. Sad and beautiful. Sophocles withdrew his hand. “There's two things I took you here to teach you about.” She glanced at him when he continued, though was clearly occupied by the sight of the falling and ascending Minior before her. Sophocles continued. “It's about how Totem Pokemon occur.”

Now she looked at him properly, eyes slightly widened. This was a topic she'd never heard before. Perhaps considered, but never actively. Sophocles grinned, happy to play teacher.

“Totem Pokemon are charged with Z-Aura, which manifests in specific places across Alola and is absorbed by powerful Pokemon there. That's why Totem Pokemon exist at Trial Sites – because that's where the Z-Aura appeared. But do you know how it appears?” She didn't. Shook her head. Sophocles explained. “It comes from the Ultra Wormhole.” Moon really stopped this time. Went stock still again, way deep in thought. Sophocles, unaware Moon had personally seen such before, was impressed she clearly knew enough about it to react so clearly.

“I didn't think you'd studied it!” He was so pleased to know Moon was another scholar of the world! “The Ultra Wormhole radiates Z-Aura. Whenever it manifests across Alola, it spills out a whole mass of that Aura, and then a nearby Pokemon grows into a Totem Pokemon. That's how it works!” Moon slowly nodded. Remembered how the Ultra Beast at the Aether Paradise, UB-01, had aura that resembled a Totem too. Now it made sense. It was the same...

“The Ultra Wormhole appearances recently,” Sophocles was building up to the point now, “haven't been doing that, haven't been depositing Z-Aura. We don't know why. But we did see the effect of the last one that did. Late last year, an Ultra Wormhole opened in the stratosphere high above Alola! And can you guess what happened?”

Moon paused, eyes widening. Turned and looked back at the rainbow sea of dust before her. How long did Minior remain in the sky before falling?
“Roughly half a year!” Sophocles piped back, thrilled Moon understood. She looked up. A far larger white star was falling. “Last time I saw you, I asked you to come back in a month,” the Captain grinned wide, “because there’d be a special Trial just for you. A Totem unlike any other.” The white star was getting bigger and bigger. “Just like any other Minior, once out of its shell it won’t last long. Longer, definitely, but not forever. In that time, you have to weaken it enough so that I can catch it, and add it as a Totem Pokemon of Alola! Are you ready, Moon?”

Moon nodded and in that moment a giant rock from the heavens crashed into the land before them, the wave of force resulting washing out across its surroundings, the red dragon shawl Moon wore whipped back by the wind. She held tight to it though, and stepped forward, as the bright glow of the gigantic fallen Minior, its rock body larger than she was, failed to disperse. The ground split and dust fell from the Pokemon as it rose up. As a crack ran along its body and with a rapid spinning motion it shattered the shell binding it into dust that was just as quickly whipped into a tornado of particulate around it. Still the glow did not fade.

The glow of the Totem Minior.

It was hard to tell the colour of its rounded yet star-shaped core, Moon opening a Net Ball to bring her Milotic to the field. Indeed, by the pulse of the Z-Aura around it, the Totem Minior appeared to be changing colours, cycling between all known variations of Minior. The rainbow dust filling the air, creating an aurora over Starfall Hill, was caught in the movement of the Totem too. As if the entirety of all that had fallen stood against Moon.

She closed her eyes, once, then opened them with focused gaze. Let the fifth Trial begin.

The jet of water bursting from Milotic's mouth went quickly dodged, the Minior, despite its size – larger than Moon was – moving with speed that was frankly incredible. Sophocles, watching from behind Moon, Vikavolt standing guard over him, noted the Meteor Pokemon must have intentionally shattered its shell, absorbing the remnants for a boost in speed and power. It had been difficult to know how powerful this Totem would be. Maybe it was the new apex of Alola.

He silently watched Moon's fight.

Milotic was a skilled evader, its surging snake-like movements allowing it to move in ways unexpected, but the Minior's speed eclipsed it, the floating core of rainbow colour too difficult to hit with the streams of water the Tender Pokemon unleashed. Aware of that, Moon changed strategy, having the Pokemon whip up a spinning dust tornado of its own, cloaking itself with water within. The cloak of water bound the rainbow particulate, becoming a shining coat of mud across the Pokemon, Milotic somehow just as beautiful as it had been while clean. The Minior, aware of this aggressor, zoomed towards it at incredible speed to strike it down.

Just as Moon expected.

Another coiling movement from Milotic, this time dispersing the dirt covering it, sloughed off the rainbow mud from its dazzling scales to strike the Totem Minior head on as it raced towards the Tender Pokemon. The charging attack connected, but by falling back with it Milotic proved able to minimise the impact as best it could. Even still, Moon knew the attack had hit with great power. This Totem was strong.

But she wouldn't give in.

The Minior spun itself, attempting to loose the spattering of mud covering its body. That moment, where it was focused solely on itself, was more than enough for Moon to raise her arms, blue Waterium-Z set within her Z-Ring. Sophocles watched the Z-Aura shining around Moon, eclipsing
sight of the Totem itself, the shape moving within it difficult to parse or look away from. Only when
the light faded, a powerful surge of water having washed over the Totem, did Sophocles blink and
shake his head. The sight of Moon's Z-Moves really were like that, then. Captivating, in a terrifying
way.

He mentally prepared himself to have to see however many more before the night was over.

The strike of the Totem and the exhaustion of a Z-Move was a risky thing for any Pokemon, Milotic
now slow to move. But Moon had gambled on the dust in the air, and through the power of the Z-
Move Hydro Vortex, succeeded in coating the Totem in so dense a layer of mud she had the time to
direct her Pokemon to heal. A Pokemon able to restore its vitality – to a point, at least, another Z-
Move certainly not on the cards for many hours still – Milotic recovered as the Totem spun faster and
faster, bright Z-Aura breaking through its muddy layer and shining outward. The Meteor Pokemon
shot up into the sky, spinning faster still. Moon looked up to it.

Saw more white stars falling from above.

Milotic moved to dodge the shower, impact after impact raining down upon the side of Starfall Hill,
but while focused on that failed to track the sudden burst of speed unleashed by the Totem itself, still
hovering overhead. Moon saw it, and Moon's reaction to it reached Milotic fast enough for the
Pokemon to realise, but not fast enough for it to react. As the Totem slammed into with incredible
force Milotic cried out loudly before its head hit the soft dirt of the mountainside, the land pulverised
by Minior rain over the years. Moon extended the hand carrying the Net Ball and called Milotic back
to her, another Pokemon emerging in the next moment.

Sylveon, joining the battle.

The Intertwining Pokemon was not one of great speed, but did possess nimble movements, and
weaved its way around the charging tackles of the Totem. Whether this Minior had other abilities
than a charge backed by its incredible speed and strength, it had not yet chosen to unleash such – to
Moon's advantage. The longer it held off using more of its power, the easier this would be. She
focused on keeping Sylveon dodging right up until the point a smaller Minior, one with a red
glowing core, charged right into her Pokemon and bowled it over.

“Oh!” Sophocles, watching, hadn't expected this. The Totem alone he was sure was a significant
Trial, but the other Minior moving for its sake – he should have realised. All Totems had the ability
to command similar Pokemon around them: a further rain of Minior would only increase the number
of its allies. And though they'd fade fast, the danger to Moon's Pokemon was...

Moon gave keen commands, Sylveon dodging the storm of smaller Pokemon, Minior of different
colours, while the rainbow glowing Totem overhead spun faster and faster still. It was drawing more
rainbow dust, released by the fading of smaller Minior around, into itself, sustaining and recovering
from damage – Moon realised. Until all the Minior had finished falling this Totem would not tire, and
the damage she did would be quickly healed. The Z-Move her Milotic had struck with, its effects
were already being lost.

Moon pointed and voiced a command.

Sylveon leaped, all four legs landing on a floating Minior mid-charge, the ribbon-like feelers
emerging from the Intertwining Pokemon's head and neck wrapping around it. A bright glow as
Sylveon drained energy from the Minior suffused it, the green core of the Meteor Pokemon
shattering into dust. Dust that lifelessly settled, lacking the energy to be taken into the Totem itself.

The action that had just taken place, fought over the fading lives of these Pokemon, suddenly hit
Moon and she felt ill. Sophocles began to fret. He'd miscalculated what was going to happen completely. The mental effects of this sort of fight, Moon couldn't possibly be expected to shoulder such- with a powerful surge of light the Totem shot a beam formed from the mass of its own body directly down upon Moon's Sylveon. The incredible force of the blow, Sylveon weakened by Moon's fading resolve in this battle amid dispersing Pokemon, struck down the Fairy-type heavily. One beam of light and that was it. Moon raised a Pokeball and called Sylveon back. She didn't feel okay with this. Not with needing to disperse the energy given by the lives of these smaller Minior to prevent the Totem from recovering its own vitality. She knew, on some level, that nature could be vicious like this, but the feeling of it was too much for her. She turned her head to Sophocles and shook it.

This wasn't what she wanted to do.

Sophocles nodded back. She didn't have to go through with this. He had his Pokemon and the Totem, he'd take charge of this – the capture for his sake as a Captain – and give Moon a better Trial. This just wasn't fair upon her.

He stepped forward and prepared to call out an end.

A high-pitched shrill cry split the night sky, a small purple form racing through the cloud of rainbow dust filling the air to stop before Moon, a stream of loud noises emerging from its rapidly moving mouth as it gestured continuously at the one before it. At the light that would keep it safe.

Moon stared, the Ultra Beast UB-06 Adhesive floating before her. A small creature, purple with pink highlights across its chest, face, and beneath the three poison-dispersing needles emerging as horns from its head. She'd seen it before, outside of the Ruins of Life. It had gone to her, wanted to stay by her, offered to fight for her. She didn't understand that. But seeing it here, floating as it was, she was sure that was still its wish.

So she raised her hand and offered it to the Beast. It stretched out its own and placed it upon her. Together at last. Its mouth shifted into a smile. Moon smiled back.

A new bond forged.

Sophocles stared. He'd seen that Pokemon, registered in the UB Catalogue. Someone had encountered it in Alola, provided a lot of information – more recorded on it than any of the other UB entries. That was an Ultra Beast. With Moon. And he could tell clearly a Trainer's Bond had just been forged.

Ah. She had seven with her right now then. A memory of a previous conversation floated into the forefront of his mind.

Lana posted a message in ~Captain's Chat: Official “Moon's Big Siblings” Hangout Spot~

Lana: so I know where Moon's been going
Kiawe: Did you find her earlier? She's been here at the Wela Lodge since finishing her Trial
Lana: yeah it was a few hours ago
Lana: but listen, have any of you heard about the “Poke Pelago”?
Mallow: Nope
Acerola: not me!
Kiawe: Nor I
Lana: so there's a small patch of islands to the north-east of Akala, not too big, mostly empty space
Mallow: :?
Lana: someone's set up there, said his name was Mohn – Ilima do you know him?
Ilima: I do not. Should I?
Lana: well he was the one who gave Moon the Aether Pager
Ilima: Oh, huh. I'll ask Jace. Why did he do it?
Lana: as thanks for her helping him develop the islands
Mallow: What's that even mean?
Lana: I counted maybe thirty Pokemon staying on the main island with Mohn
Ilima: Wait
Lana: they've been working with him developing the place
Ilima: Wait
Mallow: ?
Lana: and they're all Moon's
Ilima: WAIT
Sophocles: You don't mean...
Lana: he did something with a storage system terminal, so Moon could let all her Pokemon out at once
Mallow: wait...
Lana: and I saw Moon there
Ilima: you can't be serious
Lana: surrounded by them
Mallow: Lana!
Ilima: ... Acerola: O_O
Lana: and she had a Bond to every last one of them
Ilima: ...
Mallow: oh
Sophocles: hey that's...
Acerola: really really?
Lana: really really
Kiawe: She can bond with more than six at a time
Ilima: why didn't we see this coming?
Lana: I don't know
Mina: well thats something
Mallow: Mina!
Acerola: full house :D
Mina: so what did you do
Lana: she needs the Pelago
Lana: so I promised her we wouldn't tell anyone
Sophocles: Anyone?
Ilima: ohhhhhh
Lana: actually Soffy
Lana: you need to tell Molayne about the storage system intrusion
Lana: just so he doesn't find it himself and shut it off
Lana: we want Moon to keep it
Sophocles: but not about Moon?
Lana: think about what would happen if this got out
Ilima: ...
Mallow: ...
Kiawe: ...
Lana: yeah
Acerola: ...
Acerola: dang it!
Sophocles: Big Mo's super cool though! He won't tell!
Lana: I promised her we wouldn't tell anyone else
Mina: we shouldn't break a promise
Ilima: So only we know. Only we know that Moon can form Bonds without any limits at all.
Lana: yeah
Mallow: ...
Mallow: We should probably step up the next Trial :o

Seven Bonds before Sophocles's eyes. But so many more stretching from Moon to the distant Poke Pelago. The impossible sensation that she was, it was the sensation of so many healthy Bonds, more than five times what any other Trainer throughout the world and likely history as well could maintain. It was no wonder she appeared so impossible to those with the ability to sense her Bonds.

She was unlike anyone else there had ever been.

The purple Ultra Beast, UB-06 Adhesive, now shared a Bond and the will of its Trainer. This sky of rainbow essence, the largest rainbow glowing core prepared to counter any attack thrown against it, its Trainer wished to rise above this. Didn't want to fight over the essence, the last wave of Minior already having risen up and decayed. The air was thick with life energy, and in due time another wave would fall.

So before it she had to win.

Z-Aura surged around the Ultra Beast, transformed by passage through the Ultra Wormhole, able to express such by absorbing life and light around it. This rainbow dust, the small Pokemon relished in flying through it, glowing brighter and brighter. It would take it for its own. In a matter of moments the air began to thin of the particulate the Totem used to heal. Moon stared.

The Ultra Beast was preventing the remains of the other Minior from gathering. The Totem wouldn't have them again. If that was true...

A crack formed across the Totem and a gush of rainbow dust emerged, before being sealed over by the Z-Aura it held. It too had a lifespan. Sophocles, watching, gripped the white Timer Ball he had prepared tightly. Could Moon do it?

Moon unleashed her next choice.

Shelgon, from the moment its heavy form hit the ground, breathed up flames, igniting the remnants of dust and washing over the Totem, who spun rapidly to disperse the fire before performing another charging tackle upon the Dragon below it. But the Endurance Pokemon was not monikered as such without reason, and a barrier that took the attack was quick to manifest, the Totem bounced back.
Good, Moon focused on that defense, she'd wear the Totem down. Without the loose rainbow dust, drained of energy by the Ultra Beast that had sided with her, the Totem couldn't maintain itself. So she'd block its attacks and let it weaken, before striking hard. An obvious strategy, but one that would work. Should the Totem maintain its current ineffectual strategy.

It didn't.

Floating backwards, the Totem now glowed, drifting overhead out of easy reach of the Shelgon. It was hard to tell exactly what it was doing, but each time the glow it unleashed dimmed, it was a little brighter all the same. It was charging up. Empowering itself. Moon understood that at least. So she had to stop that.

The Ultra Beast responded to her will.

A drenching blast of toxic purple liquid emerged from the needles atop UB-06's head, bathing the floating Totem, surprised by the attack as it focused on the Shelgon below. Moon was unsure as to the rights of this battle, with two Pokemon acting on her behalf at one time, but when she glanced at Sophocles he raised a thumb to indicate she should continue. Well then...

More draconic flames emerged from the Shelgon, the attack well able to travel further than its previous form Bagon could project. Another rain of white stars was falling, and so Moon had to prepare for that as well. Her new partner, Adhesive, hassled the Totem at such high speeds even the Meteor Pokemon couldn't catch up, pushing it down only for Shelgon's attacks to lick at it from below. Yes, Adhesive was moving with a speed Moon was stunned by, even though she'd seen it so many times before. It was ridiculous.

And it was on her side.

The falling Minior arrived. Putting up more barriers, Shelgon weathered a direct hit, Adhesive having raced out of the impact zone while it went on. The Totem Minior chased after, but pulled short, unwilling to leave the location of the allies that would refresh it. It held back. Moon was already on the attack, Shelgon breathing more draconic energy, washing over the entire area, baking the shells of the fallen Minior shut. Let it be harder for them to break free for a little while at least. The Totem didn't like that one bit.

Another of the powerful beams of light it generated from its rainbow-coloured body punched through Shelgon's shield and hit the Endurance Pokemon directly – the power behind the Totem so great it was able to knock the Dragon out in a single attack. Moon called Shelgon back, watching as Adhesive raced back into the area to hassle the Totem, who was waiting for the other Minior to arise once more. The next Pokemon Moon chose was Decidueye. This was a risky moment, for the ally Minior were still about, the current wave still surrounding her Pokemon. But the Totem was panicking, evident by the third beam of light it shot, the fresh Decidueye dodging through the shadows it cast to avoid. The battle was beginning to take on its final stage.

Moon placed her Grassium-Z into her Z-Ring and focused on commands. She was going to bring this to a close.

A series of cracking rock noises as the fallen Minior finally freed themselves, the cores having long enough before fading away to attack. Decidueye dodged amongst the charging bodies of pastel colour, evading from shadow to shadow as its abilities allowed it. The Totem Minior charged another beam, only for Adhesive to fly into its face and unload another spray of poison. A wave of Decidueye's wings unleashed a storm of leaves that pushed the ally Minior away, the momentarily blinded Totem charging downwards at the sound of a target below. Decidueye stepped to the side, the huge Minior crashing into the ground beside it. Then placed a taloned foot upon the glowing
rainbow body of the Meteor Pokemon.

Moon raised her arms, Z-Aura flaring around her once more.

Even from far away the bright light of the Grass Z-Move Bloom Doom could be seen atop Starfall Hill, Kukui and Molayne watching from the peak of Mount Hokulani both transfixed by the glowing dome of energy, like a sun hanging on the side of the mountain below. Then it faded, and no glow was left in its place.

Not in Moon, or Decidueye, their Z-Move complete. Not in Adhesive, whose Aura faded quickly without a source to sustain it.

And not in the Totem, lying still beneath Decidueye's feet.

Sophocles raced in and threw the Timer Ball towards it.

In silence Moon and Sophocles watched, Decidueye and Adhesive standing by. The Timer Ball shook once, shook twice, shook thrice.

Then dinged with the sound of a successful capture. The fifth Trial complete.

“You did it!” Sophocles's loud cheer brought from Moon a great and relieved smile, Decidueye landing behind her and wrapping wings around Moon, Adhesive floating down before her and making an inquiring noise. By their Bond Moon understood, and reached out to the Pokemon and took hold of it, bringing it to her chest and holding on tight. It grabbed hold of her shirt and nestled further into her. She smiled at it too. Sophocles approached her.

“That was... a lot more than I thought it would be, and honestly if I'd known I don't think I would've brought you here. Are you... okay? With everything that happened?” Moon looked behind her. Another rain of the Minior from above. More shells cracking and more floating round stars of red and blue and green, yellow and orange, indigo and violet. Floating stars that hovered, then broke apart, their dust mixing together into a rainbow aurora before her. She turned back to Sophocles.

She was ready to go back.

“Okay,” Sophocles nodded, calling for the Totem Vikavolt to land before them. Moon returned Decidueye to her Pokeball, keeping hold of Adhesive for now. Settled on the back of the Totem behind the Captain, so that they could all return to Mount Hokulani's peak.

Kukui and Molayne awaited them there.

“You did it,” Molayne congratulated Moon first, Kukui silent at the sight of the purple Pokemon she had clutched to her chest. That was UB-06, he was sure of that. That was an Ultra Beast. Moon had an Ultra Beast with her.

Okay.

“Okay!” Holding out a hand, Sophocles presented a yellow crystal to Moon, who reached out to it with a smile. Molayne stepped forward and held out a silver-grey crystal as well, so that Moon might take the Steelium-Z in addition to the Electrium-Z. Both Captain and former Captain stepped back.

“This is the Z-Pose for the Electric Z-Move Gigavolt Havoc!” Sophocles performed a quick Z-Pose, ending with his arms forming the shape of a lightning bolt. Moon memorised it as soon as she saw it.

“This is the Z-Pose for the Steel Z-Move Corkscrew Crash.” Molayne's Z-Pose involved clashing his
fists together, before holding them out towards Moon. Moon memorised that pose too. Though at this point seeing a Z-Pose was barely a requirement.

She could feel the movements needed in the flow of Z-Aura around her.

“And that's that!” Sophocles clapped his hands, a smile on his face he couldn't shake. The Totem Minior was now his, to raise as a Totem of Mount Hokulani. Not that it was at all balanced for this stage of an Island Challenge – Moon had gone above and beyond in facing it. He'd have to talk to the other Captains about what to do next, for this Totem and for Moon. After all... “It's Captain Acerola's Trial next! It's held on the southern side of Ula'ula Island, she'll definitely come find you soon!”

“Well Moon's got a research expedition first,” Kukui reminded Moon in saying this, “though you look tired enough to sleep right past the time Professor Oak and the others were leaving tomorrow. I'll let him know you'll catch up so they can head out beforehand, if you'd like?”

Moon paused. Then realised just how tired she felt. Using Z-Moves didn't tire her, nor did her Bonds, but the mental demand of simply thinking fast enough to battle such an opponent, combined with the drain of the entire experience, combined with the late hour that it was, had her tired. She slumped her shoulders and nodded, the Ultra Beast hanging onto her making a complaining noise. Kukui chuckled.

“I'll take you back down to Malie then. You don't mind flying this time, do you?” She shook her head. Kukui nodded then turned to Molayne. “Come down to Malie yourself, we need to get some food – it's been too long.”

“Got it,” outstretching a fist, Molayne smiled as Kukui bumped his own against it, “now go get her home, it's way past her bedtime.”

“Hey Moon!” One last message, Sophocles calling for the girl's focus, fading as it was. Moon looked at him. He smiled. “You did great!”

The smile didn't leave her face even as she napped clutching the purple Ultra Beast that had found her, Kukui carrying her atop his Braviary back down to Malie City. Even as she collapsed into a bed in the Pokemon Center and deep sleep took her.

She dreamed of rainbow light, glowing creatures that fell from the sky, and standing against it all, head held high.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who follow the Pokemon Sun & Moon anime, you'll find a lot of the content in this chapter pretty familiar. Starfall Hill, the nature of Minior, and Sophocles's description of his experiences with the Pokemon, were all lifted pretty wholesale from an episode dedicated to such. I really loved that episode a whole lot, even if the specific tone and lessons of it came as a big surprise, so I'm happy I got to tribute it this way, with a special Totem fight I don't think anyone ever came close to expecting. Really showing my willingness to do whatever I want with this fic.

But I do believe my decisions were enjoyable.
With this the fifth Trial of the Island Challenge is complete! As Kukui reminded her, Moon has agreed to join Samson Oak's research expedition, Hau and Lillie going along. But Acerola isn't a patient sort so no doubt she'll seek out Moon to see her take on her Trial soon enough. We'll find out when it happens. But there's plenty of fun to be had first.

Thank you all for reading this chapter of Eldritch, I have a lot of feelings about it and I hope you all enjoyed. I will, as always, return with the next chapter soon enough. I ALMOST feel like we're approaching the midway point of this fic now. It's somewhere around these chapters, I just don't know where and won't know until we're deep in the final arc.

But I'm sure it's nearby.

See you all next time.
Into the Rocklands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With focused intent Kukui slowly applied the final touches, black cloth tied off at both ends, wooden mask carefully fitted in place. Leaning back, he breathed out a sigh. Not bad, not bad at all! There, a perfect Phantump indeed, yeah!

It took less than a minute for the Ultra Beast UB-06 Adhesive to completely shred the disguise applied to it once free of Moon's hands.

“Really?” With a huff of frustration Kukui placed his hands on his hips, staring at the rapidly spinning purple being floating freely in the air. Moon could only offer a shrug. It didn't seem to like the disguise Kukui had come up with. And he'd done such a good job of it too!

“And it definitely can't be caught in a Pokeball?” Kahili, sitting with Kukui, Moon, and this Ultra Beast – something she had absolutely not been prepared for Kukui to grab her that morning and inform her Moon had somehow formed a Bond with the night before – looked to Moon. The girl nodded, raising a Pokeball again as evidence. The floating Ultra Beast didn't even try to test it this time, chattering in a high-pitched voice before swinging a tail and knocking the ball out of Moon's hand. Kahili sighed.

Of course she understood. The moment Kukui had told her the Beast had formed a Bond with Moon the night before she'd fired back. Moon should have had six Pokemon with her though. How could she form a- her words had died as heavily as Kukui nodded his head. Yes, that was the case. Moon was supporting more than six Bonds.

Somehow what annoyed her the most was that despite everything Moon had done so far, Kahili had never once suspected this possibility was in the cards. She lacked imagination. Something to work on.

“I know,” Kukui replied to Moon's question, asked while Kahili was focused on her own thoughts, “but we need to sort this out before you head out to catch up with Professor Oak and the others. Admittedly, once out of the city it'll be less trouble having a literal Ultra Beast with you than inside of it, but even still.”

Kahili scanned the area. The three of them were sitting in one of Malie City's parks, Kukui having collected both Moon and Kahili that morning from their respective staying places – Moon a Pokemon Center, Kahili a Malie Hotel – for this strategy meeting. Moon being agreeable to store one of the six captured Pokemon with her, reducing the Pokeball-contained count to five, plus one free-floating Ultra Beast, at least made it difficult for people to realise the numbers she could maintain. Which, Kahili hesitated to ask, she didn't actually know the limits of. Nothing else Moon had ever done had involved limits, so why should this? Likely she could form as many Bonds as she desired. Perhaps with every single Pokemon in the world without stopping.

That thought scared Kahili far more than she'd like.

Scaring people seemed to be the Moon thing of late. Yesterday's big showdown with Guzma, boss of Team Skull, had put Moon back on the front pages of Alola's attention. Her (mostly successful) disappearance during the Akala Trials had allowed Moon to slip more into the interest of gossips and the curious than the ravenous need for attention possessed by the majority, but here on Ula'ula Island
Moon had returned to the forefront of public knowledge in a big way. The display of the Pokemon with her, Pokemon she simply should not have been able to raise or maintain, and her battle with Guzma – mechanically a total loss on Moon's part, yet won by defeating the man's pride rather than his Pokemon – had made Moon front page news. Everyone should want to know everything about her, seeking and hassling her the way they had after the Melemele Grand Trial. That was what Kahili had expected to happen.

Instead she saw someone look, take in the group, then turn and hurry on their way. And that was neither the first nor last time it had happened even this morning. People were afraid of Moon. It was the Z-Move she'd performed, it had to be, Kahili having seen the videos the same as anyone. Kukui had said it was far more intense in person, but the video said enough. The way Moon disappeared in the moment, the way the light seemed to bleed in ways it shouldn't. Watching it, Kahili had felt like she'd momentarily slipped from her hold on her own mind. Like the sight of Moon in that state made it difficult to see reality. It made no sense and honestly she wished that rather than a research expedition with Samson Oak, Moon was staying with her and Kukui so they could try and solve this. If Moon could learn at all to express her Z-Moves in a form that did not affect others so, Kahili would feel so much the better about sending the girl on.

Kahili could no longer see the shape of Moon's Bonds. No-one could – Kukui and Molayne both confirming that their sight saw only one grand mass with no discernible shape. For any other Trainer, Kahili would see the lines between them and their Pokemon. Sense the strength of such. Well, she'd describe it to others that way – the sense was so much less definitive than words made it seem. Simply a feeling that translated into understanding. But she couldn't understand Moon. Not as she was. And especially not when she performed a Z-Move.

People fear what they do not understand, such is an expression as old as time itself. Now that Moon had gone from barely understood to impossible to understand, people had flipped from curious to cautious, fascinated to fearful. Kahili wondered if the only reason she was not the same as those avoiding Moon was simply that she'd gotten to know the girl, a young child with a large heart and a rarely seen yet vibrant smile, beforehand. Without that, would she avoid her too?

The existence of Moon kept posing questions to Kahili that made her feel like she was far less than the person she wanted to be. A long road still to walk ahead. She turned her attention back to Kukui and Moon. And Rotom-dex.

“Okay,” Kukui released the Rotom-inhabited Pokedex, “the password lock on data upload to the UB Catalogue is still in place. Now Rotom, keep your promise not to upload data on UB-06, okay?”

“Zzt!” The floating Pokedex saluted, though not as energetically as usual. Sharing recorded information was its design, after all, and this was such rare data it had gained. Moon took hold of the Pokedex and gave it her appreciation. Kukui had added the password last night just prior to entering Malie City, requesting Rotom-dex to respect it and not share the data on UB-06 it had collected. He didn't want information on Moon having an Ultra Beast getting out yet – at least for as long as it could be prevented. Moon understood that. She'd kept the Poke Pelago hidden for as long as she could to stop anyone from finding out her lack of limits went even further than was known. And an Ultra Beast was going to draw attention, especially given she couldn't keep it in a Pokeball – the devices failing to contain the creature even when freely entered.

Nonetheless she was determined to keep Adhesive with her. Because it had sought her out by its own free will. Was presently pushing against her arm for the attention she was giving Rotom-dex. Moon lifted her arm and the purple creature fit in beneath it. She smiled at it.

“The disguise was a no-go though...” Kukui rubbed his short-cut goatee, “Well, I guess we'll have to
make do. Kahili, would you be willing to fly Moon out south from here? You'll be able to find the research camp the Professor's setting up from the sky for sure.”

Moon, with a noise of satisfaction, smiled as Adhesive delightedly hugged the red dragon shawl she had been given by the Dragon Tamers around itself, pleased with the fabric, and covered enough by it to be difficult to see beneath. Kukui grinned at that. Even without using a Pokeball, which hastened the bonding process with a Pokemon, Moon had forged a strong one with this creature already. She really was everything after all, huh? It truly was stunning.

Without question she'd change the world one day.

“The two of you have a good Bond already,” Kukui voiced the thought, gaining Moon and Kahili's focus both, “so I'd say that confirms Ultra Beasts, or at least this little guy, are a kind of Pokemon after all. We've suspected that all this time, but suspicion and proof are two different, hah, beasts. My wife's going to tell me off for not letting her know about this until you're gone, but if you were still here she'd demand I keep you until she got to Malie and I'd never be able to say no to her.”

“Glad I'll be outside the city when you tell her,” Kahili remarked dryly. Kukui flinched but it was an entirely for show reaction. He smiled right after.

“Final thing then, and this one's all you, Moon.” Kukui's attention on Moon kept her eyes on him. He nodded at her, glancing at the floating red shawl that was covering UB-06. “UB-06 and Adhesive are just designations. Little reference numbers and titles for a being we barely understand. But this is a Pokemon and your partner: they need a name of their own, yeah! You're the first to discover it, and the first to partner with one. It's only right you do this. The name of this little guy... it's yours to come up with.”

Moon paused. Then thought. A name. A Pokemon name. Other Pokemon names, the members of her team, came to her mind. The bits and pieces that made them up, creating these names that Pokemon expressed, she sorted through. Looked at the Ultra Beast before her, a creature with three horns atop its head, each that sprayed poison. Purple, with vibrant pink highlights and eyes of blue, small arms and legs, a long tail, a large head. Adhesive. Ultra Beast. The Z-Aura from last night. Poison. Purple. Poison and purple. Poi...

“-pole?” Kukui repeated the name Moon uttered, thinking for a moment, before nodding with a smile. “Not bad, not bad at all! You've got a gift for this!” Moon smiled under Kukui's praises. He smiled back, looking at the Ultra Beast. “Poipole. Okay! Congratulations Moon and Poipole, here's to a big future for the both of you, yeah!” A high-pitched sound came out from beneath the red shawl, but it was a sound that felt approving. Moon reached up to the Pokemon and grabbed hold of it, shawl and all, to hold against her chest.

“Then it's time to head out?” Kahili asked this now, receiving the affirmation from Kukui and Moon both. “Samson left just after dawn with his associates, as well as Lillie and Hau. They have a convoy of Pokemon for riding and material transport, so they won't be hard to see from wherever they've made it to.” Standing up, Kahili motioned for Moon to join her. “City ordinance still means we have to leave its limits before we can use flying Pokemon for transport. Shall we?” Moon nodded and stood too. It wasn't too long a walk to a point Kahili could unleash a Pokemon for her and Moon to board and fly south upon.

Moon would be reunited with Lillie and Hau again all too soon enough.

“Alright then,” Kukui stood last, playing with his phone but not yet daring to activate it and make the call, “Moon, beyond the area Samson Oak will be in is Tapu Village, where the sixth Trial of the Island Challenge is held. Captain Acerola will no doubt come find you soon to take you there – after
that, Mahihinu on the west coast of Ula'ula. Kahili will meet you again there.” Halfway through nodding, Moon frowned. Then looked up at Kukui. Wouldn’t he be there too?

Kukui and Kahili both paused.

“Well,” even as Kahili stood behind Moon and shook her head in disapproval, Kukui deflected, “I'm going to be spending a lot of time up on Mount Lanakila. Just making sure League preparation is going well. I'm sure I'll catch up with you after that though! Good luck with your next Trial when the time comes!”

Moon maintained a strange look even as she nodded, turning back to Kahili for confirmation they were going. Kahili nodded. “Well,” she didn't hide the judgement of Kukui from her eyes, “we're off.” Kukui waved to the two as they began to move.

“Safe travels!” And so they parted ways for the time to come.

As soon as she and Moon were a street away Kahili refused to let Moon wonder a second further.

“Kukui isn't allowed south of Mount Lanakila.” The stark way she said it made Moon react in total surprise, going from casually walking and thinking to staring at the Flying-type expert. Kahili kept walking so Moon did too. “He's trying to keep it to himself, but the way he said it just made it feel like he'd lost interest in supporting you, didn't it?” When Kahili looked at Moon, Moon quickly looked away. But it was obvious. It had felt like Kukui was suddenly disappearing. Kahili sighed.

“I can't talk about the specifics, please understand. But I don't want you thinking things like he's not doing his best for everyone. He's just really bad at not making himself look bad.” A quiet noise that was something like an awkward laugh came from Moon. Kahili hadn't intended for that to sound amusing. “I will be in Mahihinu though. The sixth Trial of Alola is... nothing like it was when I did it. I shouldn't tell you anything though, you'll have to see for yourself.”

She'd just done her fifth Trial the night before. Moon watched as Poipole flew around her, still wrapped in the red shawl. At one point the Pokémon nearly rammed into her, requiring Moon to call its name. It reacted to it fast, for having just been given it. A strong Bond, Kahili noted to herself. Anyway, Moon pointed out, she shouldn't be thinking about her sixth Trial yet. Kahili raised an eyebrow in response. Really now?

“How moderated,” she observed Moon's new attitude. “Well, it is ultimately up to the individual to first decide when they are ready to attempt each of their Trials. The danger of pushing yourself, you've learned it now, yes?” Moon nodded in response. “Then I will leave it with you. My apologies for hurrying you.” This time Moon shook her head. She understood. Kahili wondered how true that was.

How much that singular month with the Dragon Tamers had allowed this girl to change.

“How moderated,” The Toucannon of Kahili was not the largest of the bird Pokémon she kept with her, but sturdy and experienced enough to still bear her and Moon both. Not as fast as Kukui’s Braviary could carry two, but still completely capable. Kahili settled first onto the Pokémon's back, followed by Moon taking seat before her, the floating Poipole wrapped in Moon's red shawl contenting to grab on to Moon herself. The Toucannon, flapping large black feathered wings, rose up off of the ground and began to spiral, releasing a current of heat to rise on from its own massive beak. With its ability to heat the air, Toucannon was a Pokémon well able to form thermal currents to control its flight. From their many experiences together, Kahili and the Cannon Pokémon could perform most incredible flying manoeuvres. But they’d spare Moon the full show from the Pokémon's back. That was the sort of thing it took quite some time to adjust to indeed.
Together they flew south from Malie, out over dense forests and wide fields, small houses dotted amongst them, until the land gave way from green to red. Until they entered the rocklands leading to Ula'ula's south.

The great mountain range stretching from the north to south of Ula'ula Island, dividing its eastern and western halves, consisted of numerous peaks – Hokulani and Lanakila towering tallest of them all. But most active was Blush Mountain, its volcanic nature near constantly threatening to spill forth. A combination of human ingenuity, in the form of the geothermal power plant leeching energy from the mountain's superheated payload, and local Pokemon able to work with and redirect the periodic lava flows, was all that kept it in check – enough so at least that people could travel through the dense rocky paths south of Malie City, around the eastern coast of Ula'ula, all the way to the island's southern point. Though none lived in this territory, consisting of wide stretches of red stone, volcanic rock formed over the many millennia of the mountain’s life, enough travelled it. It was a sight worth seeing, much of Alola agreed.

Moon did too.

Kahili directed her Toucannon to soar out over this section of Ula'ula Island, revealing to Moon a landscape of red stone, rising peaks and valleys before them, fields of hardy grasses, rises and falls of uneven rock, and a singular winding path the Flying-type expert told Moon stretched all the way to Ula'ula's south. It reminded Moon, in a way, of the rocky paths that curved around the northern coast of Melemele Island, the trail she had travelled with Kahili and the others back to Iki Town what felt like so long ago now. But this land below her was so much more dynamic, its shapes so much more twisted and extreme. For as fast as Kahili's Toucannon ascended into the sky, so too did the land below rise up to meet them. Kahili pointed, indicating the plume of constant smoke emerging from Blush Mountain, the buildings surrounding it barely able to be seen by the way the land curved around them. That was from where all of Ula'ula Island received its power, she told Moon. From the land of Alola itself we receive life and blessings. Such is the Alolan way.

It was rare to hear the tone known as reverence in Kahili's voice. Moon considered that deeply, and watched the land unfurling beneath her as they flew. Samson Oak, along with Lillie, Hau, and the Pokemon Professor's research associates, would have travelled along the path below only a few hours before, a convoy of Pokemon transporting both them and their equipment, and helping them navigate the incredibly steep paths of the south-eastern Ula'ula rocklands. Moon wasn't sure how fast at all they could have gone, but with the way Kahili's Toucannon flew, she was sure they'd find them again sooner rather than later.

So soon in fact that Moon paused and considered something else. Turned to Kahili for attention and made a request. The woman looked at her with surprise, but nonetheless asked her Pokemon to assist them such. Toucannon turned, beginning a spiral that would slowly lose altitude and bring them down to the land below. Still they swept out over the red rocky terrain.

A girl on Mudsdale-back far below spotted the Cannon Pokemon circling overhead and directed her Pokemon to follow after.

With elegance the Toucannon came in for a landing, cutting its flying speed a scant meter above the ground, dropping directly down to land neatly on its feet. Years of experience with its partner and Trainer had allowed the Pokemon to fly with skill that far exceeded many of its kind, and the Toucannon took great pride in such. From the moment it had met Kahili as a tiny Pikipek hunting bugs in the flowerboxes at her windowsill, their fate had been set. The Pokemon turned its beak to Kahili as she dismounted and preened as she ran a hand over its head. It couldn't be happier at all.

“Well then,” Kahili turned to watch Moon as the young girl slid off the Cannon Pokemon's back, far
less smoothly than Kahili herself had done so, Poipole floating up into the air and twirling delightedly to be flying under its own power once more, “we’re on foot. I can understand your wanderlust, but this isn't territory to walk aimlessly within. If we don't find the research camp Samson Oak is at before afternoon, we'll head back into the sky, alright?”

Moon nodded, appreciative. This land, stretching hilltops of red rock towering overhead, something she'd never seen before, she wanted to walk it. That was part of the Island Challenge, seeing Alola, right? Kahili couldn't help the smile at Moon's expression. It was. And Kahili deeply appreciated that Moon appreciated such. There was so much more to the Island Challenge than just its challenges. The faster one goes, the less they are able to understand that. And Moon was going the fastest anyone ever had. But if she intended to slow her pace, to better explore Alola and know its shape and spirit, then so much the better. Kahili would support her in that wholeheartedly.

She'd promised as such to herself already, after all.

“The way is yours,” Kahili gave Moon control of their direction. “We’re just near to the main path heading through the rocklands, and I imagine the research camp is further south along it, given we haven't made any sighting yet. What would you like to do?”

Moon thought for a moment, simply enjoying looking about the area around her. Distant Pokemon calls in the air sounded unlike those she'd heard in other areas of Alola travelled before. This place, it was different, so much so that she could not help but delight in it. She was pleased to be here. So with a smile she set their path. They'd head down from this hilltop, no roads defined and so careful progress required, to the main road below to follow it for a time. Kahili nodded and moved to take point, identifying the best path to descend. Part of wandering Alola was experiencing areas not shaped by human hand, but in these hills that still required a base measure of caution and care to do so safely. And she'd made more than enough promises to care for and guide Moon already.

To herself and so many others.

The two descended to the path below, Poipole floating above them the entire way. And made it to the bottom just in time. Another emerged over a southern ridge to join them. And called out.

“Well met, Moon!”

The sight of the small girl atop the huge Mudsdale's back, clothed in tan and purple with two long tails of bushy black hair emerging from the purple bonnet she wore, combined with the strong twang behind her voice as she called out to Moon, immediately received Moon's greeting in turn, breaking away from Kahili to approach the one before her. It was good to see Hapu again. Hapu smiled down from her Mudsdale before dismounting to stand before Moon face to face.

Or as good as could be done with Hapu's height a full head shorter than Moon's own.

“Hapu,” Kahili, following after Moon, had met Hapu a number of times over the past month, the young girl spending much time with Lillie and Hau. It had been Kukui who had told Kahili about Hapu's relation, as granddaughter to the former Poni Island Kahuna Koa, though Hapu had been quick to pull Kukui aside and ask him not to spread that fact about. She seemed to not want to be known as such. At least not for the time being. Kukui and Kahili had both acknowledged that. Hapu nodded back to Kahili's greeting.

“Ms. Hano.” Then answered Moon's question asked before. “I have been training in the rocklands for some time now, my Mudsdale and I.” When referred to the huge Draft Horse Pokemon gave a deep rumble to show her presence. Moon quickly gave her greeting to the Pokemon as well.

“Captain Acerola suggested it, and so I have been spending my days here since leaving Malie City. I
am sorry that I missed your return.”

Moon shook her head, just pleased she'd had the chance to run into Hapu again. Hau and Lillie had told her all about the time Hapu had spent with them over the past month. Hapu nodded at this, glad to hear they had made mention of her so. “In fact,” once Moon was done, Hapu surprised her and Kahili both, “I ran into them earlier this day. The research group with Professor Samson Oak, yes?” Seeing the nods in reply, Hapu smiled. “They asked me to keep an eye out for you, in case we were to cross paths. It is lucky you chose to land from your flight where you did.”

“It is...” Kahili didn't frown externally, but a little internally. Lucky indeed. Moon’s reaction was clearly surprise to see Hapu, but the timing of when she'd asked to land, followed by Hapu being right there, felt a little too convenient. Kahili just couldn't tell how it all added up. Shook her head to focus on the here and now. She got too stuck inside her own mind anyway. “Then are you taking over for me in bringing Moon to the research camp?”

“If you'll both allow me,” Hapu addressed Kahili and Moon, “I would be happy to spend the time with Moon, and escort her onwards, if you feel comfortable leaving her in my hands?” Moon turned to Kahili and asked her to do so, but even if she hadn't directly Kahili would have been fine with it. Hapu was a reliable figure; Kahili had confirmed that in the time the girl had spent in Malie City over the last weeks past. She nodded.

“If you're both fine with that, Moon, I'll head back to Malie, and ensure Kukui hasn't managed to get himself into too much hot water with Professor Burnet.” Moon nodded with a light smile, Hapu looking up at the sound of something she was unaware of. Actually... turning her head, Hapu observed the floating Pokemon, which had a red shawl wrapped over and around itself. She could see purple colour, and a tail, beneath the cloth. That wasn't a Pokemon she knew, she was sure. Not that she did know them all but...

Moon turned and called to the Pokemon, who raced to her side and clutched onto her arm. That was a strong Bond then, Hapu observed. She turned and looked back to her Mudsdale. The two trusted in one another, and Mudsdale listened to Hapu's commands, but the power she contained still pushed at Hapu's limits when they went all out. Many times Hapu had doubted whether she was the Pokemon's Trainer, or the Pokemon was simply continuing to act on the last will of her grandfather.

Still so far ahead to go.

“Well then,” stepping back, Kahili nodded to the pair, “I'll leave the rest of the journey to you. Moon, I'll be in Mahihinu, a small colony west of Tapu Village, by the time you make it there. Continue to take the Island Challenge at your own pace, and enjoy Alola as you do so. That's all any of us can ask for. I wish you the best.”

Thanking Kahili for her aid, Moon waved the Flying-type expert off as she manifested her Toucannon once again, boarding the Pokemon's back and zooming off into the sky at speed far faster than she had travelled with Moon before. Moon was thankful for that. Flight was okay. That wasn't. She turned back to Hapu with a smile, one Hapu herself mirrored.

“Then let us continue on.”

The Mudsdale showed no difference between carrying Hapu and carrying Hapu and Moon both, the Pokemon able to bear many times more weight without slowing a step. First along the long road that wound its way through the rocklands, but quickly enough with a smile Hapu guided the Pokemon to leave the beaten path, its heavy hooves crushing uneven rock underfoot, unerringly climbing another hill along the way. Moon, seated behind Hapu, held on and asked how Hapu's time with Hau and Lillie had been.
“They are both wonderful people,” Hapu answered steadily, continuing to watch the path her Mudsdale was taking, despite the Pokemon knowing well how to ascend uneven terrain itself. “Hau's drive to improve and go further is truly respectable, and I have found myself inspired by him to try even harder myself to meet my own goals. Lillie... few people I have met could be considered as lovely as she.”

Moon agreed to that immediately and on all counts. Hau had helped her find confidence time and time again. Reached out a hand to pull her forward, or placed one on her back to push her on when she struggled. He was the reason she had made it as far as she had. And Lillie... Lillie... Moon found her thoughts grinding to a halt, no words able to give proper expression to the way she thought of the girl. Hapu, still focused forward, waited a moment longer before prompting Moon to continue. “Yes?”

It wasn't so simple to describe as what Moon felt towards Hau. Hau was her best friend, her encouragement to move forward, motivation to overcome all challenges before her. The one who'd accepted her without a second thought, and never once been cowed by the way she was. Though Moon had gone down the wrong path while believing she was properly acknowledging their friendship, even now on the other side she thought the same as before. Hau was the one she wished to keep up with. So that the two of them might see all of Alola, overcome all of its challenges, and share their experiences from beginning to end. That was what Hau meant to her. It was so easy to describe.

But Lillie... Lillie had been there just as long. Even longer – she was the one Moon had met first. Called out to Moon and Moon had moved to help her. From the very beginning Moon had wanted to stand by her. Lillie, who bore her own challenges different to Moon and Hau, still stayed with them. Cared for them. Supported them. Her words, her kindness, Moon kept them all close to her heart. Lillie was always with them. Even when apart.

But it was more than that too! Lillie was someone who Moon felt like a better person for knowing. Who had this light about her that relieved the tension that had settled over Moon as the weeks of her Island Challenge had gone by. Being around Lillie... was like the world was a better place than it was when Moon was on her own. Like the girl had a magic to her that made Moon happier just being around her. That was... as well as she could explain it. She didn't understand.

Hapu, listening in silence as Moon talked, made sure to keep her focus first on the path her Mudsdale was traversing. Then spoke second. “You think highly of her.”

She did. That was enough of an answer for the young tan-skinned girl. Hapu turned for the first time to give Moon a smile. “You should tell her that some time.” And the way Moon immediately glanced away, deflecting with an expression that she didn't feel able, answered Hapu's belief more than well enough. Lillie was truly lovely indeed.

Alola had given Moon more blessings than just the path she had walked to this point.

The Mudsdale Hapu was Bonded with, a Pokemon of strength that still eclipsed that of many adult Trainers, none of Moon's Pokemon able to stand a chance of besting it one on one, held no trouble navigating the rocklands of eastern Ula'ula, the higher hills it crested giving views out over more around. But though the ocean lay never too far east, it could not be truly seen with the lay of the land as it was. Moon remarked on the beauty of Alola's ocean, remembering Wahiola Town upon the north coast of Akala Island, and joined Hapu in a discussion of the sights they had seen across Alola. Brooklet Hill, which Hapu had gone to just after Moon had left it, still stuck with them both. The terraced pools filled with Pokemon life were an astounding sight. Hapu remarked that it was the first
time she had been there too. Moon asked where her home was.

For a moment Hapu paused. Then answered.

“I come from Poni Island,” when Hapu told her this, Moon focused intently. The fourth island of Alola. The one she knew nothing about. “There are very few settlements on the island, the least number of people living on it of all Alola's islands. The most populous isn’t even part of the island, Seafolk Village being a floating town of ships all moored together.” Moon immediately started imagining such a sight. It sounded amazing. She wanted to see it. Hapu continued talking. “My home is part of a very small farming community near to the island's southern coast. We do not produce anything close to the volume of produce Akala's farmlands do, but there are some rare strains that only grow on Poni soil. My grandfather and Mudsdale here spent many years caring for the earth and ensuring bountiful harvests for Alola.”

Mudsdale was continuing along a narrow ridge connecting two of the rocklands' peaks together. Moon looked out over the not insignificant distance below. Hapu didn't seem concerned at all. She was so resolute. The girl laughed lightly as Moon said that. “I have complete faith in Mudsdale. She and I have a Bond and trust in one another. I am thankful to my grandfather for passing her on to me.”

Hapu had mentioned her grandfather before as well, when they’d met just before the Battle Royal. He sounded like an incredible Trainer.

“He was.” Hapu answered simply, the tense strong enough to help Moon understand. “He taught me so much, and helped me become the person I am today. I hope that this journey I undertake... helps him find peace, knowing I have continued on in his path. That is my wish.” There was little Moon could say to that. A sound of acknowledgement, but no real words of comfort or praise. Hapu appreciated her listening all the same. With the two girls upon her back, the Mudsdale continued on.

Only by the time the sun had passed its zenith, though its brightness was muted by a light layer of clouds that day, did the Mudsdale come to a stop, a path before her leading down to a circle of tents, a pen of Tauros and other Mudsdale, and a number of people all moving about. Hapu nodded with a smile. Very good. Then looked back to Moon.

“This is the research camp Professor Oak has established. Hau and Lillie will be down below. It was a pleasure travelling with you this day, Moon.”

Moon cocked her head. Shouldn't Hapu come down with her to join the others? It would be best if they were all together, right? They hadn't been yet! Hapu shook her head with a small smile. “There is much training I need to continue with, in order to achieve my dream. I am afraid I must return to the wilder regions of the rocklands here. Worry not,” she didn't miss or fail to appreciate the clear expression on Moon's face that said she wanted to have Hapu join her with the others. It was kind of her to treat Hapu such, who had known Moon only the tiniest fraction of time Moon had known Hau or Lillie. “I have promised to join you all when Lillie travels to the Ruins of Abundance. I will find you at that time.” Moon nodded, remembering Lillie telling her that herself. Okay.

Dismounting from Mudsdale, Moon still reached a hand up to Hapu, one Hapu accepted as well. “I will see you then.”

And with those words the young girl on Mudsdale-back turned the Draft Horse Pokemon and took her leave. Left to watch her go, Moon hefted the bag she carried over her shoulder, turning to look at Poipole, still floating overhead. She called the Pokemon down to her, the purple creature happy to settle with hands gripping onto the back of Moon's shirt. Turning once more, Moon looked down
upon the camp below, a small figure standing at its edge waving exuberantly up at her. Moon smiled. And began her descent to join them.

“Heeey!” As ever on the front-lines, Hau waved with excitement as Moon drew closer. “Was that Hapu up there? Did she find you like we asked?” She did, Moon confirmed, though wanted to return to her training after dropping Moon off. Hau frowned, as much or perhaps even more interested in having Hapu join him, Moon, and Lillie as Moon herself had been. “Well, we’ll catch up with her later, yeah? Let’s make sure to get a lot of good stories to tell her! So far Professor Oak and everyone’s just been preparing the camp – we’re apparently going to start surveying the area tomorrow!”

Moon nodded, unsure exactly what the research expedition of Samson Oak would entail. She understood the Professor was studying Alolan Variant Pokemon specifically, but not actually how that study worked. She supposed she’d have to ask. Hau took charge of moving to guide Moon to the tent Lillie was set up within. Then paused and looked up at the Pokemon that had floated away from Moon’s back as he moved to push her along. Huh?

“Hey who's that?”

Oh, Moon turned, calling for the Pokemon to descend back to her, to hand over her shawl for a moment so it could show its full self to Hau, this is Poipole. They appeared during Moon’s Trial the night before.

“Right!” Slapping a closed fist into an open palm, Hau swung back from the Pokemon to Moon, “How did it go?” The answer was as obvious as Moon’s smile. Hau raised a hand. Moon struck it with her own at full force.

... ow.

Then they laughed, shaking their hands. Hau looked up again at Poipole. Hang on.

“Hang on.” He really was thinking hard about this. He was sure he’d seen it before. Moon caught his expression, calling for Poipole to grab the shawl again. They should go see Lillie. Hau consented to guide Moon on.

The tent was on the smaller side, half storage space resulting in only enough room for Lillie on her own. She felt more comfortable that way however, and was sitting inside with Nebby free of her bag, the Nebula Pokemon pleased to be playing about by jumping up on top of the containers stacked within the fabric shelter. Lillie looked up at the sound of Hau telling her he was coming in and smiled widely to see Moon follow after. Even when sitting the tent, packed with boxes on one side, didn't have proper room for the three. Lillie squeezed into its back as Hau ushered Moon in first, before sitting in the entrance with the flaps hanging over his shoulders. Comfy. Lillie noted the floating Pokemon hovering above Moon’s head. A new member of her team then. “Moon, is that?”

With a nod Moon reached up and retrieved her shawl again, unveiling Poipole’s eyes so it might take in the scene. Immediately upon spotting Nebby a loud shriek of delight came from the purple Pokemon as it dived on the smaller blue and purple cloud-like being, Nebby shocked to be so enthusiastically cradled with a larger face rubbing up against its own. Moon argued with Poipole about the Pokemon being too overbearing, surprised by its strong reaction to seeing the Nebula Pokemon. Lillie stared at the interaction.
Hau realised what he was thinking about.

“Aue! Isn't that an Ultra Beast, Mo-?” Moon's hand over Hau's mouth did nothing to stop Lillie's gasp, the girl edging a little further back from the small being. No no! Moon waved her other hand, trying to defuse the situation, it was fine! She just didn't need to have the researchers around asking her about it yet. Professor Kukui had told Moon it was best to keep Poipole as low profile as possible – difficult given the Pokemon would not go into a Pokeball and insisted on always staying by Moon's side. Hau nudged Moon's wrist with a hand, reminding her to remove her hand from his mouth. He gasped a little after but it was a play action. Then moved onto hands and knees to crawl further into the tent and look at Poipole up close. The purple Pokemon, cheerily waving Nebby's own 'arms' up and down, turned its head to look up at Hau, but didn't react beyond that. Hau looked up at Moon and shook his head. “Moon that's incredible!”

It had been unexpected. Moon recounted her experiences with Poipole before, first in the Hau'oli Cemetery, then again at Memorial Hill – though Moon obfuscated much of the action around that time to hide the moment with Plumeria, still somewhat shamed by the words the woman had used to compare Moon to who she was sure was the boss of Team Skull. Then finally talked about Poipole approaching her during her fifth Trial, the Bond that was immediately forged, and the inability for Pokeballs to work on the creature at all. Lillie was quick to theorise.

“Perhaps Pokeballs don't work on Ultra Beasts, because there is something about them different to all other Pokemon?” Moon nodded in response. Professor Kukui had thought similar. So because of that, Moon now had the Pokemon with her at all times, drawing attention when not disguised. It was a lot to deal with. Lillie, a small smile appearing on her face, pointed Moon's attention to the large bag she always carried with her, the one that housed Nebby when out and about. “Would you like your own bag for Poipole then?” Moon smiled and shook her head. Maybe having an Ultra Beast with her would be awkward, but she'd rather not keep it hidden away. When Lillie glanced away from Moon saying that, Moon was quick to make sure Lillie knew that was only because Poipole was more than capable of protecting itself. Nebby needed to be kept safe and Lillie was right with what she was doing.

Lillie gave Moon a smile for saying that.

But wondered all the same.

“Oh! Hau, quick to recover from all surprises in life, crawled back to the entrance of the tent.

“Hey Moon, hey Lillie, let's go see what everyone's doing! Maybe we can go exploring!” Each as quick to agree, Lillie encouraged Nebby back into her bag, while Moon wrapped her red dragon shawl over Poipole once more, the Ultra Beast happy to settle onto the back of Moon's shoulder again. One by one the trio exited the tent, heading into the inner circle of the camp where Samson Oak stood over a table with a map spread across it, discussing with two other researchers the first sweep they'd make in the surrounding area. Seeing the young trio approach, Samson moved to take a break from planning and walked over to them with a smile and a wave.

“Hello hello, alola and hello, glad to see the three of you together again! Young Miss Moon, I take it your Trial went well?” In response to the Professor's question Moon nodded, earning a smile from the darkly tanned man. “Wonderful. My associates and I intend on spending a number of weeks in these hills surveying the area and the local Pokemon populations, and you and your friends are welcome to stay with us for as long as you wish! By my understanding it is not the longest trek from here to the Tapu Village Refuge Zone, so I am sure I will be able to spare a guide to take you there, if another does not appear before then!”

Moon tilted her head. She didn't know much of anything about the southern region of Ula'ula Island,
or Tapu Village, which Professor Kukui and Kahili had both mentioned. She didn't know why it had a 'Refuge Zone'. Neither Hau or Lillie seemed to react.

“Hey Professor!” Sticking his hand up, Hau drew the attention of Samson Oak. “What can we do today?”

“Well my boy,” Samson smiled at Hau's student-like diligence, “some of the researchers here are moving containers for setting up blinds in the surrounding areas now. If you and your Pokemon would like to help them move such, that would be most beneficial! Once we're all set up with our equipment we can prepare for the first study expedition tomorrow!”

Nodding, Hau turned to Moon. “Okay Moon, let's go help out!” Happy to follow after, Moon went with Hau, Lillie following behind less able to help but happiest always by their side. Watching the three youths go, Samson observed the floating being wrapped in a red shawl hanging onto Moon's back. Drew his own Pokedex from a pocket.

He was sure that was...

Though clouds still hung overhead for the time being, reducing some of the heat of the day, still being out in the rocklands quickly worked up a sweat, both for people and Pokemon working together. Wiping her brow, setting down a small container she'd agreed to help move, some of her Pokemon helping with one larger, Moon endured a teasing remark from Hau that maybe she should borrow Lillie's hat.

Lillie, not about to give her hat over to anyone right now thank you very much, looked at Moon and tilted her head slightly. Moon caught her looking and asked what it was. Lillie shook her head. Then stopped and asked the question all the same.

“Moon, I was wondering...” she wasn't sure how to approach this, but her own curiosity now drove her, “before Akala, and at the Battle Royal, you wore that red hat – I got the impression you really liked it.” Moon slowly nodded. She did. Lillie continued. “It's... unique, I can understand not wearing it when trying to hide, but you're not doing that any more, are you?” Moon shook her head, but didn't maintain eye-contact with Lillie after. She knew where this question was going now. Lillie ventured to ask it all the same. “Is there a reason you're not wearing the hat now?”

Hau, nearby, overheard all of this and wondered what the answer was too. Moon kept looking down and found it hard to admit. Slowly, with Lillie and Hau watching over her, she did.

The hat felt weird on her head while her hair was cut so short. She kept looking down, embarrassed by that being the case. Her confidence in asking for her hair to be cut as short as it could be so she could both retake her natural colour and have less hair during the peak of Alola's hottest season had quickly backfired the first time she'd tried to put on her hat and been unable to feel comfortable with it. She'd have to wait for her hair to grow back out some.

So for now she was hatless.

A small giggle from Lillie fit neatly between a sharp snerk from Hau followed by his loud laughter at Moon's situation, Lillie's own amusement kindly muffled by the boy's volume. Moon, who was embarrassed to have been caught out so soon on her haircut mistake, huffed at the both of them only to be teased by Hau even further. Lillie, watching over the two, enjoyed the sight. The three of them together like this, that was good. It was the way she wanted things to remain.
Let these days together last, as long as they might be.

Chapter End Notes

Today we enjoy a cooldown chapter, which I feel completely fine about given the high intensity of the number to come before. Lots of little character things, but mostly journey, an enjoyable travel through a new stretch of Alola. Part of what the Island Challenge should be, y'know?

Naming Poipole differed from canon, as it's name is meant to consist of poison and pole, but I couldn't really think of a good way to work that because pole is a weird word to draw out of Poipole so I just followed the #1 Rule of Authors which is "Do whatever you want". It all works out.

There's a lot of seeds of things being different here, I'm sure a few people are wondering what's the deal with Mahihinu, or the Tapu Village Refuge Zone. Well those are important things to discover as we go. For now, we're quietly enjoying a bit of rest for these kids getting to do something different and learn more about Pokemon in their natural habitat. I'm sure we'll see some of that next chapter too.

As always, my thanks to all readers, knowing this content continues to reach and entertain you is a huge part of what motivates me to continue. If you have any comments to give, I'd love to hear them, and if you have anyone you think you can recommend this fic to, I'd be so very thankful if you did. Please look forward to the next chapter, and the continuation of the Ula'ula arc. This is chapter 30, huh? I can't say wordcount, and I can't guarantee chapterwise, but it's starting to feel like I'm at the midpoint of this fic now. Been a long ride, huh?

Well we're still on the upwards climb of this rollercoaster. Hang on tight.

There's still so much further to go.
The Fourth Samson Oak Alola Research Expedition

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“While Variant Pokemon develop as a result of outside stimulus, the stimulus varies far wider than most people would assume. The vast majority of Alolan Variants, from the nocturnal Rattata to magnetic Geodude, have developed based on environmental factors, however others such as the Alolan Meowth and Persian are instead derived from human interaction – the Pokemon originally being a luxury pet and converting to a Dark-based typing due to the changes in attitude that situation allowed. Pokemon changing based on their own personal perceptions isn't an unknown thing – the Tender Pokemon Milotic for example is known to evolve from Feebas once it perceives itself as beautiful – however it is an incredibly fascinating topic all the same. By simply changing the way it thinks, a Pokemon may begin upon an entirely new line of development. A specific part of the research into new evolutions of Eevee is in fact based on the Pokemon's perception of self, which is why Eevee are so common in regions that host Pokemon Contests, such as the Hoenn Region—”

“Hau!” The sharp nudge of Lillie's elbow jolted Hau's attention from the Pokemon overhead, a flock of Fletchinder driving a Skarmory out of their territory, both Pokemon that appeared commonly in the skies of the Ula'ula Rocklands. He glanced at her, then over to Professor Samson Oak, who was standing before him, Moon, and Lillie. Hau blinked.

“Continuing,” the Pokemon Professor returned to the topic, Moon and Lillie focusing again. Hau struggled with sitting still while there were Pokemon about, which wasn't the most uncommon of traits and Samson honestly didn't find the boy's restlessness that off-putting. He'd let the three loose to see the work his researchers were undertaking soon. But first he wanted to outline what he knew, to make sure that if they discovered something he didn't, they'd know. The limits of one's knowledge must be made known so others might fill in the blanks, after all. “While Alola possesses the vast majority of what we refer to as 'Variant Pokemon', and has the most wildly differing variants among them, it is not the sole region to display differences in Pokemon based on environment. Consider the Bagworm Pokemon Burmy, which builds its cloak from material it can acquire from its local surroundings. Depending on that material, its then evolution Wormadam will have differing typing based on what the Burmy was cloaked in. And while their typing may remain consistent, there are a whole host of other Pokemon across the world who show both minor and major physical differences based on the specific location they occur. Indeed, Variant Pokemon could be considered less a unique phenomenon of Alola, and more of the furthest developed occurrence of this phenomenon in the known world. Thus far, at least.”

Lillie was nodding, fascinated. Pokemon research had always intrigued her – from a young age she'd enjoyed studying reports and essays written by experts in the field. They fascinated her still, and she loved to hear about Pokemon. Loved Pokemon. The bag she always kept by her side, she placed a hand against it and felt Nebby within respond to her touch. The mind of a researcher, who could see the mysteries in the world and begin to solve them, she idolised that. Thinking that way, it would allow her to help Nebby find their way home. Away from all of this.

Back to where it would be safe.

Moon listened too. As opposed to Lillie, her fascination wasn't with the ability of the Professor as much as the topic itself, everything about Pokemon appealing to her. She wasn’t studying and thinking about ways to think the way Lillie was, simply taking in all Samson Oak was saying so that she might have useful information going forward. Hau, who took things as they came, nudged Moon.
and pointed out a Fletchling that had landed nearby, pecking at the ground around them. Moon smiled at it, but soon looked back to the Professor when he spoke again.

“The majority population of Variant Pokemon in the Ula'ula Rocklands,” Oak continued, “are Diglett, Geodude, and their respective evolutions. In response to a heavily volcanic environment, Diglett developed special ‘hairs’ to act as feelers for safely traversing unstable locations. Geodude, due to the high concentration of magnetic rock in these mountains, have become Rock and Electric-type, their bodies comprised of a far higher percentage of magnetic stone than Geodude of other regions. In both cases these developments have led to even more advanced changes upon evolution, evident in the famously lush head of ‘hair’ sported by Alolan Dugtrio, and the magnetic spines that take shape upon Alolan Graveler and Golem. The core purpose of this research expedition is to observe these two strains of Pokemon, and chart their interactions with their environment, each other, and other Pokemon besides, in order to compare and contrast with occurrences of the species in other regions. While you are staying with us, keep an eye out for these Pokemon, and make note of anything of interest you might see in that time.”

Moon, Lillie, and Hau all nodded at that. Samson smiled, pleased with these three young ones. Kukui had given him a full run-down on how to approach them: that Lillie was carrying a rare Pokemon she was protecting; that Hau had an endless supply of energy and heart; and that Moon while quiet was always watching her surroundings. The three were at their best together, Kukui had told him, and Samson should make sure they were free to stay as close to one another as possible. He respected that, and them. Three young ones willing to join his research work, to learn a little more about approaching the world of Pokemon not as a trainer but as an observer to nature. He couldn’t be more delighted to help nurture their seeds of curiosity. To that end...

“Now while I have given you an overview of Variant Pokemon, there are still some mysteries we do not know. The existence of Alolan Raichu, for example,” as Samson spoke again, first Lillie, then Moon, then Hau with a sudden riveted expression as Samson mentioned the Pokemon in particular, focused their attention once more, “still has yet to be explained. A sudden development in the Psychic-typing is no small feat, given it is considered one of the most notable of all Pokemon-types, not to mention the most common typing amongst Legendary and Mythical Pokemon.” All three were now locked onto Samson. ‘Legendary’ and ‘Mythical’ were titles for Pokemon that instantly grasped the attention of dreamers across the globe. Oh to see one for oneself. Samson smiled. “While the mystery has yet to be solved, it is one we are keenly interested in. That and the mystery of one other Alolan Variant. Can you guess which one?”

All three glanced at one another then back to the Professor, shaking their heads. He nodded and explained.

“In comparison to its typing of Grass and Psychic found in other regions across the world, in Alola the Coconut Pokemon Exeggutor is the Grass and Dragon type. This is, to the best of our knowledge, a change based upon the vibrant sunlight available in Alola, which has allowed Exeggutor to grow far beyond its more common form. But this belies its true mystery. Have you determined what it is yet?”

Again a moment's pause followed by shaking of heads from Hau and Moon, Lillie thinking too deeply to answer. She was sure she could figure it out, if she just had a little longer to...

“The true mystery,” Samson continued on, “is why. Why, when provided a significant volume of sunlight, does the secondary typing of Exeggutor change from Psychic to Dragon? Do you understand?”

A longer pause, before Lillie ducked her head in acknowledgement. It made no sense. Hau and
Moon looked at her. She explained. “Alolan Exeggutor show no signs of the Psychic-typing, however Exeggcute which they evolve from still do. That is to say, their Psychic-typing transforms into Dragon. But why does Psychic become Dragon?”

“Exactly, young lady,” Samson beamed, pleased with Lillie's deduction. “There is no logical reason for the Psychic-typing to transform into Dragon – no understood relationship between the two types. And yet Alolan Exeggutor poses this question to us: what is the relationship between these two types, that one might become another? Psychic Pokemon are notably powerful, and Trainers with Psychic-type biases are known to develop their own abilities when bound to them. Dragon-types, meanwhile, are incredibly physically demanding, and also appear among many of the strongest Pokemon of each region. One could consider the two types to represent the strongest possible mind and body. I do not believe it coincidence that the only recorded Pokemon to possess both types are the Legendary Eon Pokemon of Hoenn.”

All three children were absolutely fascinated. Samson enjoyed it. It had been a while since he'd run a course at a Pokemon School, and he realised now that he missed it. Maybe after his research projects in Alola were done he'd find somewhere to settle down for a while and help share knowledge with the next generation. That would be nice. Pleased, he concluded. “Unfortunately for now Exeggutor Island, the most populous location in Alola for Exeggcute and Exeggutor, is off-limits while Poni Island has no Kahuna. Until a new Kahuna is appointed, I have been told I will not have permission to visit it.” The wait for Poni’s next Kahuna was, day by day, extending to more and more of Alola's population, the pressure upon those involved in the choice mounting. Samson gave a thoughtful hum, considering the three youths before him. “However, should any of the three of you find your way there before I do, please remember me and take notes of what you might encounter. The mystery of Alolan Exeggutor may just reveal one of the greatest of all Pokemon! Perhaps, at least.”

Silence settled as the Professor ended his lecture on Variant Pokemon, before he clapped his hands with a wider smile, the three children musing on their own thoughts jumping at the sound. A research associate, wearing mostly khaki clothing, approached the group. Samson waved the children's attention to them. “Well then, thank you for hearing this Professor out, let's get to research, shall we? My associate here will show you to one of the observation stations we set up the day before, near to one of the more populous Pokemon sites in the rocklands. Off you go now!”

Bounding to his feet, Hau raced to the researcher's side, Moon and Lillie each standing a little slower before heading after, sharing a glance and a smile at Hau's enthusiasm. Overhead the sun continued to shine, its light falling upon the land and sea of Alola, and the day continued on.

Their time together continued on.

Three days followed the founding of the Fourth Samson Oak Alola Research Expedition's campsite, with three nights preceding each. Each night was punctuated by a communal dinner, a time for all those gathered here to sit together and talk, sharing their thoughts and actions of the day. Of the three children who had joined this expedition on the invite of Samson Oak, Lillie was most delighted in by the other researchers, her questions astute enough to show she had more than just a passing interest in the field. She had a bright future in Pokemon research, should that be the direction she chose, many proclaimed.

Hau, vibrant and full of life, entertained through constant questions, though often they were all of the same vein: about Pokemon seen, encountered, and how they acted. He just wanted to know it all! Everything about every Pokemon around! His enthusiasm was something everyone found themselves enjoying.
Moon... people avoided.

She was quiet, mostly. Talkative with Lillie and Hau, but when around others tended to observe more than speak. Her silent stare, her oft-unreadable expressions, quickly grew off-putting, as they always had with those not used to her. But that wasn't the real reason people refused to meet her gaze. And she knew it.

Pitaya had told Moon this would happen. The decision to appear as herself, the Guildmaster had warned Moon, would go as such. The nature of most people is to be cautious around power viewed as unstable. A person will walk beneath power-lines without fear. They would not do the same were those lines aflame. It is an obvious thing, is it not, that when you cannot determine how something that possesses great power will act you will move to avoid it? Before Moon had been fascinating, possessing six Pokemon, able to perform Z-Moves without restriction, but now she appeared as dangerous. The Pokemon with her now were the type capable of unleashing true damage. Moon's announcement of her self, standing against the boss of Team Skull, had made sure everyone knew she possessed power that could not be predicted. And so approaching her without care introduced threat.

So Moon acknowledged that. Forewarned as she was, she understood that so many people would see her as unpredictable, and move to avoid her. And accepted it. What mattered was that those she cared about, Hau and Lillie, still stood by her. Didn't feel concern or move away. That, knowing that together the three could still be the same as before, had been her one wish. Granted as it was, she accepted that the majority would keep her at arm's length. It didn't matter. She had those important with her. That was enough.

Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alola Dragon Tamers, had said this: “We who make our name and presence known as possessing great power, will always find people treat us with a measure of wariness. No master trainer is beyond this result, even the most famous and fawned upon will have that layer of measured caution from the populace they walk amongst. It is an inevitable thing.” The Guildmaster, robed in yellow, paused for a moment and sighed wistfully, looking at the blue sky overhead. Then turned to Moon with a smile. “But there will always be those who do not fear. Who see only ourselves. And they are the ones we must truly treasure. You have those people already, do you not?”

She did.

And over the days here Moon treasured them. She treasured Lillie's delight from the moment they rose each morning, as she spoke with researchers about the work they'd undertake that day, to the evening meal, where she listened to them describe observations and added her own into the mix. This momentary pause upon her journey, Lillie never failing to care for Nebby, but taking this time for herself, away from her mission and the stresses that had haunted her, brought smiles and reactions Moon could not help but smile in return to see. Lillie was, at times, almost as energetic as Hau in discussing Pokemon with the others here. Samson remarked to Moon, the Pokemon Professor one of the few here who showed no concern in approaching her, that Lillie without question had all the potential to be the finest of Pokemon researchers.

If that was what she wanted to do then Moon wanted to see her achieve such. Moon wanted to see Lillie achieve all her goals, as long as they continued to bring the smiles the blonde-haired girl currently wore to her face. Whether giving her thoughts on Pokemon movement patterns when gathered researchers discussed observations over maps, or out in the field joining others in staying as close but unobserved as they could to the local populace, the Geodude and Diglett lines specifically, Lillie exuded deep enjoyment of this time. Her happiness... Moon treasured.
Lillie's happiness and Hau's liveliness.

Without fail Pokemon were always around Hau – often his own, but just as easily he seemed able to call and lure those about the rocklands to his side. He had a gift, a great ability to call out with friendship to Pokemon, the researchers on this trip appreciating him more and more as the days passed by. Often it was Hau who asked a Pokemon to come and greet another, so they might make closer observations of the wild creature. He had an ability to present himself as an equal, a fellow member of the world around them, belonging just as much as those he spoke to, that helped Hau earn the trust of the Rocklands Pokemon. Moon, who herself had never experienced true difficulty in reaching out to Pokemon either, quickly learned the difference between them. For her, Pokemon wished to follow her. That was their nature regarding humans, to seek Bonds and power, conflict and evolution. Those that approached Moon sought such. Some she did catch, but it proved difficult to encourage others to return to the wild. She upset the balance the researchers were attempting to observe.

Often they had to ask for Moon to keep out of the way, doing their best to phrase the request as politely as they could. Still, it did sting a little, being unable to help.

Unable to do at all what Hau could seemingly so easily.

Pokemon approached him, sat with him as he sat with his own, even talked for a while, Hau rambling, those Pokemon answering back in their own voices. It is said through the strongest of Bonds Trainers and their Pokemon can communicate as equals, but Hau appeared well able to talk to any around him. So they joined him for a time and then went back on their way. And this the researchers valued immensely.

So yes, while Lillie embraced the minds of research, Hau embraced the heart, and together each inspired and benefited those they were following, receiving praise and thanks often. Moon enjoyed hearing that, knowing the two were doing so well. She was proud of them, and happy for them.

But a part of her still couldn't help but feel comparison to them all the same, and her own lack of utility in this time together. Lillie could talk with the researchers as equals. Hau the local Pokemon. But Moon knew far too little about Pokemon research to join those conversations, and listening in or asking Lillie still didn't help her measure up. And the local Pokemon were thrilled to battle her, or seek her approval, but she lacked communication with them the way Hau did. In this time, those two had found places.

But Moon hovered at the edge only truly welcomed by Hau and Lillie themselves. Samson was always happy to explain facts or talk about Pokemon, but his interest in teaching wasn't the same. To a degree, Moon felt disconnected from this trip. It was why she agreed to go immediately, when Acerola came to fetch her.

But that hasn't happened just yet. First comes the full moon. Then the migration to the shore. And only after then the Captain's arrival. First came the full moon.

On the second night the moon rose full in a sky clear of clouds, rich with stars. The view from the peak of Mount Hokulani, Moon imagined, must be beautiful beyond imagining at this time. Lillie and Hau both plied her with questions about that, but each with entirely different interests. Lillie found fascination in the observatory, the grand telescope that gazed into the stars. Hau with the Pokemon, knowing full well that Minior fell at this time. Moon described the sight as being beautiful, Lillie and Hau both knowing enough about the Pokemon's life-cycle to understand the slower pace
Moon spoke in was a result of being affected by such.

Discussing Minior led into discussing her Trial, Moon speaking in enough of an overview to satisfy Hau’s rampant curiosity without going into the details of her own fight. From there the topic addressed Poipole itself, the purple Ultra Beast always by Moon’s side, either floating nearby or clinging to her when feeling particularly needy. Lillie and Hau each took different things from observing the Pokemon.

“What I read of Alola's Legendary Pokemon, of Solgaleo and Lunala,” Lillie was looking into the sky, the full moon overhead, as she spoke of this, the topic one always on her mind, with her from the moment she'd read the book Acerola had retrieved for her, “is that they first descended to Alola from a hole of light. It is said they came from the heavens itself but...”

“A hole of light?” Hau was the one to ask it, but both he and Moon were thinking the same thing. For they'd seen such a thing before. And the creature that emerged from within. “Are Solgaleo and Lunula Ultra Beasts then?”

“I don't know,” Lillie shook her head, aware theologians and scholars of the modern day had given the topic far more consideration than she. “But if Nebby is related to them, then maybe...” a loud squeal from Poipole drew all three's attention, the Pokemon having half opened Lillie's bag to stick its head within and greet Nebby. Lillie watched in silence as Moon pulled the Pokemon back, lecturing it for messing with other people's property. Lillie had only seen one Pokemon react as strongly to Nebby before: Tapu Lele in the Ruins of Life. It was said the Tapu had pledged to guard the child the emissaries of the sun and moon had left behind. But also that they rejected Ultra Beasts by nature, Moon having told the tale of Tapu Lele driving off Poipole before. Perhaps the Tapu feared the Ultra Beasts sought to take Nebby away, as the Pokemon was one of them? Or maybe it was even more complicated than that. She didn't know.

Just that, if Nebby was related to the Ultra Wormhole... Lillie fell silent, deep in her own thoughts. Hau, watching over Moon as she wrangled the squirming Ultra Beast in her grip, smiled. “The two of you get along really well.” Moon, presently holding the Pokemon upside-down, both arms wrapped around its midsection, gave Hau a questioning look. Poipole squealed loudly with delight at being held such, Hau reaching out and poking it in the middle of its face where a nose would be. A giggling sound responded. He grinned at it before looking back at Moon. “I'm just thinking it's really cool that an Ultra Beast can have a Bond as well. I wanna be friends with one too! Moon, make sure to introduce me if you meet another!” Moon nodded. She would. Hau appreciated that. Looked over to Lillie, who was stuck in her thoughts, and poked her arm, earning a scolding from her that he grinned the whole way through. Moon smiled too.

It was good.

The next day, as Samson Oak explained about the more territorial nature of Alolan Graveler, who competed for rarer magnetic rock material compared to the common Graveler's less exacting preferences, a researcher raced towards the group. Gasping ragged breaths, they quickly surmised what had driven them to report as fast as they could. A great number of a rare Rocklands Pokemon species were travelling through a nearby valley, heading east towards the sea. Delighted, Samson redirected the researchers around to observe this rare sight, Moon, Lillie, and Hau all racing off to be the first to see.

Today's observation zone had been one of the more magnetically charged rocklands mountains, south of the Geothermal Power Plant built around the volcanic Blush Mountain. Continuing over the
higher ridges, soon enough a narrow valley would be reached, its base at roughly sea level, sometimes exposed to the sky above, other times a tunnel through solid rock. And through this valley, as Moon, Lillie, and Hau stared down into it, a great number of red and yellow shelled Pokemon marched. Rotom-dex emerged from Moon's bag to describe the Pokemon, Hau and Lillie each focusing upon it, Moon knowing already. She'd seen it once before, after all.

And more than that...

“Turtonator, zzt!” Delighting in being able to record so many members of the species, Rotom-dex did a spin as it read off the data recorded, “the Blast Turtle Pokemon, Fire and Dragon-type, zzt! A volcanic Pokemon that consumes numerous materials including sulfur, it is known to have a chemically-unstable shell that detonates when struck. Usually travels alone, zzt! Recording migration now!”

A recurring march, a gathering of the Pokemon from across the rocklands to head to the shore where volcanic debris from Blush Mountain flowed into the sea. A fresh flow had run down the trenches dug just days prior, and so new materials for consumption would be available. This was the rare time these Pokemon gathered in such masses, a grand opportunity for any researcher to observe how the Pokemon interacted with their fellows in great numbers. Many eyes looked into the valley below to see what they could see.

So focused were they that they missed what Moon did next. Until it was too late at least.

Decidueye was not a Pokemon that could fly with any excess of weight upon it, that was something Moon had learned soon after the Arrow Quill Pokemon evolved. But even with her clutching onto its chest, it could still control its fall, slowing more than enough for a safe landing even from great height. The flights upon her Ride Charizard's back to the Poke Pelago may have helped Moon's struggle with heights, but it was the time spent upon the mountain of Hokulani with Decidueye that allowed her to overcome it.

Enough to do what she did now.

The gasp and yell of Moon's name from those observing came far too late, the Pokemon holding her tight already having leaped out over the ravine, its outstretched wings catching the air and slowing the descent of the pair into the depths below. Guided downwards, seeking a rocky platform Moon had seen, the Pokemon landed well, even as Moon's name was yelled time and time again by those distressed by her action above. She'd had to move fast though. Had to reach the migration as it passed.

In case the one atop the back of a Turtonator in its midst were to disappear before she caught him.

“Yo there,” waving from the back of the Pokemon he trusted in fully, even knowing her shell was dangerously explosive, Ryuki Oda looked up at the rock outcropping ahead, Moon standing upon it and looking down at him, a Decidueye standing behind her. Moving to stand himself, Ryuki continued to wave. “How're you doing, Moon?”

Wind whipped through the narrow valley far below the rocklands shelf above, carrying a cloud of dust with it, stirred through the air by the onward march of the Turtonator herd, each trudging forward on all fours, red and yellow spined shells pointing at the sky, long necks ending in similarly shelled heads stretched forward. Moon raised the red shawl, marked with a deeper red dragon, that she had been given to her face, covering mouth and eyes as best she could. Poipole, floating around Moon, simply spun in place to push the dust away. Ryuki blinked in surprise.

“Hey now, you've been busy.” A tap and a word to the Turtonator he rode and she began to shift,
changing her movement to break away from the herd, pushing through their numbers to the side. Others complained, this valley narrow and her intent to come to a stop making it difficult for more than one to pass her by at a time, but she did so all the same. Ryuki, visiting each population of dragons across Alola, had enjoyed watching his partner have the chance to join along with this herd, but now someone was calling him.

And Ryuki Oda always answered whosoever called his name.

“Need a lift up?” Raising his head, Ryuki could see others peaking over the edges of the clifftops high above, the sight of Moon descending from that height with a winged Pokemon slowing her fall having surprised him deeply. Not that he wouldn't do the same, but there was more than a decade of years between him and Moon. The way she grew, it was at a pace that seemed impossible to keep up with. She’d have an older spirit than him by the end of the year if she didn't slow down.

He found that kind of funny.

Moon looked up as well, seeing the same people staring down at her. Looking back to Ryuki she nodded, having gained his attention as she'd wished. Ryuki nodded back, and withdrew a pair of Pokeballs from a slot on the guitar-case slung over his back. In a fluid motion, one return and one release, Ryuki swapped Trixie for Serena, Turtonator for Dragonite. The orange Dragon Pokemon happily accepted Ryuki clambering onto her back, wings beating as she lifted up from the valley below, allowing the grumbling herd of Turtonator to properly continue their march. When she reached the rocky outcropping Moon had landed upon Moon returned Decidueye, before accepting the Dragonite's hand to cling onto its side as well. The Pokemon, of great strength despite an oft-peaceful expression, easily rose higher and higher carrying the two humans, until finally it crested the rocklands shelf above.

Immediately Moon found herself being lectured.

“Moon, why would you-” “Have you done that before?” “-scared us-” “Weren't you scared?” “-at least say something-” “Hey isn't that Ryuki?”

Hau and Lillie, the latter taking a little longer to recover from the panic of seeing Moon leaping from a high cliff edge than the former who was just happy to see Moon was okay, both stopped as Ryuki dismounted from his Dragonite’s back and returned her to her Luxury Ball. Ryuki grinned.

“Yo yo, little miss Lillie, and that's Hau too! All three of you together, that means I win a prize!”

Moon, attempting to reassure Lillie despite her displeasure at Moon's cavalier action, looked up at Ryuki as he said this, the researchers around split between wanting to follow along the Turtonator herd's path and stay here to see what this strange figure with the Dragon Pokemon would do. Moon asked him what his prize was. Ryuki's smile focused on her.

“Well to start with, how about letting me see how that little one is doing?”

In a flash of red light Moon unleashed Shelgon, evolved form of Bagon, to Ryuki's absolute delight. With a whoop he squatted down, reaching out hands to the Endurance Pokemon's shell, poking and prodding at it in a way that looked as though it must be frustrating, yet the Pokemon simply leaned into the touch. Ryuki knew Dragon-type Pokemon like few others did; even among the Dragon Tamers Moon had only seen Pitaya herself display the same ability to interact with the Pokemon in that way.

Seeing Ryuki before her, and thinking of the Dragon Tamers, Moon vividly recalled the discussion she and Pitaya had had regarding one Ryuki Oda, the shining star come from distant lands. And the
warnings the Guildmaster had given her.

“One of the most defining signs of experience among Pokemon Trainers is the ability to sense another's Bonds,” the Guildmaster had told Moon. “It is not something that can develop from anything but experience, that awareness of the power and Pokemon another Trainer has.” It was true, for Moon at least: even looking at Ryuuki she couldn't tell anything about him. He gave the impression of being strong, and had demonstrated such the last time they had met, battling three of Alola's Captains without concern, but that did not mean Moon could feel it. She couldn't sense the monster that he kept.

“He has six Pokemon,” Pitaya had described Ryuuki's visitation to the Dragon Tamers Guild, an act of respect any Dragon Tamer visiting a foreign land undertook, greeting the local caretakers of the incredibly powerful Pokemon type. “But one of them I do not understand.” Moon had pressed this. Pitaya shook her head. “He showed some, those he'd allied with locally around Alola. But one he did not show, one he kept secret, has an intensity to its Bond that I've never felt before. I would describe it as monstrous, but that does it disservice. Moon, whatever secret Pokemon Ryuuki Oda is keeping with him, it may very well be one of the most powerful you will ever see.” It was then, and only then, that Pitaya gave a smile that looked far less like the serene and guiding Guildmaster and far more like a Pokemon Trainer with a great challenge before them. “I can only hope I cross paths with him in the Pokemon League so I might find out what it is first-hand.”

“Seriously,” Ryuuki's words broke through Moon's thoughts, her focus aligning back upon him, “that's really impressive, Moon. You're going to show us a Salamence at the League, right?” Moon nodded and lifted a hand, touching the cord holding the Key Stone around her neck. Ryuuki focused on it. “No kidding? Then you've got a Salamencite too?” Moon's nod drew a real whistle out of Ryuuki. Who'd given her that? Irresponsible no doubt. But... kinda cool too. Ryuuki stood back up, Shelgon making a muted noise after the man withdrew his touch. “Arright, lesson time then, here comes Ryuuki Oda's Crash Course in Mega Evolved Pokemon!”

Moon stood at attention, Ryuuki's offer of guidance instantly appealing. Hau, listening in on all of this, quickly stepped up to hear as well, even though he neither had a Key Stone nor a Pokemon that would become a Pokemon that could Mega Evolve. He wanted to hear it anyway. Lillie listened as well, but she kept back too. She was still a little upset at Moon for worrying her like that.

Ryuuki messed with his guitar-case, before pulling from another slot a cord with a rainbow pendant hung from it, a Key Stone all of his own. Moon focused on it. So he'd show that at the League too...

“So Mega Evolved Pokemon start pulling at their Bond the moment they transform, growing more tired by the second as they use more and more strength. They'll run out and turn back the second either the Pokemon or Trainer runs out of gas, and once they do they're pretty much out. I've seen a couple of Z-Moves and it's pretty similar, but I'd say Mega Evolution is more demanding on the Pokemon than the Trainer. That much power constantly pumping into them is real rough. Every Mega Evolved Pokemon acts differently, but they're all going wild in their own way. That makes Mega Evolution real scary if you can't fully trust your Pokemon. So that's lesson one: don't do it if you've got even a single doubt – at least not somewhere safe without friends to help you out if things get bad.”

A synchronised nod from Moon and Hau brought a smile to Ryuuki's face. Here he was teaching some kids, that was a new one. Well, stars shone equally on all.

“Have either of you ever pulled back on your Bonds?” The shake of the children's heads, confused at the question, had Ryuuki explain further. “So we give strength to our Pokemon, and when we start off as Trainers, we just give without thinking, letting as much go as will go. But once you get used to
that, and start thinking about it, you can pull back on the amount you give, and lower the strength your Pokemon can express. You've had some fights with people who were holding back despite seeming like they were going all out, right?” This got nods, both Moon and Hau having experienced that with Kahuna Hala and Kahuna Olivia. Ryuki nodded back. “Yep, so that's something most people have learned before they ever get around to Mega Evolving, not after. That way when you first Mega Evolve, you can hold back as much as you can so the power doesn't completely overload your Pokemon. You gotta ease into it and grow to get used to it together, you can't just go all out right away. That's just gonna make things go real bad, okay?”

Again nods. Good little students. Ryuki focused on Moon and Shelgon.

“Salamence are pretty headstrong, even among dragons. When they flip out, which they tend to do pretty easily, they start tearing up everything around them. Mega Evolved it gets way worse, they're pretty much going one-hundred percent 'raar I must destroy everything' from second one. This little guy's first Mega Evolution, if you, you especially Moon, don't hold back on that, then he's going to hurt a lot of people, and himself. I don't know if whoever gave you that Mega Stone explained it, but hear me out here: don't do it alone, don't do it in a crowded place, don't do it fighting something that's pushing you, and don't do it at full power. It's a lot but yo, Dragon Tamers gotta teach each other how to handle power, that's how we do it. Make sense?”

Moon nodded. When her Bagon had evolved into Shelgon, Pitaya had sat Moon down with both Rotom-dex and tomes of the Dragon Tamers, describing the Dragon Pokemon Salamence and its known brutal nature. She'd given the same warnings, even offered to take the Salamencite from Moon, and hold onto it until Moon felt ready, but Moon had chosen to keep it for herself. Still, hearing it a second time from Ryuki couldn't help but make her think maybe Pitaya had made a good point.

Moon lifted the Key Stone from her neck and put it into a pocket. No-one present missed the motion. Ryuki grinned.

“But hey, I know you're gonna find your way all the same. So how about we give this little guy a test, and see how he's doing? I've got someone for him to meet anyway.” The Dragon Tamer's words drew a confused look from Moon, Ryuki withdrawing a Pokeball, bright orange and styled with a ‘V’, to unleash a silver and gold draconic Pokemon, bipedal, large scales standing out across its body. It shook and the scales rattled, a clanging noise emerging from them. Rotom-dex, always on standby for a new Pokemon to describe, jumped at the chance.

“Zzt, Hakamo-o, Scaly Pokemon, evolution of Jangmo-o. Dragon and Fighting-type Pokemon, it uses its scales for intimidation, attack, and defense!”

“Yep yep,” Ryuki nodded, the Scaly Pokemon pacing before him, posturing and flexing, eyeing off the similarly-sized Shelgon, whose yellow eyes within its shell narrowed at the Pokemon before it. “When Dragon Tamers visit foreign lands, we go find where we all gather and do a little cultural exchange. I brought a Gible I hatched back in Hoenn with some of the Dragon Tamers there and they gave me a Jangmo-o in return. Been raising him since, travelling Alola, just getting used to the pace of this place. He'll be a big strong Kommo-o by the League next year, just like your buddy there will be a Salamence if you keep it up. Could call them rivals!”

Moon didn't miss the way the two dragon Pokemon were eyeing one another. Rivals indeed.

“So then!” With a clap of his hands, Ryuki bounced back a few steps, “here's a pair of dragons we've been raising for about the same time, why don't we let them get to know one another? Knowing they've got a strong rival getting stronger, that'll encourage them to get stronger too, y'know! That's one of the best ways to help Pokemon grow!”
Hau immediately inscribed Ryuki's words deep in his heart.

For a moment Moon thought, wondering about the fairness in battling someone like Ryuki, who she knew to be ridiculously strong. But Shelgon turned and looked to her with a noise that almost seemed to plead for Moon to let this battle occur. So she nodded and asked for space so she and Shelgon could stand opposite Ryuki and his Hakamo-o.

Let their battle begin.

“Moon,” Pitaya had said, “here is the strategy for facing Ryuki, and every Trainer whose power significantly outmeasures your own. First do not expect victory with this. In the end, a Trainer with power, wisdom, and caution will never fall to such tactics. Once wide enough, the gap between Trainers becomes insurmountable without further training. If you fought Ryuki now, you would lose. First accept that.” She had. Pitaya continued. “Because you are outmatched, Trainers will first think only in terms of power. They will make strategic mistakes, believing their Pokemon can push through the retaliation they might suffer. This is the first step to overcoming them. Those mistakes, those opportunities to attack, you must use them perfectly. Target them in ways that slow and weaken, that prevent those Pokemon from using that same level of power again. Exploit frustration when they fail to overcome you with the power they expected to. Maintain calm and precision. But never even once believe you have won. Not until it is over. This will allow you to beat a single Pokemon of a foolishly arrogant superior power.”

Hakamo-o’s clanging scales rang out loud as its fist crashed into the barrier raised by Shelgon, the Endurance Pokemon's ability to negate blows a core tactic with its slow speed in this shelled form. Ryuki smiled, ordering Hakamo-o to perform a multi-hit attack to bust on through. A display of pure power. Moon looked for the ideal move.

“As you push back against an opponent, they will change their strategy based on their nature,” Pitaya's voice continued to echo in Moon's mind. “The truly arrogant will become infuriated, believing they should face no challenge from you, and apply more and more power still. Your goal then is defense, and evasion, as they push their Pokemon to exhaustion in an attempt to overwhelm your own. No Pokemon is above exhaustion, and a Trainer lacking in caution will risk such to prove themselves. That is the way to beat that type.”

A trio of rapid punches broke through the barriers Shelgon had raised, but weakened by those barriers they did not stun the Pokemon they struck, who breathed a rush of draconic energy over the Hakamo-o in return. It stumbled back, the power effective upon it. Moon kept her focus.

“The fearful,” Pitaya went on, “will become overly cautious. Doubt themselves as you push back against them, and order their Pokemon to keep distance. As their confidence recovers, they will overwhelm you, and so you must use this one moment of self-doubt to push against them and never relent. Be unrelenting. Overwhelm them. They will not regain control and they will lose in turn.”

With a propelled launch of significant power, despite its stubby legs, Shelgon closed the gap formed by Hakamo-o stumbling back, slamming into it at full force, Moon ordering another draconic strike. Ryuki grinned and whistled a tune that evoked the wind whipping through the valley behind them, the magmatic pulse beneath the heart of the rocklands, the cries of Pokemon in the distance and the movement of clouds overhead. The song of Alola.

“To the skilled you will lose.” Pitaya said it plainly. “They will neither be overtaken by arrogance or caution; instead what they will do will be the end. They will acknowledge you. And once that gap, that belief they can beat you regardless of what they do, is gone you will lose. For they will apply tactics borne of experience that out-measures your own, and power from Pokemon yours cannot compare to. When that happens, Moon, do you know what the most important thing to do is?” Moon
didn't. Pitaya told her. “It is to accept it. There will always be another chance in the future. Remember that.” She had said that she would.

Hakamo-o, with an overwhelming rush, punched Shelgon down and punched again and again, a rain of blows that shattered each barrier Moon called for, stunning the Endurance Pokemon over and over. When Ryuki called his Pokemon to step back, to give room once more, Shelgon staggered woozily to its feet. But Moon knew. Ryuki knew. This contest of strength was over.

Ryuki Oda the winner today.

“Of course,” Pitaya had gone on to conclude, “even if this allows you to beat one strong Pokemon, in a battle of numbers there is no way to maintain such an advantage for the length of it. The longer a battle goes, the more Pokemon are involved, the more the stronger Trainer will come to acknowledge you and give it their all. That is simply the gap that can only be crossed with training and experience, not tactics and heart. If you wish to make it to the tournament next year, you must accept you will be standing as one of the least experienced and able of all those there. Use these strategies well, but from the moment you stand on that stage expect nothing. Simply give it your all. That is the best advice I can give you. Then when the next League comes, go further. And the League after that too. I believe you can, so do not be cowed by the strength of those before you. Simply will yourself to reach that level one day. With that belief, you will overcome in time.”

“Honestly,” Ryuki stepped forward, Hakamo-o sitting heavily on the ground, sharp-hooked jaws opening and panting heavily, “that's closer than you'd think. My guy's real tired too now. They're similar power, really. It was down to the wire.”

Moon appreciated Ryuki saying that, but she knew she still had far further to go. He smiled to hear that. Good, that was the attitude he wanted to hear from her. The nature that would push her further and further beyond all challenges. Someone like her... would be a star too. When the time came for them to clash for real, they'd each shine so much the brighter because of it. Sure she was a kid, sure she was barely a few months into her Pokemon journey, but she had a whole life of shining ahead of her. Ryuki would motivate her every step of the way.

He was looking forward to everything she did.

“See Shelgon has this major armour, and is really slow, right?” Now standing before her, Moon returning Shelgon to its Pokeball, Ryuki gave a little more lesson on dragons. “Plus it learned to make barriers for defense, so you think 'oh the strategy is maximum defense!'. But that's not actually true.” Moon looked at Ryuki in surprise. The Dragon Tamer gave her a grin. “There's still a dragon in there, and dragons love nothing more than going all out. You were thinking defend then attack, but actually even with Shelgon it's still attack then defend. Did you see my Hakamo-o slamming its scales together whenever you attacked it?” Moon shook her head, then nodded a moment after. Now that she thought about it, she had. “So that sets its scales rattling, increasing its punch strength, but also disrupts attacks. That's its nature that it uses to fight, but Shelgon wasn't giving into its full nature to fight for itself. That's really what won it for me.”

Moon considered that. Was she directing her Pokemon wrong? Not following its true nature and holding it back? Perhaps. Ryuki smiled at her clear thoughts.

“Okay, well,” with a flick of his wrist, he used his own Pokeball to call Hakamo-o back, “think I'll head off. Trixie enjoyed playing with the local Turtonator, but there're plenty more dragons to see around Alola, and plenty more sets to play. I might head back to Malie and rock a few more houses – you didn't see any of my shows last month, did you?” Moon shook her head. Ryuki looked downcast. “Well,” looking up again with a grin after, he lifted the guitar-case off of his shoulder, “maybe I can put one on here and-“
“Excuse me please!” The loud call of Samson Oak, among the researchers watching over this battle between Trainers, interrupted Ryuki's preparation to rock out. “This is a research area for studying local Pokemon, I’d like to avoid any loud shows that might drive them even further away, thank you!”

“Ah,” with an almost shamed expression Ryuki slung the guitar-case back over his shoulder. Shrugged to Moon. He seemed awkward now. “Well, I'll, head out then. Good seeing you Moon, hey Hau, hey Lillie, look after her okay?” Hau saluted, Lillie taking a moment before nodding, putting the finishing touches on the speech she was preparing to give Moon about jumping off of cliffs even if she had Pokemon with her thank you very much it still scared others! Messing with a Luxury Ball, Ryuki brought his Drampa, Dazzle, out and clambered onto the Pokemon's back.

“No doubt I'll run into you again sooner or later,” the red-clad Dragon Tamer gave a wave, “so keep getting stronger so you can shine on the final stage too. G'bye now!” And just like that the massive Dragon-type Pokemon lifted into the sky, bearing Ryuki along and off into the distance. Towards the next stage he'd stand upon.

Towards the next place awaiting his song.

The third day following the research camp's instantiation felt restless. Moon joined the others observing the eastern coast of Ula'ula, the Turtonator herd having set up across a fresh volcanic field, Alolan Geodude, Diglett, and their evolutions present in the area too – interactions between those Pokemon useful research as well. She watched the ocean, sea Pokemon darting about, even a few people far out surfing atop Pokemon back. But Moon found it hard to focus, thinking about her battle with Ryuki, and the League in just over seven months' time. She'd made promises to never push herself the way she had before, to not drive herself to breaking point, but she also felt determined to try and go a little further all the same. She was enjoying this time with Hau and Lillie, enjoying their enjoyment of this trip, seeing all these Pokemon and simply taking it easy. But she felt restless too.

So when a lunchbreak came and she, along with the others, returned to the main camp, Moon wasn't disappointed at all to discover someone had come to fetch her.

Captain Acerola waved with a smile.

“Alola alola,” repeating a word was originally Mina's thing, but Acerola had co-opted it after spending enough time around the Poni Island Captain. As Moon approached with interest, unsure of who this was – yet to meet Acerola in person – Lillie and Hau raced over to the Captain, both having spent time with her already over the last month to pass. Pleased as could be Acerola greeted them in return, but quickly enough asked them to introduce her properly.

Lillie turned and waved for Moon to approach.

“Moon,” with a smile Lillie took a step back so Moon could stand before the small Captain, “this is Captain Acerola. Captain Acerola, Moon.”

Acerola, Captain of Ula'ula Island's southern side, wore a dress that appeared almost patchwork, various hues of purple from pale lavender to almost black stitched together into shape. Her hair was a deep purple too, hanging in curls around her head. A golden band, something that was neither Z-Ring nor Key Stone holder to Moon's eyes, was clasped around her upper left arm, a Captain's symbol pinning up some of her hair. Acerola smiled with an easy-going expression.
“Hey hey Moon, so good to finally meet you!” Moon ducked her head, expressing the same. She'd heard about Acerola from Lillie and Hau, who both smiled as Acerola turned her grin on them. Then back to Moon. “Okay in that case, how're you feeling, Moon? I heard your fifth Trial went great!”

It had, Moon nodded. The complexity of her feelings at the time were still difficult to dig into, coalescing further and further into one overall block of emotion as time went by. Looking back now, Moon recalled a beautiful and sombre sight she stood against with her Pokemon, and the joining of Poipole to her team. Maybe that was for the best though. Acerola bobbed her head again as Moon focused on her.

How Moon was feeling now though? Honestly, restless. That got the Captain grinning as wide as she could. Well then... well then!

“If that's the case, how do you feel about making the trip to Tapu Village to take my Trial? If you follow the main road you'll be there before sundown, and then I can teach you about the Trial and get you started on it! No rush if you're not ready buuuuuuut you are, aren't you?”

Hau and Lillie both looked at Moon. Moon looked directly at the Captain. And nodded. Acerola clapped with delight. “Then Moon, then Moon,” stepping to the side, giving a bow, Acerola extended her hand, indicating the direction she'd come from. It was Moon's journey to make it to Tapu Village on her own, but Acerola would be there soon after to get her started, “I'll see you there.”

Moon turned back to Hau and Lillie. Each seemed surprised by the speed at which this had happened, at which the Captain had come to collect Moon and Moon had agreed to go. But... each of them saw Moon's determination. She was intent to do this. So each smiled to see her off.

“Make sure to show that Trial who's boss!” Hau clapped Moon on the shoulder, Moon reaching up a hand to push his own back, giving him a smile.

“Moon,” Lillie stepped forward, Moon not stepping back but also not prepared for this sudden closeness. Lillie looked up at her with a concerned expression. “Please don't jump off any more cliffs.” Well, Moon tried to smile, she couldn't promise~ Lillie reached out and wrapped a hand around Moon's wrist, holding onto it. Moon was sure Lillie could feel Moon's rapid pulse without question. Lillie's bright green eyes stared into Moon's brown own. “Please look after yourself.”

Slowly, Moon nodded. Lillie sighed, stepping back and letting Moon go. The absence of touch around her wrist Moon immediately felt, moving her own hand to grasp it. Lillie caught the motion. “I'm sorry, Moon, I just-” no no, Moon shook her head, she'd be better. She didn't want to scare Lillie. Ever. Lillie smiled then. Moon stayed silent. “Then,” raising her head, a big smile to see Moon off, Lillie gave her blessing as well, “do your best!”

And with those words and those moments filling up her head, Moon turned and set upon the path, south-west from the rocklands, to find her way to Ula'ula Island's southern point. To the ruins of Tapu Village, site of rebellion.

And the sixth Trial of the Alola Island Challenge.

Chapter End Notes

As is usual, the ending point of this chapter came into play sooner than my original
notes said, but that's okay, it was the right point to stop. We got a lot of information and insight in this chapter, which makes it both pretty long and pretty dense, but it was important to start setting these things out in the open. Next chapter we're off to Tapu Village and the Trial of Captain Acerola, so please look forward to that, I know I am. Can't wait to write it.

Going to be trying something a little different again, hopefully it works well.

November has begun and with it Nanowrimo. In theory I'd like to manage 50k words of Eldritch over these thirty days, but in practise I don't think I can. I have a three step editing phase (read it silently, read it aloud, have it read back by text to speech) for these chapters to ensure quality as best I can, and after I post chapters I always go into a burnout period before I'm able to write again. I wouldn't be surprised to see 40k over the course of this month, but 50k would be wilding out pretty hard. We'll see though.

Since this chapter's done, as always I'd like to thank you all for reading, for all comments, and all kudos. It all helps Eldritch stand out further, allowing other people to find it too. Please look forward to the next chapter, and the fun times it will bring.

We're going to have lots of fun, you and I.
Despite being the largest of the four islands of Alola, Ula'ula Island far paled to Melemele and Akala in terms of connection between settlements. The road running south from Malie City extended out to smaller places in the foothills, and even towards the eastern coast of the island and small pockets of housing along it, but through the rocklands themselves changed to a dust and rock path soon after passing the location of the Blush Mountain Geothermal Power Plant. The road that went west from Malie City split, its southern fork running up to Mount Hokulani’s peak, its northern branch barricaded and abandoned. That way that once curved around the northern coast, connecting Malie City and Po Town together, had long since been sealed off.

There was no-one left with the desire to travel west, and none welcome to come east.

The road through the rocklands, the path travelled by Samson Oak, his research associates, the convoy of Ride Pokemon, and Lillie and Hau, later followed by Hapu and Moon, continued to curve around the island's east to south as little more than a path hewn through rock. The Haina Oasis, otherwise known as the Tapu Village Refuge Zone, expected nothing from the east nor held the desire to travel there. The southern side of Ula'ula Island was, in so many ways, cut separate from its north.

Mount Lanakila, highest peak of Alola, cast its shadow over the island's south as the day continued on. As the afternoon began to take shape and the Island Challenger Moon, continuing to walk the path of the rocklands, journeying to the site of her sixth Trial, crested a hill and looked out over the land below.

And then the sky went dark.

Once on Melemele Island, leaving Professor Kukui's lab on the third day of her Pokemon journey. Once on Akala Island, another lab left, this time that of Professor Burnet. Once when training with the Dragon Tamers of Ula'ula Island, the reports collected by the Dimensional Research Lab and Aether Foundation claiming the events to be caused by appearances of the Ultra Wormhole.

And once again now, all light gone in a single moment as Moon stared into a sky that was pitch black yet she could swear roiling with movement. The scream, so loud Moon winced, she recognised. Poipole, Ultra Beast, Pokemon from another world who remained by her side at all times now, was clutching onto Moon, burying its face under her arm. It was terrified. And now she understood.

The second time darkness had fallen there had been a scream. The same scream. That had been Poipole then. Now Moon knew: it had found her then that day, and been chased away by the darkness before it could reach her. She raised a hand, touching the Pokemon she couldn’t see, and told it she was there. It quietened, its shaking slowing. Whatever was scaring Poipole, Moon wouldn't let it have them. Something scary caused by the Ultra Wormhole... Moon recalled another Ultra Beast's scream. UB-01 Symbiont, at the Aether Paradise, who'd emerged from an Ultra Wormhole and then been grasped and dragged back into it by a massive clawed hand of black. It had screamed too.

Another memory, two nights ago, Lillie speaking of the Legendary Pokemon of Alola, creatures who'd emerged from a hole of light. An Ultra Wormhole? Perhaps. Two days further back and
Moon had been in the Malie Library, reading a book of legends, another donation from the collection of Captain Acerola's father. One story had stuck with her. About Alola's Legendary Pokemon, and a light-devouring beast they'd sealed away. It was said they'd chased it through a hole in the sky, the story one of the last written of the emissaries. Perhaps it had been through an Ultra Wormhole that creature that ate light had been sent.

And perhaps it was still hungry.

No gaze of discordant colour in the darkness met Moon's own, no answers to her challenge to the dark. Only moments of silence passing before light returned, the Ultra Wormhole's manifestation completed once more. Captain Sophocles had said the Ultra Wormhole created Totem Pokemon. Released a great volume of Z-Aura, bathing the land below and allowing Pokemon to transform. But that wasn't happening any more. The Ultra Wormholes that appeared had no power to give. Was the reason because another was taking it?

Ancient legends always spoke in terms abstract, the true meaning often hidden from obvious translation. If the heavens were the Ultra Wormhole, if the child of the emissaries were Nebby, then the light the emissaries brought to Alola, and the light the beast of darkness ate... perhaps...

Perhaps.

With the light of day returned Poipole slowly released its grip from Moon, its tiny hands scrunching at the fabric of the sleeveless pale yellow shirt she wore. The Dragon Tamers all had their own grand ideas of fashion, many benefited by the fact their outfits were mostly predetermined. Still, everyone had agreed Moon needed to take on Dragon Tamer yellow and Ula'ula red if she were changing her look. She didn't mind this, truthfully. It was different but... not unwelcome. And dressed like this, she remembered the time on Mount Hokulani. Of the vibrant and showboatish Dragon Tamers always competing to give her challenge and advice, friendship and guidance. Not one of them had ever shown caution of her, not the way so many did now. All they really wanted was to help out. That was the way of Alola, Pitaya had reminded Moon when she'd commented on it to the Guildmaster.

The way of Alola... Moon reached out a hand to Poipole and invited the Ultra Beast to return to her arms. It was still concerned, she could tell that with ease. With a happy sound it accepted her grasp and chirped happily as she held it against her chest. There. That was better.

From the hilltop overlooking the Haina Oasis, Moon descended to the gathering below.

The population of the Tapu Village Refuge Zone consisted of a rather even split of the apologetic and the unabashedly unapologetic. Caravans were scattered about the area, the only building a small motel for travellers visiting the Haina Desert and surrounding lands; in the end only a few dozen people residing here full time. Many of those wished to stay close to the Haina Desert, and the Ruins of Abundance within, to continue to give their thanks and praise to Tapu Bulu, Guardian Deity of Ula'ula. Many more wished to spite it. Refuse its demands to leave this land behind. This mixture, of those in prayer and protest, proved difficult to separate. So the Tapu chose to ignore them instead.

For being the closest to Tapu Bulu of any upon Ula'ula Island, those who lived here would never be heard.

The Tapu Village Refuge Zone was the staging ground for Island Challengers preparing to face their sixth Trial. Captain Acerola, tasked with care over the southern side of Ula'ula Island, spent much time on either side of Tapu Village, and was a key reason the winding road that stretched through the ruins could be safely travelled at all hours. But only that one road was the safe path. Beside it, at the far end of the Haina Oasis, a pair of Trial Gates stood. To walk through them was to declare yourselves to the only occupants Tapu Village had left. Moon, having descended from the hill with
her eyes locked on the brightly coloured wooden posts across the area, wondered just what the sixth Trial might be.

She'd just have to wait for Captain Acerola to get here, she supposed.

The sound of the door to one of the rooms of the nearby motel opening drew her eyes, the one who'd just stepped out staring back at her, his own widening. Was this just going to keep happening every time he came out of somewhere he was staying? With a sigh Gladion gestured for Moon to join him for a talk. Might as well tell her too.

She was the one best able to keep Lillie safe, after all.

“I feel like I can't go anywhere these days without one of you jumping out at me.” Gladion's dismissive tone did nothing to dislodge the slight smirk on Moon's face at the sight of him. Hau and Lillie had told her about Gladion approaching them in Malie City. Maybe he complained far more about seeing them than he felt. Gladion chose not to acknowledge those words.

“Did they tell you then?” To his question she nodded: she knew Team Skull were searching for Cosmog. Lillie was with a group of researchers in the rocklands right now. Gladion glanced around as Moon said this, noting some members of Team Skull lazing about the place. Mostly they just hung out here to slack off while also flipping the metaphorical bird to Tapu Bulu. Still... “Here, move out of view.” Stepping to the side, Gladion indicated for Moon to move into the open doorway to his room, so that the way he was standing blocked sight of her. Better they weren't seen conversing. Poipole floated past the two into the room proper to satisfy its own curiosity, Moon watching it fly about. No sign of Type-Null inside. Gladion must have the Pokemon on him. Moon looked back to the teen boy.

“Make sure to keep her safe.” The intensity with which Gladion said this once she was looking at him stuck with Moon. He meant it so strongly. He knew her. He didn't reply to Moon's accusation. Moon's stare continued.

He looked like Lillie.

“That doesn't mean anything,” Gladion refused to meet Moon's eyes, his words unable to stop her own from widening. Wait, really? A frown creased his face as Moon asked again. Gladion shook his head. “Leave it,” he said it with strength that surprised Moon, though it was a far lesser surprise than what she felt acknowledging the relationship between him and Lillie she was sure she now knew.

“Listen,” Gladion pushed a hand against the wall of the motel, his figure taller than Moon's own, “it's not important. What matters right now is that you keep her and Cosmog safe. I'll keep feeding Team Skull false information as long as I can, but I can already tell their trust in me is running out. And they have other people out looking too. Even if they're not that bright.”

Turning his head, Gladion cast a scathing eye over the few Team Skull Grunts he could see. One of them caught him looking and made a less than metaphorical gesture. Gladion looked back to Moon. She was still staring at him in curiosity. His frown failed to scare her off.

“I'm fine.” His reply to her question came curt, but when Moon refused to let that be all Gladion sighed and relented. “Like I said before: Type: Null is designed to pull as much through its Bond as possible. Because I have Eevee now, there's less for it to take when it fights. We've all gotten stronger since the last time you saw us though. I can't just leave looking after Lillie in your hands alone.”

Hau was with Lillie too. Moon's response earned a slight pause from Gladion, enough for Moon to more strongly repeat herself. Hau was with Lillie too. Gladion looked away.
“He’s like that with everyone then,” the blonde-haired teen said it in a wistful tone, less biting than much of what he spoke in. “Ever since Wahiola I’ve been... less angry. It's almost annoying how effective he is at helping.” Moon's wide smile didn't ease Gladion's lack of comfort in admitting that. He cast his eyes around the circle of caravans that made up the Tapu Village Refuge Zone once more.

Then jolted to life and swung an arm around to Moon's side.

“Get in!”

Shoving Moon further into the motel room he had exited, Gladion pulled the door shut, turning away from it just as footfalls approached. As a figure crossed the area to stand before him, hands on her hips, a disapproving gaze to her yellow eyes. The Team Skull Admin Plumeria clicked her tongue.

“I thought you said that dog of yours didn't tire you out anymore.” The husky voice of Plumeria reached through the door of Gladion's motel room enough for Moon to immediately stiffen up, pressing her ear against it so she could hear everything while remaining fully aware the dangerous woman was so nearby. Poipole, still in the room, sensed its Trainer's stress and went silent too. Without any sign of concern, any revelation he was hiding a thing, Gladion answered back smoothly. An impressive feat indeed.

“I still need to sleep.” His reply earned a scoff from Plumeria, but she didn't say anything else as he continued. “I've been checking out this area, and now that I know it's clear, I'm going to head around the eastern coast.”

“Really now?” Plumeria tapped her foot, staring at the enforcer Guzma had picked up. She didn't trust Gladion an inch and frankly the most respectable thing about him was that he obviously didn't trust her either. He wasn't Team Skull no matter what he said or did. And she knew he knew that. “So you think you'll find Cosmog out that way?”

“No it's in the mountains, like I said,” Gladion lied with ease. “But there's no good entrances into the mountain ranges from here, so I'm going to go in from Mount Hokulani.”

“Uh-huh,” Plumeria sounded skeptical. “And you're going around the coast to get there far slower than through the rocklands because...?”

Gladion shrugged. “I don't like the rocklands. Too dry.”

A bark of laughter from the lightly-tanned woman of pink and yellow hair, one of each of the two long tails of hair extending from either side of her head the differing colour. Gladion, with clear nerves of steel, didn't flinch as she shook her head. “Hmph, useless. I don't know why Guzma lets you ride with us, you can't pull your weight even a little.”

“I'm stronger than the rest of Team Skull combined,” Gladion shot back. A cold gaze stared him down for saying that.

“I don't recall you helping in Malie.”

“You picked a fight with Kahili Hano and expected it to work out?” Gladion's lazy reply drew a frustrated huff from Plumeria. She continued to stare him down.

“You might be more useful than a lot of those numskulls but you're not nearly as cute, you little kid.” Plumeria's tone was growing more and more annoyed. “You know what being useful makes you? A good tool. That's it. And if you can't even be useful then you can go in the trash. They've got a recycling plant up at Malie, go visit it.”
Gladion smirked. “I'll see if I can find you a new attitude there.” Behind the door of his motel room Moon clamped a hand over her mouth to hold back the laugh she nearly gave. Plumeria just stared at Gladion. Then turned and left without a word more. He watched her go until she was upon the path of Tapu Village, making her way back to Ula'ula's western side. Then, and only then, did Gladion breathe out and step away from the door. Moon, still leaning against it, jumped back as it clicked and opened inwards.

Gladion gestured her out.

“Team Skull are common around here,” he warned her, Moon thanking him for keeping her out of Plumeria's sight, Poipole once again holding onto her back. Even with the strength Moon had gained compared to the person she was before, her Pokémon stronger than ever, Plumeria she still didn't want to fight. That woman just felt way too dangerous. If Moon could avoid the Team Skull Admin, she would. That was her decision.

“They hang around the Refuge Zone to slack off,” Gladion continued, “pop up in Mahihinu to cause trouble, and if you go north from there their home-base, Po Town, is packed full of them. Once you're done with your Trial I'd take Lillie and get off this island, if you can.” Moon couldn't promise that. It depended on what Hau and Lillie wanted to do as well. Not to mention Kahili and Professor Kukui. Gladion shrugged.

“Well if you all keep together it'd take a lot of the stress off of me. Keeping Lillie near Kahili would help a lot. She's strong.”

Moon nodded. Lillie had mentioned her whole family were fans of the legendary golfer and trainer. Compared to Gladion's stoic handling of Plumeria moments before, when Moon said that he actively and visibly flinched. Then gave her a displeased look. Moon smiled serenely. It didn't improve his mood.

“Listen,” shaking his head, Gladion took a step towards the motel room, giving up on the fresh air he'd been planning on getting before running into Moon, “just promise me you'll keep her and Cosmog safe. If Team Skull get their hands on it, it'll be a bigger disaster than you can imagine, okay?” Moon nodded. Then tilted her head. Really, this would all be a lot easier if Gladion just dropped Team Skull and stayed with them instead.

He flinched again.

“I...” for the first time, the blonde-haired and green-eyed teen, features so similar to Lillie that Moon felt annoyed it had taken her this long to realise, seemed at a loss for words. Eventually he just shook his head. “I'm going to rest.” And closed the motel room door behind him. Moon, staring at it, voiced aloud that she would. She would keep Lillie safe. A noise of acknowledgement came from within. Thus that conversation came to an end.

Moon stepped down from the motel doors and moved further towards the Haina Oasis, deeper into the Tapu Village Refuge Zone. Captain Acerola had stayed behind with the research team, firstly to give Moon time to travel on her own – the journey one of a few wild Pokémon battles Moon had easily overcome – and secondly to talk more with Hau, Lillie, and Samson himself. Moon wouldn't know, but Hapu would soon appear as well to be notified by Acerola that tomorrow would be the day to visit the Ruins of Abundance.

Without a single doubt the Captain believed Moon would overcome her Trial that night.

The oasis at the centre of the Refuge Zone was a pool of clear water, greenery growing thick around it. Moon understood little of Tapu Bulu or its power over plants, the Island Deity able to make all...
manner of flora grow as it wished, and so only acknowledged this sight as beautiful, not as an expression of the Tapu's strength.

She'd see more than enough of that soon enough.

But for now Moon looked out at the oasis and wondered what was next. The Refuge Zone was small, no Pokemon Center in sight. Looking around Moon saw a caravan nearby, an older woman standing just outside of it, her skin tanned and hair white, enjoying a cup of something in the afternoon heat. Moon walked towards the woman, having learned this lesson well. Alola meant to look out for one another. Thus those in need could always reach out. The woman spotted Moon approaching and lowered her cup with a smile. Moon smiled back. Another part of the Island Challenge more important than the Trials was to become a part of Alola. To talk to people. Reach out to them and allow them to reach out to you. Such is Alola.

Moon was so thankful she'd been given the chance to learn that.

“Good afternoon, dearie,” the woman smiled at the young girl who was approaching her, clothed in yellow and perfect Ula'ula red, a shawl of the same colour over her shoulders. A purple Pokemon was floating with her – a fantastic sign meaning this girl was clearly a Trainer loved by this partner who travelled with her without concern – drawing the woman to smile even more. Here was a fine young girl, with an Island Challenge Amulet to boot! “Are you here for your Trial?” Moon's nod drew an impressed noise from the woman, who only now realised how young this girl looked. She seemed like she should barely have begun her Island Challenge! “You must be doing very well.” Another nod from Moon. A thoughtful sound in response. Then a question. “How may I help you?”

There wasn't a Pokemon Center nearby, was there? Moon's question received a shake of the older woman's head. “I'm afraid not, the nearest is in Mahihinu, on the other side of Tapu Village. But if you're looking for somewhere to rest for a moment, I'd be happy to offer you a place to sit and a meal to eat! My granddaughter had just stopped by, but she didn't end up staying for dinner. She's always so headstrong and busy, just like her mother! Well, such is life, I suppose.”

Moon had spoken to her mother during her time with the Dragon Tamers. But since returning to Malie City things had been such a whirlwind of activity she hadn't contacted home since then. Thinking of her mother, reminded of her by the caring maternal nature of this older woman, Moon felt as though she wanted to talk to her again. The older woman, catching a contemplative look on the young girl's face, asked and Moon answered honestly.

A wide grin crossed the face of the woman at the girl's words.

“Well that's lovely, you must be a wonderful daughter. Pokemon journeys are about finding your own way, but remembering to send word back home to those that care about you is important too! I'm afraid I don't have a good way for you to contact her, but you'll be able to find that in Mahihinu when you get there. Tell her I sent my best wishes, and that I also made sure you had a good meal too! If you'll take a seat, I'll prepare something for you and your partner there.” Delighted to have a visitor in her humble caravan home to feed, the older woman set to cooking a meal. Moon and Poipole both settled at a small table, and each relaxed in an atmosphere that could only be a home well cared for.

Moon began to think it might be time she visited her own.

“Captain Acerola visits us often here,” the woman spoke as she cooked, Moon contentedly listening in. “And often she has an Island Challenger with her. Though Tapu Village is a husk of its former self, knowing it can still be part of a Pokemon journey, a site of a Trial, means a lot. The spirit hasn't truly left that place. That's important to a lot of the people who used to live there, you know?”
Moon didn’t. What was wrong with Tapu Village? The woman paused and looked back.

“Where are you from, dearie? Kanto? And you recently moved to Alola? How wonderful, I hope this land and its people are treating you well.” They were, Moon confirmed. She cared for them all a lot. But what about Tapu Village? The woman nodded. “Well you might not have realised it, but Tapu Village is right nearby. Did you see the Trial Gates?” Moon paused. There was just a mass of plantlife beyond the gates. Trees and bushes and the like. The woman nodded again.

“Yes, that is Tapu Village. Or its remains, I should say.” This shocked Moon. She remained silent as the woman continued. “Some, oh, ten years ago now Tapu Village was one of the most important places to the Tapu, built as it was in the shadow of Mount Lanakila. A company, wanting to create business in Alola, sought to build a shopping centre as Tapu Village expanded, a Thrifty Megamart if you can believe it.” Moon had seen such a shop in Akala’s Royal Avenue. It had looked busy. The woman sighed. “Too busy for our Guardian Deities – Tapu Bulu was very upset at having such a thing built in a sacred site. It lashed out and destroyed the building, its incredible power overgrowing all of Tapu Village too. That's why we live here, outside of the village's remains, and why so many more people moved to Mahihinu to the west. Such is the cost of insulting our Guardians so deeply.”

Moon frowned. She didn't like that. Not at all. The woman, cooking food over a small stove, turned back to her with a tired smile.

“Now now, it can't be helped. The Tapu care for and protect all of Alola, it's only right that we care for their sacred sites in turn. Everything that happened back then... was just everyone getting a little bit ahead of themselves. But we all learn from making mistakes, so as not to repeat them again. That is the way things are.”

With food served, Moon and Poipole both ate. The taste of pure home cooking, made with familial love honed over years and generations, struck Moon deeply. She wiped at her eyes but failed to keep the tears back.

“There you go,” handing her a tissue, the old woman smiled to see Moon's reaction. To be brought to tears over home cooking, this girl... “I think it will be good if you visit your mother again soon.” Moon nodded. It would.

And as the meal ran down, the old woman happy to ask Moon all about her journey around Alola, a voice called into the caravan as a small figure stuck her purple-haired head within. “Hey auntie, have you seen- oh there you are Moon! Glad you could make it!”

Captain Acerola smiled to see Moon, who stood and nodded in response, explaining the woman here had been looking after her until Acerola arrived. Acerola raised a hand, holding out two fingers for a victorious 'V'. The woman waved at her.

“Okay then, Acerola dearie, make sure young Moon here has a good Trial.”

“I will!” Acerola continued to smile, waiting as Moon made her way across the caravan to follow the Captain. “I'll stop by after, so make me some food too!”

“Yes yes,” with a smile the woman responded, “do your best, Moon!” Moon waved back and thanked her, from the bottom of her heart. The woman smiled at that too. What a good young girl. Honestly.

She wasn't nearly as scary as people had said.

“Alright.” Once outside Acerola began to walk, the Trial Gates outside the overgrown Tapu Village
only a few minutes away. “Time for my Trial, Moon! The remains of Tapu Village lie ahead, the destroyed Thrifty Megamart smack-dab in the middle! The entire place is su~uper haunted so this Trial's about the Ghost-type of Pokemon, are you ready for that?”

Moon nodded. She was. Acerola grinned.

“So the Trial's pretty simple – you need to go in there and then get the attention of the Totem! How you do that is up to you: it's somewhere in Tapu Village, you just have to find and draw it out! Sound good?”

Another nod from Moon. She understood. Then she stopped and asked. Was Acerola okay with what Tapu Village was? The Captain frowned.

“Tapu Village was my family village for generations,” Acerola spoke in a matter-of-fact tone. “My family goes back to the old royalty of Alola, we have a real ancient history.” Moon didn't know much of anything about the old royalty. Acerola shrugged when she said that. “But the royalty stopped mattering generations before I was born, so it's not really something to worry about, right?” The slow nod of Moon's head showed she understood, but not that she got it. Acerola just gave a smile. “It's the same for Tapu Village! Sure I was a couple of years old when everything happened, but not like, really old enough for it to matter. So I don't worry! No problems!” The Captain held up another 'V'. Moon frowned. She still didn't like it. Acerola turned Moon around by the shoulders and began pushing her forward, Poipole floating overhead. “No worries, no worries,” the Captain chirped in Moon's ear, “Let's focus on your Trial! Once you go through those Trial Gates it's a signal to the Ghost Pokemon living in Tapu Village that they're allowed to go all out! The normal path they won't mess with anyone on, but you they're all going to want to know about! Are you ready?”

Moon was standing now before the Trial Gates. This close she could finally tell, the mass of greenery before her wasn't just grown from the ground. It was breaking through stone buildings, twisting out of shattered windows, covering paths, and subsuming an entire broken village. This was Tapu Village, a place humans had once lived, now overgrown and filled with ghosts. So this was the site of Alola's sixth Trial. Poipole, floating next to Moon, made a noise of the same query. Moon nodded.

She was ready.

And through the gates she strode.

A droplet of water fell from an overhead pipe, running down the twisted and coiling vines that had split its metal open, collecting more beaded drops one by one as it grew larger and larger before gravity pulled it downwards and it fell further still. A broad fern leaf sagged under the heavy drop's impact, the water shattering into a splash in all directions. Moon raised a hand and touched her cheek, now wet, as she continued past the ruined buildings of Tapu Village, onwards into the dark.

She'd seen Ghost Pokemon in the Hau'oli Cemetery. Fought with them upon Memorial Hill. And formed Bonds with some as well. Decidueye, final evolution of Rowlet, her longest and most beloved partner, was part Ghost-type itself. Moon knew the Pokemon held fascination with people, a desire to earn their acknowledgement, and an attitude that drove them to perform obsessive actions to do so. Many Ghost Pokemon in less populated areas, where they couldn't interact with people regularly, were known to be quite dangerous. Stories abounded warning young children to avoid silent places the Ghost-type lurked.
Even knowing Tapu Village was a Trial Site, under the care of Captain Acerola, still walking through it Moon felt a discomfort. Poipole, floating always with her, maybe felt the same for its unusual silence.

It was so quiet.

Row by row of ruined houses, setting sun casting long shadows between them, old stone and thick vegetation muffling the slight wind finding its way down empty pathways. As soon as Moon passed the threshold of the Trial Gates things were different, the ground thick with grass, each blade swaying back and forth as she pushed through. From the base of Mount Lanakila where a path to its peak was carved, all the way down to the black-sanded shores of Ula'ula Island's most southern point Tapu Village stretched, consumed. Vines wormed their way through what was once solid stone, trees puncturing floor after floor of buildings, their wide canopies keeping the sun's light from ever truly blessing this land again. Alola's summer was in full force, heat and humidity almost omnipresent. The rocklands, and Haina Oasis, had been bone dry, but as soon as Moon entered Tapu Village things were different. There was moisture in the air. That and chill.

She shivered.

It was so stark, the difference. Before it had been red stone, thin grass, dry air and the rare tree. A dusty path that stretched to the town, promising safe travel. The land not judged by the touch of Tapu Bulu.

But then the rest was this way. Greenery so thick it was hard to move, Moon pushing through a dense mass of ferns, the plants closing the way behind her unwilling to allow retreat, silent stone relics overgrown by plantlife of all kinds towering above her. Moon had seen the power of Tapu Koko, defeating her with ease during her first Trial. She'd seen the power of Tapu Lele, burying Plumeria's Pokemon without trouble. But now she realised she'd seen only a fraction of what they could truly do. Small little actions of brushing aside a foe. This, this was a Tapu's real power. Tapu Bulu, Guardian Deity of Ula'ula Island, had destroyed this place.

The shiver didn't stop as Moon's skin pricked in the cool air of night as the moon rose over Alola once more. As the ghosts of Tapu Village began to rise again.

Poipole shifted, moving across a road between buildings, thick roots emerging from the soft earth and then diving below again like a Gyarados twisting through the ocean's waves. A pile of loose rocks, set atop a collapsed section of wall, shook slightly as the floating purple Pokemon stared at them. Moon, looking from where she was, trying to find anything within the empty village, turned in time to see the Ultra Beast float in through a hole in the side of the building it had approached. She frowned and moved to follow after. The shadows of night stretched further as clouds crossed over the moon.

It had been a home once, the broken wall leading into what might have been a place people ate. A collapsed table, legs rotted away, mushrooms growing from its surface, gently gave as Moon stepped upon it, the grass inside the building so thick she couldn't see the ground. She called out to Poipole, hearing a returning sound from beyond a staircase up ahead. Shaking her head Moon stepped towards it, calling for the Pokemon to return to her.

Her foot sunk through the grass up to her knee.

The sudden change unbalanced her, Moon tripping and falling, disappearing into the thick grass that had eaten the building's once wooden floor. Its twisting growth beneath the table had held it up against Moon's weight, but without that surface could not support her. Moon, breathing heavily, clutched at the cold dirt beneath her, grass pushing against her face making it impossible to see. She
struggled to sit up, the plants around her seeming to hold on but proving unable to stop her. Her head rising above the surface, Poipole's bright blue eyes stared back into Moon's brown own. She huffed and reached up a hand, placing it on the Pokemon and pushing down against it to help her back to her feet. Kindly, Poipole did not complain.

As soon as Moon was standing, patting down her clothing for any dirt or grass stuck to her, Poipole shoved its prize into her face, a ragged stuffed animal, barely resembling the Pikachu it had once been. Now the toy's fur was faded grey, body missing half its shape, head deflated, covering soft with wet mould and rot. Moon pushed it away, telling the Pokemon to put it down. Poipole made a complaining noise back at Moon, unwilling to drop the prize it had found upstairs. Moon, losing the will to argue, pushed through the thick grassy floor of the building towards the stairs Poipole had floated above. The bottom half of them were missing, instead a huge mass of fern leaves sticking out of it. Moon shook her head and turned back to Poipole, who was spiralling about in the air with the rotten stuffed Pikachu held tight to it. She shook her head again.

Nothing about this place made her feel alright.

It was colder outside again, the wind now sounding out between the buildings of Tapu Village, Moon clutching the dragon shawl tighter around her. She'd left her bag with Captain Acerola, heading into the Trial with just her Pokemon and self. No jacket. She regretted that now. Considered turning and heading back to the Captain to get it. Then stopped. Which... way had she come from? Moon turned around, the features of the village unrecognisable. Heavy tree canopies overhead blocked what little light made their way through the clouded sky, darkness thickening minute by minute as the night went on. The ground, lush with plantlife, showed none of her footfalls, the grass already springing back from her prior steps. Moon turned and called for Poipole, asking the Pokemon to fly up and tell her the way.

No answer.

...

Poipole?

Moon called again. And again. And received no answer but for the cool wind setting goosebumps across her skin. She returned to the house, its floor thick with deep grass, and called one more time. But when she looked down it was light stone flooring, smooth, only dust across its surface. This wasn't where she'd just been. She stepped back. And a cool touch settled upon her cheek.

Moon slapped at it, hand striking her own face hard, pressing the cool leaf that had been caught in the wind and blown into her against her now stinging skin. She breathed in and out, heartbeat pounding, thinking desperately about what she should do next.

She... didn't know what to do.

The wind was growing louder, Moon's own breath now visible before her. It shouldn't be this cold, not at this time. But it was. She shivered, trying to think of what to do. She had the rest of her Pokemon with her but... she didn't know how Poipole had disappeared. Would they disappear too if she let them out? The loudness of the wind made it too hard to think, Moon moving to a building, the thick roots of a tree growing through it having broken open a way in. It was colder inside still, but the wind wasn't able to reach her. She clutched the shawl tighter, looking around the room for anything she could use. But the plantlife was too thick to start any fire safely, she couldn't ask Shelgon to do that. Where was the best place to go? Acerola had said the Thrifty Megamart was in the village's centre, could Moon find something there? Some way to call for help? Or Poipole? She didn't know.
But she had to try.

Muted by thick clouds only the faintest hint of light made its way through the canopy above, barely revealing the hole torn through the building's rooftop by the tree growing up from its floor. Only when she stood beneath that tree, hand upon its trunk and staring upwards, did Moon see it. Ah, that would help.

She hoped.

Decidueye in a flash of red manifested, quickly settling behind Moon, thick feathered wings wrapping around her, bringing her warmth. She sighed into her Pokemon's touch, wishing she could stay like this. But she couldn't, not while Poipole was out there. So instead she asked her partner to take hold of her and jump, to bring them both up the tree piercing the rooftop so they might see out over the plant-consumed town. A soft sound of acknowledgement came from the Arrow Quill Pokemon as its wings tightened around Moon, holding her to it, and its legs tensed before it leaped, jump by jump ascending the tree leading above. The heavy beating of wings and cries of Zubat and Golbat overhead, taking off from the rooftop as Moon and Decidueye appeared upon it, reminded Moon it was said this town was filled with Ghost Pokemon. She hadn't seen one yet though.

Had she?

Moon couldn't see where to go from here either. It was too dark, and the surroundings too much the same, thick plantlife over collapsed buildings. She asked Decidueye for guidance, the Pokemon looking out over the distance with far better vision in the dark, answering Moon's request for the direction to what looked like the largest building. If anything was going to be the Thrifty Megamart...

Should she even be going there? She needed to find Poipole. She didn't know where it was though. Maybe the Totem would help her, if she bested it? She didn't know where the Totem was either. Just that she had to draw it out. Would going to the Megamart help? She didn't know at all.

But all she could do was try.

Holding Moon again Decidueye leapt, landing neatly on the ground below, no fall a threat to her or her trainer should they be ready. Privately Moon decided not to mention any of this to Lillie, feeling bad for the way she had scared her before. Thinking of Lillie helped, calming Moon against the tension of this night, but that moment soon broke as with beating wings and loud cries the flock of Zubat and Golbat returned. Now that they'd circled the area they saw a target in Decidueye, something to fight. Moon frowned. She didn't want to fight these, it would take too much time and energy, especially if she had to face the Totem too. So Decidueye she returned to her Pokeball, and from the mass of Bat Pokemon Moon began to edge away, hoping they would leave her be.

They didn't.

Through the thick greenery and howling winds of Tapu Village Moon ran, the flying Pokemon behind her travelling above to give chase, losing sight one after the other as Moon pushed through broken buildings, ways opened by the destructive plant growth Tapu Bulu had unleashed. In time she lost them, the flock spreading out over the village for their hunt, Moon crouching behind the rotten and collapsed frame of a sofa inside of an overgrown building, walls so thick with moss you couldn't see even a hint of stone. She stayed like that, huddled with knees tight against her chest, arms wrapping shawl tight around her, as the minutes went by. She still didn't know what to do. She was more lost than ever now. She didn't know where the Megamart was. Or the exit. Or the Totem. Or Poipole. She was just lost. Lost and alone. Bitterly, she fought tears that formed all on their own.

She just wanted to-
“Hey Moon, what's going on?” Hau asked, sticking his head in through an open window of the building.

Moon jumped, and yelled, the loud voice of her best friend completely breaking through the tension of the moment. Hau, leaning halfway through the window, gave her a smile. She stared at him, shocked. He tilted his head. “You okay?”

She shook her head. Then shook it again. What was Hau doing here? He looked surprised by her question. “I came to find you!” He smiled brightly, the world seeming to lighten as he did so. “Come on, quit hiding behind that sofa and let's go! Lillie's waiting for you!”

Lillie is here? Moon placed a hand on the sofa, its rich coffee-brown fabric pleasant to the touch, its sturdy form barely budging as she pushed her weight against it to help her stand. Hau pulled back out from the window, its glass and wood frame opened inwards. “Everyone's here!” He called from outside, “we've been waiting for you!” Moon, stepping around the sofa, over the soft carpet and smooth wooden floors of the home, shook her head. What about Poipole though? She'd lost Poipole!

“They're here too!” Hau was waiting for Moon to step outside, into the sun-dappled streets of Tapu Village's mid-afternoon, neatly paved roads running between sturdily-built homes. He smiled at her. “Seriously, what were you doing in there?” Moon looked around in confusion. She... this wasn't right... was it? Hau's hand took her by the wrist and pulled.

“Let's go!”

The light of Alola cast warmth over Tapu Village, rock homes built in the shadow of Mount Lanakila pleased by its touch. Voices of people living throughout it called to one another, greetings all pleased to be out and about on so fine a day. The movement of people, Moon hearing their voices and footsteps, never seeing their faces, continued into the centre of the village, an open square, a party in full swing. Moon stared at it.

What... was...

Laughing and running a young girl crashed into her, Moon stumbling from the impact, the girl spinning away before coming to a stop. She looked up, a child maybe four years of age, head a thick mess of mussed purple hair, smiling wide all the same. “Sorry!” She bowed her head, Moon staring, before answering that it was okay. Hearing that the girl raised a hand, a gesture of two fingers raised in a 'V' of victory. Then giggled at the strange look Moon gave her before bounding off into the party too. Moon looked down at her hand, making the same gesture. That was...

“Hey don't take so much food!”

“I left enough for you!”

“The heck you did!”

More loud voices drew Moon's eyes, settling upon a nearby table on the outskirts of the town square, loaded with food. Two boys, late in their teens, were squabbling over party plates, the paler skinned one with white hair making a lunge at the more-tanned one – likely a result of his lack of a shirt – who quickly raised his plate up over his head. A third figure, with the lightest skin of the trio, crop of light brown hair brushed forward, broke out of the crowd to admonish them.

“Would you two stop, the Kahuna's going to speak soon!” Immediately both snapped to attention, first giving a mocking salute, then mocking agreeal.

“Yes sir mister Captain sir,” the white-haired one drawled, Moon’s eyes spotting the symbol of an
Alolan Captain pinned to the third teen's blue shirt. The shirtless one nudged his friend and whispered something that prompted a raucous guffaw. The Captain sighed at them, shaking his head, a slight smile on his face all the same. Moon eyed the three strangely, her thoughts so jumbled she couldn't grasp them, before moving on into the crowd. Maybe the Kahuna would know where Poipole was.

The crowd was encircling a group of people dancing, the participants changing constantly, some entering from the crowd, some returning to it. Moon looked around, seeing people gathered all about. Another girl, similar to her own age, a pony-tail of bright pink hair tied at the back of her head, looked her over. Moon nodded her head. The girl nodded back.

“Ah, have you made a friend?” An older woman standing by the girl observed the reaction. The young girl shook her head.

“No Tutu,” the girl answered her grandmother, “I don't know her.”

“Well you should!” The older woman beamed, “Making friends is important! Your mother would say so too, wouldn't she?” The younger girl sighed, looking around.

“I don't see her.”

“She'll be making her speech soon.”

Moon, head full of thoughts moving too slowly, looked back towards the dancers, seeing Hau amongst them. He caught sight of her and waved her forward, Moon taking only a few steps before more dancers parted and a young girl of white dress, pale skin, and flowing blonde hair emerged. Breathless and face flushed, Lillie reached out to Moon and took hold of her arm.

“Moon, would you dance with me?”

And without resistance Moon allowed herself to be pulled in.

Chapter End Notes

Two or so months ago I thought to myself "Where is the Abandoned Thrifty Megamart, it's not just on some random peninsula, it needs to be a proper part of wherever it's being built. It's probably part of Tapu Village." From that thought, and my understand of Tapu Bulu's powers, I designed the sixth Trial of Alola, a journey through a massively overgrown ruin filled with ghosts. I found this when looking for references: https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-44412576 but even that pales in comparison to what Tapu Bulu did. Tapu Village will never be home to anything but ghosts again. Such is the Deity's decree.

There was a lot to this chapter, but I feel like I handled the pacing on it fairly well. The trial section might have benefited from being slightly longer and even more tense, but in the end I chose to go with the pace I did go at. I've never really read any sort of horror, nor actively enjoyed it, so trying to write creeping tension was basically flying blind. Hopefully I still did a good job and managed to catch you all up in my pace. Nothing would make me happier than knowing I made you jump.

That's it for this chapter, please do your best to await the next. I'm sure you're quite keen
to know what happens, I'm keen to write it. My thanks, as always, to my readers, I'm glad that so many people are continuing to stick with Eldritch. There's much more still to come, you know this. And I know you'll be there for what's next.

Until then... would you care to join the dance?
“What do you even mean 'you can't find her’?”

Captain Acerola had a problem. As Captain of Ula'ula Island's southern side, and manager of the Trial that took place within the ruined Tapu Village – the action of using the location for that sake working well to re-endear it in Tapu Bulu's eyes – she had a responsibility to watch over the Trial-goers taking on its test.

Those who entered the haunted Tapu Village would be lured and teased by the spirits it contained, drawn into illusions they must rise above before the Totem would acknowledge them. Moon, at this time, should be deep inside of whatever crazed and nonsensical world the ghosts here would concoct. Once she overcame that she'd battle the Totem and then complete her Trial. While she was asleep Acerola would watch over her, though the ghosts of Tapu Village had all made the same promise: to not truly do any harm to another. That was what should have happened.

Instead the apologetic Gengar before her, a leader amongst the local ghost packs, was admitting it had no idea where Moon was. Acerola shook her head again. What? Hang on, that was really bad, right? This had never happened before: people lost in the illusions crafted by the ghosts of Tapu Village didn't just disappear. Unless... Moon who was special... Acerola very quickly concluded that she had to find Moon as soon as she possibly could. A flick of her wrist and the large floating Blimp Pokemon Drifblim appeared from a Pokeball, the powerful partner one who had carried Acerola across Alola over the years. Wrapping a hand around one of the ribbons stretching from its body, Acerola gave the signal, the Pokemon blowing out a steady stream of dark gas to ascend, carrying her up and over the ruined Tapu Village to begin her own search.

Please, let nothing have gone wrong.

Moon's head was spinning. Her entire body, in fact, as Lillie before her held onto Moon's hands with her own, the two circling one another, momentum keeping them locked in this moment of dance. Wait, why was she here again? Moon closed her eyes, struggling to regain her thoughts. She'd been... somewhere... but not here. Where was here? Opening her eyes again all Moon saw was a village in party, the warm orange light of an Alolan afternoon, and Lillie's own eyes locked on her own. Lillie smiled widely. Moon couldn't help but smile back.

It was nice.

But something still felt wrong.

“Moon, what is it?”

Through her confusion and hazy thoughts Lillie's voice penetrated, drawing Moon to reassure her she was fine. She was enjoying this. Just... what had she been doing before? Lillie tilted her head, unsure of the question. Moon slowly, reluctantly, let go of Lillie's hands. She needed a break from dancing. Lillie smiled brightly once more.

“Okay then, let's take a rest!”
For as quickly as Moon had released her grip, Lillie had taken her by the hand again, guiding Moon through the crowds filling the centre of Tapu Village. Today was a day of celebration, of thanksgiving to the Tapu, and there was much song and food and dance to be had. Lillie led Moon to the outside of the town square, where a table mostly raided of food was set up. Ah, this had been where those three older boys had been before, Moon noted. They were familiar. But her head felt too foggy to piece together who they reminded her of. Lillie stood happily outside the crowd, her grasp moving from Moon's wrist to hand. The touch only made Moon's thoughts blurrier. She couldn't figure this out. Any of this. Just that something felt off.

But... what could it be?

Another girl at the edge of the crowd caught Moon's attention, the one with the pink ponytail and cool expression, another moment's eye-contact between them. But she looked away without any acknowledgement this time. Moon frowned. She felt familiar too...

But the voice that followed, echoing over the crowd, that was not a voice Moon knew. It quietened those gathered, drawing all to direct their focus to one, and Moon watched as the young girl perked up and then dashed through the mass of people towards it. She moved to take a step forward too. Lillie held her back.

"-to celebrate the meaning of Alola, the spirit of this land and all who live upon it, we are gathered here in the shadow of sacred Lanakila to give thanks-"

The voice, deep and feminine, continued as Moon turned back to look at Lillie, the girl holding on to Moon's hand with both of her own. “Let's stay back,” she spoke to Moon's distaste of crowds, of being surrounded by too many people and voices, “we can listen to the Kahuna from here.”

The Kahuna? Moon turned and looked again, unable to see whomever the woman beyond the crowd might be, giving her speech to those gathered before her. Lillie continued to hold on to Moon. “Moon, we should stay here.”

But... Moon shook her head, that was right, she was looking for Poipole, that was what she was doing here. Had Lillie seen Poipole? Lillie paused. And looked around. “I-” Moon would ask the Kahuna: she would know. She pulled slightly with her hand, Lillie's grip on hers loosening, the blonde-haired girl's arms falling limply to her side. But Moon would be back soon, she reassured her. Once she'd found Poipole, and everything was fine, they could even dance again. A smile from Moon. Lillie's own and wave to see her off.

Then as soon as Moon turned her back the girl flickered out of sight.

“You're crazy,” a voice passed over Moon's head as she pushed her way through the crowd, its tall and white-haired owner staring down a similarly tall tan-skinned figure. “I could mop the floor with you any day of the week.”

“Yeah right!” The other teen shot back. “There's no way you can keep up with my or my Pokemon's awesome moves!”

“You wanna test that?”

“Would you two,” the third teen, the one with the Captain's symbol pinned to his shirt, shoved his way in between them as Moon moved past, “keep it down? Some of us are listening to the Kahuna!”

Immediately the two turned on their Captain friend, their banter continuing behind Moon as she made her way forward. The crowd, those three amongst them, vanished as Moon moved on.
“Do you see?” An older woman turned her head to look at the young girl beside her, the one with the ponytail of pink, “your mother's doing a wonderful job, as always.”

“Yeah,” the girl quietly nodded her head, continuing to stare at the woman standing upon a small raised dais, speaking out across the crowd. Moon followed her gaze. And bore witness to the Kahuna before her.

“-it is today we remind ourselves of what Alola means to us all, and how it is formed by we who live within it linking our lives together. This connection that binds us, becoming the weave that holds us all up, is a sacred treasure of Alola we are all part of. People, Pokemon, even the Tapu themselves, we are all linked in a way that makes each of us a vital part of this world. Thus each of us must remember to practise Alola, and reach out to one another to strengthen this weave of life. As your Kahuna, I-”

She was a fine speaker, Moon noted. The Kahuna before her, a woman of middle age, skin more bronzed by tan than pigment, with golden eyes and a long wreath of deep pink hair that curled down to her waist, similar but slightly darker in colour than that of the ponytailed girl who was watching her so intently, continued to give her speech, the crowd around her drawn into her words. Moon noted the young girl who had bumped into her earlier, the one with the mess of purple hair, clutching at the side of an older man nearby, watching as well. Everyone here was listening. Moon listened too.

“-as our praise to the light of Alola continues, as earnest under moon as it is under sun, take this time to remember how this land and those who live upon it have touched upon you, and look to the future you wish to see: a future we can only create by linking our hands together as one. As people, as Pokemon, as all upon Alola look forward, we will move without fail onwards. As your Kahuna, this promise I make once again to you all: I will be there, with hand outstretched, to each of you seeking your future. Now let the night's festivities commence!”

The crowd cheered with voices caught in echoes and memories, everything beyond the ring of Moon's sight already gone. But the Kahuna was before her, and as the woman turned and stepped down from her dais, returning to a large building across the square, Moon followed after, the sun's light already gone, the moon's all that was left over the village. Plantlife, growing thicker and thicker moment by moment, choked out the buildings once more. Moon entered the Kahuna's hall.

The doors closed behind her.

Inside the hall was open space, wooden floorboards, a throne-like chair of cane at its opposite end draped with red fabric. Before it stood a woman in a flowing dress of black, red flowers patterned across it in a similar design to the darker red flowers of Moon's own skirt. Soft pale moonlight filtered through latticed windows, casting rays across the wide room creating bands of light and shadow upon floor and occupant both. The Kahuna spent a silent moment staring at Moon as she approached.

Then stepped forward herself.

“Welcome Island Challenger, my name is Holei, Kahuna of Ula'ula Island.” Though her tone was one of neutrality alone, there was a depth and strength to Kahuna Holei's voice that immediately stood out to Moon. It reminded her strongly of Hala and Olivia both. Without question then this was a Kahuna. Moon bowed her head and gave her own name. Holei nodded back. “Moon,” the Kahuna stood tall before her, “how might I help you this night?”

She'd lost a Pokemon – Poipole – it was small and purple, liked to float about, was very energetic? Moon was deeply worried, as it had been some time since she'd lost it. She... couldn't quite
remember how long though. Frowning, Moon focused on her own hazy thoughts. How had she lost Poipole again? Holei stood silent for a moment more before nodding and returning to the chair at the rear of the hall, Moon watching as the Kahuna stepped around it, bent down, then stood up again, holding the very Pokemon in question in her arms. As Holei moved back across the hall Moon called out, Poipole immediately looking up and then launching itself at her, slamming into Moon with such great force it threw her backwards onto the ground. She just laughed and told the Pokemon she was happy to see it, clutching it as tightly as it held onto her. Holei watched over the pair as another shape emerged from behind the chair as well.

“To have come this far with that Island Challenge Amulet,” when Holei spoke again Moon quickly moved back to her feet, releasing Poipole to now float beside her, “you seek the sixth Trial?” Oh! Yes! Moon nodded, that was right! She'd somehow forgotten that. She frowned. Why had she forgotten that? Holei talked right over Moon's confusion. “In that case, Moon, are you prepared for your Totem Battle?” The Pokemon lurking behind Holei moved forward.

Moon and Poipole both pointed in shock.

That dilapidated and misshapen Pikachu doll, she knew that! She'd seen it before... somewhere... Moon shook her head. The fuzziness was still there. Why couldn't she remember? Holei waved an arm. “This is the Disguise Pokemon, Mimikyu.” As Moon stared at the Pokemon her eyes widened, now seeing the glowing Z-Aura, indicator of a Totem Pokemon, rising from the small creature's form. Moon had never seen a Totem this small before. But... something about it, about the way the light flickered and flared, screamed strength. This creature of grey cloth standing less than half a metre tall, swirling darkness only barely spilling out from beneath its covering, radiated a sense of power that perhaps matched the Totem Minior Moon had faced before. It chirped in acknowledgement of the challenger before it. Ready for the battle to begin.

Holei waited for Moon's affirmative response. Then smiled and indicated where to stand. At each end of the hall there was a Trainer's circle, the lines of a battlefield stretching across the room. Moon stood at the far end, Holei in place before the Kahuna's seat. Thick vines curled through the lattice windows of the building, wood cracking and being consumed as the overgrowth of the village continued once more. But inside this hall and this moment there was no outside, nowhere else but the field between them. Moon raised her first Pokeball as Holei and the Totem Mimikyu stood before her. The Kahuna called out.

“Are you ready, Moon?”

She was.

“Then begin!”

The first to face the Totem was Decidueye, manifesting before Moon in a flash of red. In silence the Kahuna stared across the field and in silence Moon answered. For Trainers such as them, their words were spoken clearly in the actions of their Pokemon, reflecting the thoughts they shared together. Decidueye dived forwards. The Mimikyu, with a shadowy clawed hand emerging from beneath its cloth cover, raised the small wooden club Moon had mistaken for a Pikachu's tail before. And the battle began.

Glimmering moonlight poured through holes in the ceiling above, torn by the ravages Tapu Village had undergone. Through this light and into the darkness Decidueye vanished, the Arrow Quill Pokemon quick to elude all manner of sight. Moon, in step with her Pokemon, watched as an arrow launched from out of the darkness overhead, and watched as almost effortlessly the Totem swung its club around to smack the arrow aside. So the battle continued, Decidueye moving from shadow to shadow, never firing from the same place twice, only for each shot to be deflected by the Totem's
swinging strikes with ease. This wasn’t working.

Moon gave a silent command.

With a deep flap of her Pokémon’s wings blowing out a black wind Decidueye rocketed forward before pulling short, the wind flowing with it washing out over the Totem as leaves of razor sharpness were carried with it, the mixture of the two attacks a barrage intended to overwhelm. Decidueye, having leaped in silence after the attack over the Totem once more, drew back an arrow as it waited for an opening to fire. Holei nodded. And spoke.

“Mimikyu, dodge.”

With the weight of the command behind it Mimikyu vanished, disappearing into a pool of shadow that quickly melded into the natural darkness of the room. Decidueye, unleashing the arrow down into the storm of black wind and sharpened leaves, hit nothing, the Totem and its glow completely gone from sight. Moon voiced her orders too, directing Decidueye to the largest pool of moonlight, its only source the holes in the ceiling overhead as the growing vines continued to choke out the building’s windows and walls. Arrow by arrow her Pokémon shot, each that impacted with the ground glowing a faint purple-grey, ghostly shackles extending from it as threats should the Totem come too close. Moon pressed the green Decidium-Z into her Z-Ring and together she and her Pokémon continued to wait.

Searching for the opening to change this battle’s pace.

A drawn-out battle with the Totem would only result in Moon’s defeat – it was clear that not only was Mimikyu more powerful than any of her Pokémon, but with Holei’s commands it was more able than her team as well. What Moon needed to do now was leverage her own unique advantage, and strike with a fully powered Z-Move early, weakening the Totem enough for her other Pokémon to be able to compete with it. That was the opening she now looked for.

And that was the opening she saw.

A circle of shadow formed in the light Decidueye stood over, an eclipsed corona of moonlight the only warning before with glowing Z-Aura around it the Totem emerged, dark clawed hands reaching upwards with an ominous glow. But another arrow in the ground, blocked from Holei’s sight by Decidueye’s back to her, was right there as well, and the chains emerging from it took hold of the Totem first. Decidueye leaped upwards, drawing an arrow back. Moon completed her Z-Pose.

Z-Aura cast bright light across the Kahuna’s hall for the first time since Tapu Village’s fall. A nostalgic sight. Moon, Z-Aura around her flickering and seeming to burn at the air, kept her eyes forward, seeing Decidueye in the air above, the Totem reaching out to it but held back by the shackles of the arrow her Pokémon had left, and Holei staring with silent focus from across the field. Then Decidueye released its shot.

Sinister Arrow Raid, one arrow becoming twenty, twenty points of Z-Power raining down upon its opponent below. A direct hit. Moon smiled as with a beat of her wings Decidueye skidded across the shadowed wooden floorboards, coming to a stop just before Moon breathing heavily, panting hoots emerging from the leafy shroud surrounding her head. Moon praised her partner’s hard efforts. The Arrow Quill Pokémon ruffled its feathers with a pleased shiver in return.

Holei shook her head, her next words drowning out Moon’s sense of accomplishment.

“Ineffective.” In the wake of the Z-Move, smoke and dust thrown up by the powerful attack’s detonation, the Totem emerged, still glowing with Z-Aura, the only signs of damage minor tearing
across its cloth body, and its Pikachu-like head now hanging limp. Darkness poured from two holes in the centre of its body, which Moon realised now were eyes. The true shape of the Pokemon so much smaller than its disguise had implied. “Mimikyu are able to resist even the power of a Z-Move while their covering remains intact.”

Moon frowned. She and Decidueye had struck the Totem with a full force Z-Move and the Totem had been unharmed. That was... almost unfair. Raising a Pokeball Moon called Decidueye back, even while the Pokemon made noises about being ready to continue the fight. Moon appreciated her partner's energy, but knew the Z-Move had tired Decidueye despite her sounds of confidence. Please return and rest a while. With that request given, Decidueye bowed her head and accepted Moon's plea.

From a second Pokeball Shelgon emerged to continue the fight.

“A dragon then?” Holei's observation remained so neutral in tone, the Kahuna impossible to faze. She may have asked for Moon's name, but she must have known all about her in advance, Moon decided. She was the Kahuna after all! She would have had to! So Moon just nodded and gave her next command and Shelgon moved on forward.

Their battle continuing.

What Ryuki had told Moon was that Shelgon was the same as any Dragon-type Pokemon: one who wished to attack first and defend second. So even as Mimikyu bore down upon it Moon commanded an attack, a stream of draconic breath washing out over the Totem foe. Through the surging stream of bluish energy the Totem Mimikyu swung a claw and smashed the Endurance Pokemon aside.

“Mimikyu is a Ghost and Fairy-type Pokemon,” Holei spoke as Moon stared in shock, the Totem having ignored yet another of the attacks she had called out. “Because of that it is immune to not only the Normal and Fighting, but also Dragon-type of Pokemon. It is quite difficult to deal with as a result.”

Moon frowned. That would have been useful information to know beforehand. She poked at her bag, calling for Rotom-dex, but received no response. Reaching inside Moon felt the shape of the device the Pokemon inhabited, but even then no answer came. Moon paused, wondering whether it was okay.

But she had to focus on Shelgon as the dragon staggered back to its feet and the Totem raced towards it once more. With slow movements she withdrew her hand from her bag, the red Firium-Z grasped in her closed fist. The battle would continue as it had thus far for as long as she proved unable to land a fully powered strike. Holei had claimed Mimikyu's covering would protect it to a point and, as the Pokemon lashed out with its fake head flopping loosely with every move, Moon was sure that point had come.

Attack then defend, Moon focused on the words, this time Shelgon breathing red flame, its flickering heat warding the Totem back. Though this fire was far weaker than the draconic variety Shelgon could produce, it helped create a moment all the same. Enough to allow the necessary chance. Shelgon launched forward, face crashing into the Totem and jaws within its shell seizing hold. Even while biting the Pokemon could create a barrier, and the flailing attacks of Mimikyu in response to being seized in the mouth of the dragon bounced off of the shield that it raised. Shelgon lifted Mimikyu up, pointing the Totem grasped in its mouth to the sky, and Moon completed her second Z-Pose.

Holei watched in silence.
With a roaring surge an enormous orb of flame blossomed from the mouth of Shelgon, enveloping the Totem within it before launching, punching through the ceiling of the hall. A fiery star trailed into the distance, detonating in a bright explosion that lit the interior of the battlefield with red light and flickering shadows, revealing a tired Shelgon and scorched Totem who had punched its way out of the attack just before it took flight. Holei tilted her head.

“A second Z-Move?” The question surprised Moon, who had grown quick to assume everyone she would ever meet would know of her abilities in advance. And this was the Kahuna! Something was wrong. She stared back in silence as Holei waved a hand, Mimikyu shaking a layer of soot from its body in the same moment as its Z-Aura surged again, the Pokemon still ready to continue. “Very well. Mimikyu.” The Totem responded in an instant to the Kahuna’s command, pouncing on the tired Shelgon and swinging its club around again and again, striking barrier, barrier, then breaking through and slamming the dragon aside. Moon called Shelgon back as it rolled across the field, another of her Pokemon bested. But, as she chose her third Pokeball and unleashed Sylveon to continue, this battle was still only just beginning.

Holei remained even-tempered even now.

Moon’s Sylveon was fast, far quicker than the average of its ilk. With almost dancing movements the Intertwining Pokemon weaved through the Mimikyu’s attacks, evading all manner of swinging clubs and claws from the now injured Totem. For a Pokemon whose attacks were best used from a distance, it remained as close as it could at all times, following Moon’s focused and oft-silent commands. This difference in strategy was what she needed to rely upon, confusing Kahuna Holei for as long as she might. For as long as the Kahuna and Totem remained unsure of Moon’s strategy they would practise caution, and the cautious Totem would never score a true blow.

The Totem Mimikyu had been struck by a Z-Move. The damage of this, even from a Pokemon weaker than it, was great enough for it to begin to slow. Because of this it was now at risk of tiring in prolonged battle. And that was what Moon was doing. Sylveon would, for as long as the Totem did not use its full power to stop it, continue to pressure and evade. Continue to lure weaker attacks that would only wear down the Totem further. Seamlessly Moon had moved into a battle of attrition after landing the Z-Move from her previous Pokemon. A strategy that only someone who went unaffected by using such power could do.

“Strike it down.”

The forceful command of Holei, voiced once more, energised the Totem immediately, its shadowy claws swinging out and grabbing hold of the Sylveon who had dodged it so easily before. Every time the Kahuna commanded out loud the Totem showed far more strength than it did on its own. Moon called for a blast of power at close range, to force the Totem to drop her Pokemon so it might gain distance from the threat, but the Totem had no interest in that. One claw expanding in size to pin the Fairy-type to the floor, the other clenched into a fist as its Z-Aura condensed around it. Then the pummelling began.

Moon called for Sylveon back moments after, Holei instructing the Totem to release the Intertwining Pokemon so its Trainer might retrieve them. The red glow of light that was the Pokemon returning to their Pokeball lit the shadowed room again, Moon using a Net Ball next to bring Milotic to the field. Though the Totem had bested three of her Pokemon thus far, it had both taken a Z-Move and Sylveon had done admirably in exhausting it before Holei had made her command. So directing the Tender Pokemon forward, its cream-scaled body lit pale blue by the moonlight, Moon prepared to push the Totem even further towards defeat.

Holei held her hands forward, the shape of a heart defined within the curve of her fingertips pressed
together. The pale Z-Crystal in the white Z-Ring around her wrist glowed brightly.

It was a strange sight, the Z-Pose the Kahuna took, arms bent outwards, a leg raised so she was supported by one alone. But the Z-Aura that flowed from her into the Totem was no joke, and Moon found the oddity of the Z-Pose quickly washed away. The Mimikyu reared up, its torn cloth body expanding larger and larger, before crashing down over Milotic, pinning the serpentine Pokemon beneath its now huge form. Moon called out to her Pokemon, hastily placing a Waterium-Z into her Z-Ring in order to try and break out of the Z-Move, but even before she could begin the pose she felt her partner fade. Mimikyu's cloth covering shrank down moments later, the small Totem dropping neatly onto the ground. Milotic lay before it unconscious.

Olivia's words, that Z-Moves were openings, floated into the forefront of Moon's mind. She'd been distracted by the Z-Pose, and failed to counter the attack in time. She frowned. That was a mistake on her part.

She needed to be better so it wouldn't happen again.

“The Z-Pose for your Decidueye,” Holei spoke, “despite being for a Z-Move only it can use, is the Z-Pose for the Ghostium-Z as well.” Moon nodded. Kukui had told her that. Holei continued. “The same is true for this Mimikium-Z, its Z-Pose one every Kahuna knows by heart. For the pose also corresponds to other Z-Crystals, the Fairium-Z among them.” Moon nodded again. She hadn't known that, but thinking of the pose and the almost cutesy appearance to it, the Fairy-aligned Z-Move made sense. Every Kahuna knew it though? Moon couldn't imagine Kahuna Hala doing that at all.

Holei laughed loudly when Moon said that, the strongest emotion she had shown so far. Moon grinned back and chose Larvesta next. Having agreed to store one of her six Pokemon caught in Pokeballs when Poipole joined her team, Moon had kept Larvesta, wishing to help the Torch Pokemon grow. It was a long road to its evolution, she had been told that clearly time and time again, but she did not fear attempting it. Though with her four strongest Pokemon now out of the fight, she could not help but feel nervous all the same. She would need to hope that having both taken and performed a Z-Move, as well as being caught in a protracted battle with her Sylveon, the Totem Mimikyu was now close to exhaustion.

By the way it vanished into the shadows and surged forward again under Holei's command, maybe not.

Larvesta could move quickly all the same, gouts of flame emerging from its body propelling it around the field. In comparison to the light flames of Shelgon, and the Z-Move pointed upwards, this fire held far more strength, and was beginning to curl at the wood. Moon frowned. She didn't want to set the building on fire. That cautious hesitation, it cost her, Larvesta responding to her will by weakening its flame and slowing enough for Mimikyu to catch. The Totem burst out of the shadows beneath Larvesta, flipping it through the air and punching through the flames Moon called for before slamming the Pokemon into the ground. Larvesta clicked a pleading sound as the Totem pushed it down with force. Moon admitted its defeat. Mimikyu let Larvesta up so Moon might call it back. The Totem and Kahuna, understanding the risk of exhaustion in battle, were carving through Moon's team with full force. Moon held up a Pokeball, considering. Decidueye had not rested nearly long enough to truly recover, but the Totem was tired too. Moon's strongest partner... she might be able to do it, even with her exhaustion from before. There was no way for Decidueye to use a Z-Move again in such short order, but her regular strength might be enough. Moon spent one more moment trying to decide.

Poipole decided for her first.
In a blur of purple movement the Ultra Beast surged through the air, slamming headfirst into the Totem shocked by the speed its opponent used. Bowled over Mimikyu attempted to right itself as Poipole circled it three times then pointed its horned head downwards, a spray of poison washing out of the three needles atop it and over the Totem. Holei watched as the last Pokemon of Moon surged through the air at rapid speed, a giggling sound coming from it as it raced this way and that, the Totem staggered to its feet, and the purple Pokemon returned to spray more poison still.

It was a thorough conclusion. The Mimikyu, Totem Pokemon exhausted by the battles so far, lacked little to do after the first wave of poison left its remaining energy fading, more and more blasts of the purple liquid only continuing to seal the deal. It was a concluded battle. Holei raised a hand.

“Stop.” When she called for it the opposing Pokemon did not listen, Moon having to yell its name for it to look up from its attack and begin to float back to her. Holei took a step forward, past the now bested Totem. Over to where Moon stood. Moon, having taken hold of Poipole who still seemed ready for battle, looked up at the Kahuna. The Kahuna smiled down at her.

“You have bested the Totem of Tapu Village.” Holding out a hand, Holei presented a crystal of pale purple. Moon reached out and placed her own upon the Kahuna's. Curled her fingers around the Z-Crystal. Holei nodded. “This is the Ghostium-Z. Take it. It is yours now. Though you are able to use the unique Z-Move of Decidueye, learn to wield this Z-Move as well. The two, while similarly aligned, can be used for different applications. Z-Moves are far more than just power at the highest of levels. You will need to learn how to use them as such if you wish to continue on.”

Moon nodded. Using Z-Moves for more than just power... she'd yet to really achieve that. But she would think on it and try to learn. Ways Z-Moves could be even more... she was tired. It was late.

“Moon,” the Kahuna before her spoke again, “has Alola treated you well?”

Moon nodded again. Though she'd only recently come to Alola, she'd still been reached out to. Made friends. Met people that cared about her and she cared for. Far more than Kanto she felt... at home here. With the people around her. The Island Challenge, she truly hoped to become part of Alola through it. Holei smiled at her response. “A good answer.” Then. “Are you aware of its meaning?”

Moon nodded once more. She'd been taught that, by the Captains and Kahuna, by her friends, by Kukui, and Kahili, and Pitaya. Alola meant to reach out to others and lend a hand. To share your troubles and your strength. To be part of the world so you might support and be supported by. Just like the Kahuna's speech. Moon had enjoyed it. Holei nodded again.

“Yes, that is true. Alola is about sharing. Living lives together. Honouring and respecting and caring for one another. It is important, so important, that all who are part of Alola practise this. It is, at its core, equality between all. Do you understand?”

Another nod Moon's silent response. It made sense. That was the feeling she'd received. Holei's hand withdrew, leaving the Ghostium-Z in Moon's alone. The Kahuna stepped back.

“It is why those who do not believe in Alola, who cannot practise its nature, cannot be allowed to lead or hold power over others.” Moon looked up from the purple crystal in her hand, staring at the Kahuna as she stepped back again. The shadows were deepening, the floor atrophying as the final growth of plant-life across Tapu Village returned it to its true state. “Moon,” Holei spoke again, face now unseeable in the darkness, “have you seen them practise the meaning of Alola? Do they treat others as equals? Ask and give in fair measure? Are they right?”

Moon frowned, calling out to the Kahuna now wrapped in shadow. All the world around her was darkness now, nothing left in her vision. What did Holei mean? Was who right? One final message,
carried by the darkness, came to her ears. The last words of Kahuna Holei of Ula'ula.

"Don't be bound to them. Don't be their slaves."

Then nothing but the silence of the grave.

“Moon? Moon?!” The shaking of Moon roused her, slowly, the girl blearily raising an arm to push away whoever was calling to her, trying to think through hazy thoughts. Where... was she? What was going on? Where was... the sound of Poipole, a chattering noise that meant curiosity and concern, helped Moon focus. She looked directly up at the purple Pokemon floating over her as her vision cleared, and reached out to take it and bring it into her arms. It accepted her hug happily. Moon closed her eyes again for a moment and just let the feeling of contact last. It was okay. She was okay. She...

“-was looking through every building but I couldn't find you but then the Totem came by all beat up and led me here and so I think everything worked out but I don't know why I lost you and I'm so sorry that's never happened before are you okay please be okay I'm really really-”

Moon put her hand up, finally focusing on the distressed Captain Acerola standing over her. She was fine. When Acerola took Moon's hand and tugged Moon let herself be pulled up to her feet, her other arm still holding Poipole close. But the feeling in her palm, the dig of a sharp point into it, had Moon uncurl her fingers and look into the prize she had gained. The Ghostium-Z. Acerola spotted it and whooped.

“Oh wow!” Clapping the Captain nodded rapidly, “Did the Totem give you that? I'm meant to hand those over after Trials I wonder where they were keeping it? I bet it really liked you, huh? How was it? Tell me tell me!”

No, Moon shook her head, it hadn't been the Totem, the Kahuna had given her the Z-Crystal. Acerola took a step back, looking confused. Then grinned. “Really!” She said it with hands on her hips, a wide smile to her face, “so the ghosts here finally let Uncle Nanu into their games? I bet they made him seem way meaner than he really is though!” Nanu? Moon shook her head, she didn't know that name. The Kahuna had been a woman. That was right.

Her name was Holei.

Acerola went deathly still.

The light of the moon, full just two nights ago, finally found its way through the cloud covering overhead, illuminating with brightness the outside of Tapu Village, casting pale blue through the empty windows of the small ruined building Moon and Acerola were in. Moon stepped towards the Captain, who had stopped moving completely. Was Acerola alright? She didn't respond. Moon reached out and touched her shoulder.

She jumped.

“Ah!” Her wide eyes, panicked expression, shocked Moon, who quickly stepped back, apologising. Acerola closed the distance between them.

“You saw Kahuna Holei?” She only just stopped herself from grabbing Moon's arms, almost mania in her voice. Moon nodded, continuing to step back, running into a wall of the building. Acerola just let her arms drop to the side. Stared blankly at Moon. What... had the ghosts shown her? Told her?
“I...” the Captain shook her head, again and again. A cool wind blew by them both, drawing a shiver from each. Acerola clenched her eyes shut and pushed those feelings down. For now.

“Let’s head back, I booked us a room at the motel.”

Though concerned still by Acerola's reaction, Moon nodded and followed after, Poipole remaining clutched to her side, Ghostium-Z in the palm of her hand.

Her sixth Trial complete.

The motel room Acerola had chosen had beds for two people, Moon collapsing into hers and falling into sleep so rapidly she didn't even have a moment to feel strange at sharing the space with another, Poipole tucking itself in beside her similarly exhausted. That night Moon would sleep deeply, the events of that day, the Trial she had undergone, an incredibly draining experience. Even without being able to feel the demands of her Pokemon upon her, this had still been more than exhausting. Yes, she would sleep well that night indeed.

Acerola would not.

What... had happened? What had Moon seen? The illusions the ghosts of Tapu Village concocted, challenging Trial-goers with, were all nonsensical and fantastical experiences, meant to confuse and overwhelm until the challengers found the will to break through. And the Totem battle was meant to happen only upon their success.

Instead the Totem had led Acerola to a sleeping Moon, who had named Kahuna Holei upon awakening as the one to give her the Ghostium-Z. That made no sense. That shouldn't be possible, none of that should have been possible! And why had the Ghost Pokemon of Tapu Village lost Moon to begin with? There was too much to this, far far too much. Acerola did not find sleep easy that night and when she did it was fitful and strained, too close to wakefulness to be truly restful, her mind too full of thoughts to find peace.

She needed to know.

The sound of Moon that morning awakening, sitting up in the bed she had been given, Poipole stirring as its Trainer moved, was more than enough to wake Acerola too, the Captain massaging her eyes, bleary and restless. Hearing Moon ask if she was okay only made Acerola giggle a hollow noise. This was all so backwards. She looked at Moon, her own pale grey eyes focused on Moon's brown. And had to know.

“Moon, before breakfast could you... tell me everything? Please?”

Moon nodded. And began to recount.

She'd been lost in Tapu Village. Lost Poipole too. Chased by Zubat and Golbat and hidden in a house. Then... there had been Hau. Acerola listened intently as Moon spoke of seeing Hau and Lillie, of a village in full repair, the afternoon light golden across it, a party and celebration in full force. The faces Moon had seen she... struggled to recall them now, the specifics already fading, but she knew she had been somewhere there was a celebration. She remembered the speech. Kahuna Holei describing the meaning of Alola.

Acerola blinked when Moon stopped speaking, staring plainly at her. The Captain, one of the youngest of Alola's seven, raised a hand to her face to wipe away the tears that had begun to form.
She shook her head, and looked down. Grabbed a pillow and pressed it against her face before letting it drop onto her knees. Kept looking down, head almost bowed. Moon called out to her.

Acerola held up a hand.

“It wasn't meant to be like that.” She spoke without looking at Moon, unwilling to make eye-contact in this moment. “The Ghost Trial you're... meant to be brought into illusions that make no sense. Confusing things that test people until they break out on their own. It's a test of will and focus. Making sure people who want to continue on can overcome that and handle the big demands of the Final Trials. You weren't... meant to see that.”

Moon sat back down from standing up to approach the Captain. Acerola shook her head.

“Sorry, just...” eventually she looked up, smiling widely while keeping her eyes closed, “hearing you got to see Tapu Village like it was just made me... really homesick.” Moon nodded. She understood the feeling of a place and time you couldn't go back to. Acerola appreciated hearing that. Grabbed a box of tissues from a shelf and blew her nose before looking back to Moon with her usual relaxed expression returned. Gave a grin, the time of intense emotion passed. “Still though, that's a real trick those ghosts played, mixing up some of your memories of people with the memories of Tapu Village and luring you in! I'm going to give the Totem a real piece of my mind for that one!”

Moon shook her head. No, she disagreed, it may have been intense but... she was happy for what she'd seen all the same. And been pleased to see Kahuna Holei back then. She was very cool. Acerola grinned. “Yeah! She was!” Then sombered, quickly. Moved on to the next topic she could.

“Well, anyway, Lillie and Hau, along with Hapu, will be here a little later today with some Ride Mudsdale we can take into the Haina Desert to see the Ruins of Abundance. So let's make sure to get something to eat first! The motel's got food but I bet we could join auntie for breakfast at her caravan! She's part of an old Tapu Village family too, just like me! Actually, she's-” halfway through saying that Acerola decided not to. Clamped her mouth shut and shook her head when Moon looked at her. Then gave her usual smile again. “It's okay, let's go see her!”

The older woman did indeed prove hospitable, the few Team Skull Grunts still hanging around the Refuge Zone not bothering to move or hassle Moon and the Captain. Were just content being here where Tapu Bulu didn't want them. Moon thought deeply of the words she'd been given as she ate, Poipole tearing into what food it was given as well. She didn't know what it all meant. But there were many pieces to a puzzle in her head now, only a few still missing before she had the complete picture in view.

Did Acerola or the woman miss Tapu Village? Both seemed shocked by Moon's question. The woman took over answering. “Well don't we all miss where we come from in some manner, no matter what?” She smiled. “It's the nature of life for things to change. Missing the past is okay, but dwelling on it will just make things harder. Life is all about looking forward to the future, after all. That was what my daughter always said.”

Moon had heard those words more than once recently. The older woman gave her a strange look. Acerola quickly moved to break things apart.

“Okay okay!” Food eaten, the Captain took charge of Moon once more. “Moon let's have a last minute lesson before the others get here, okay? Thanks for the food, auntie, I'll come back later and introduce you to Moon's other friends too!”

“Of course,” the woman nodded, “have safe travels to the Ruins. And congratulations on your Trial, Moon.” Moon nodded and smiled, the Ghostium-Z set in her Z-Ring so she might look to it again and again over the course of the day. Acerola steered Moon outside, Poipole floating behind.
“Alright so!” The Captain put her hands on her hips, puffing up but still not even approaching Moon's height. Then frowned. “Oh wait, you already know the Ghost Z-Pose, don't you?” Moon nodded. She'd felt it when first using the Decidium-Z. Acerola shrugged. “Okay well I was going to teach you that but you already know it! I wasn't a very helpful Captain was I?”

Moon shook her head, appreciative of Captain Acerola leading her to the Trial and looking for her during and after her after. And besides, she'd just learned a new Z-Pose the day before thanks to the Trial anyway! When Acerola looked at Moon strangely, Moon made an attempt to replicate the motions Holei had performed, forming the heart with the curve of both hands and then shifting into the one-legged pose. It felt awkward and Acerola giggled before directing Moon to better position her arms for balance.

Then the Captain frowned. “Wait, how did you learn that?”

Holei had used it, Moon answered simply. With a Mimikium-Z for the Totem's Z-Move. That didn't make sense, Acerola shook her head. Even if it had her in an illusion, if Moon was fighting the Totem it couldn't create a Z-Move on its own. As the voice of Hau called from the east, Moon turning to wave at him as he, Lillie, and Hapu approached, Acerola turned west to stare into the plant-choked remnants of Tapu Village.

...no...

“Hey Moon!” Hau dismounted from a Ride Mudsdale, the Pokemon equipped with a harness for carrying two passengers, waving as he raced towards her. “Check it out!” Throwing up his arms as he moved Hau set the heavy white cloak wrapped around him flaring out, his awesome 'superhero pose' prompting polite applause from Moon, Poipole zooming at high speeds around the group. Hau grinned and tapped at the goggles currently resting around his neck. “We got this gear for going into the desert!”

Hapu and Lillie, riding together on Hapu's own Mudsdale, a rope tied from them to a third following behind, got closer before dismounting themselves, each also wearing the thick white cloth. Lillie, with determination, still had her wide-brimmed hat atop her head, claiming she'd keep hold of it even after being warned about the heavy winds of Haina. Her bag, with Nebby inside, was strapped to the Mudsdale of Hapu. Hapu approached Moon second.

“We also have coverings for you and the Captain, which we prepared the night before. How was your Trial?”

Holding up her left arm to show off the Z-Ring with purple Ghostium-Z set within it, Moon smiled wide at Hau's whoop of delight at her success. Hapu nodded with a smile, Lillie third to join them also showing a pleased expression. Acerola took charge.

“Allright!” As Trial Captain she was tasked with caring for those on their Island Challenge, and while a visit to the Ruins of Abundance was a definite divergence from the normal path, it was a good thing to see for those travelling Alola too, so she was into it! Plus getting to hang out with this whole group was... pretty nice. The Captain pointed dramatically northwards, an open corridor through a sheer stone rise leading into the sandy terrain. “Haina Desert is just ahead, we'll split onto the Ride Mudsdale and then head on in! Since sandstorms can come up real quick, we'll have all three tied together so no-one gets lost, and I'll lead us to the Ruins of Abundance! Ready to go?”

The four around Acerola nodded. Hau and Moon, Island Challengers. Hau with four Trials and two Grand, Moon with six and two. She'd be meeting Nanu soon then. Acerola... would probably have to let him know about Moon's Trial. Would she? Should she? She didn't really know if she should bring it up. Maybe it was better to let the past lie. Even if the ghosts of Tapu Village didn't want it to.
The Captain shook her head and moved to grab the desert cloaks and goggles for her and Moon as well.

Lillie, their reason for going to the Ruins. That strange Pokemon with her that might be tied to the Legendary Pokemon of Alola. Might be the child they left with the Tapu. And Hapu, whose own journey across Alola had allowed her to grow at a pace even faster than Moon and Hau. She needed that, though, if she were to take the mantle she sought before it became too late. These four all had so much to them. It was honestly kind of overwhelming.

But thinking about that was way better than wondering if among the spirits of Tapu Village there was one who still hadn't gone to rest.

Acerola took charge of one of the two Ride Mudsdale, Hapu clambering back onto her own and offering for Lillie to rejoin her, Hau defeating Moon in a single round of rock-paper-scissors to ensure he still got to control the other. Bested, Moon accepted Acerola's invitation to sit on the back of hers, instructing Poipole to come sit before her, leaving the riders in order Acerola with Moon, Hapu with Lillie, then Hau in last. A rope, tied from one of the Mudsdale to the next, ensured they would remain connected. And with that setup done Acerola led the group off, through the passageway blocking the worst of the desert's heavy winds and sand. Into the oppressive heat only resisted by their thick white cloaks, and the lurid glare of the sun filtered by the goggles each wore.

Into Haina Desert's expanse.

The three peaks of Hokulani to the north, Lanakila to the west, and Blush Mountain to the east created a triple barrier around the area of Haina Desert, thick rocky walls encasing the locale from all but the most intrepid explorers. The only true entrance was that of the Haina Oasis, any other way into the desert stretch one too difficult for most to even consider. Thanks to those three mountains the clouds that did form heavy over the seas of Alola, the heat of the region driving their growth, never reached this location, the only covering it received being fumes from the active volcanoes lurking nearby. The heavy winds that plagued the area, caught against the mountains and dragged down into this sandy bowl, shaped sandstorms at a moment's notice, making the environment one difficult indeed to navigate or predict.

Acerola, who had visited the Ruins many times since becoming a Captain and even before, had long since gained the confidence to enter Haina Desert and make it through. Just as she had held confidence in pushing Moon into her Trial, sure things would be the same as ever, so she had confidence here.

The twin blows her belief in herself suffered from yesterday and today would take quite some time to recover.

Lillie's determination was their downfall. Even when the winds whipped up thick gouts of sand, beating against the Mudsdale and their riders, their white cloaks worn resisting it, the goggles over eyes and clenched mouths keeping the worst away, still she kept a hand pressing her wide-brimmed white hat against her head. The hat, hiding her face so she might feel more difficult to notice, had become a comfort item for her over the past few months, leaving Lillie unwilling to let it go. In this instance she did not have a choice.

A powerful surge of wind pushed her arm back and her hat took flight.

The movement of the three Mudsdale was more relentless than speedy, making their way unerringly through the swirling desert sands. This hid how easy it was to be lost, the roar of the wind blocking sound at more than a few paces, the storm of sand hiding sight just as quickly. Lillie turned in horror to see her hat flying backwards, experienced a brief moment of relief to see Hau on the Mudsdale
behind her reach up to try and grab it, then further distress as he missed, the hat blowing off into the
distance. Hau, seeing Lillie before him, gave a quick thumbs up.

Then leapt off his Ride Pokemon to give chase.

Lillie's panic quickly moved to Hapu, whose directions led her Mudsdale to pull up, the tug of the
rope between her and the Ride Pokemon ahead causing Acerola and Moon to stop as well. The sand
was too thick for them to see two places back, and so neither realised what was wrong until Acerola
saw Hapu's frantic gesturing, the Captain then guiding the Mudsdale she rode back to the second in
their chain.

Once close enough she and Moon both saw the third was without rider.

“Where's Hau?” Acerola's snap ask was answered only by a panicked Lillie explaining Hau had
tried to grab her hat when the winds had caught it, and leaped off his Ride Pokemon to do so.
Acerola's face paled. You didn't just get off of your Ride Pokemon in a sandstorm! What was Hau
thinking? Hapu, pulling on the rope of the third to get it to close the distance to the others,
dismounted her Mudsdale for a moment to change the order, so that it would follow second to
Acerola and Moon. Then she reached a hand up to Lillie.

“Lillie,” the small girl, with thick and bushy black hair and a determined expression instructed her,
“move to the other Mudsdale. It will carry you and follow Captain Acerola."

“Hapu?” Lillie looked confused, “What do you mean?”

“I have spent some time in this desert too,” the girl responded, “my Mudsdale and I will stay behind
and find Hau when the storm clears. She is well able to protect me, but I would not be comfortable
keeping you and Moon out in this environment. Go ahead, we will catch up.”

“Wait just a moment!” Lillie shook her head, “We should all stay here then! That way we can search
together for Hau!”

“If you do not know this desert it is too easy to be lost,” Hapu replied, shaking her head. “Follow
Captain Acerola to the Ruins.”

“I'll come back after dropping them off,” Acerola nodded, aware Hapu's idea was best. “Lillie, move
to the other Mudsdale.”

Even still Lillie shook her head. Looked to Moon for confirmation they should stay. But Moon didn’t
know the answer. For as deeply worried as she was, her expression clearly distressed, she didn't
know what to do. So she wanted to trust in Hapu and Acerola saying they did. To that... Lillie
slowly nodded, moving down from Hapu's Mudsdale to mount up on the back of the other. Acerola
nodded to Hapu.

“Stay safe, I'll be back soon.”

Then steered the Ride Mudsdale she rode onwards, fording the storm and continuing upon the path
to the Ruins of Abundance, deep within Haina Desert's embrace.

In ages past the Ruins of Abundance represented the bounty of nature, grown under Tapu Bulu's
will. The Haina Desert, in spite of the location that it was, once stood rich with plantlife of all kinds,
maintained by the Guardian Deity's power. That was long ago though, in the days the Tapu were
active presences shaping Alola to the forms each desired. When the four agreed to retreat from those ways Haina Desert quickly took on its current shape, the lush lands left only in story and the Tapu's memory itself. The Ruins, once a temple in Tapu Bulu's name, were now cracked and worn down, half collapsed and choked with sand. The altar deep within remained the only thing maintained, the duty of the Kahuna keeping this one place together. Often Nanu sent Acerola to check on it instead.

At the entrance of these ruins, Acerola having unerringly guided the two Mudsdale there, Moon behind her on the first, Lillie riding the second, all three dismounted. For a moment. Just for as long as it took Acerola to wrap the rope of one of the two Mudsdale around a pillar of stone at the ruins' entrance, before mounting back up upon the other. She turned back to Lillie and Moon.

“I’ll be back with Hapu and Hau, promise! Just stay here til I get back!” And as quick as she could Acerola guided her Ride Mudsdale back out into the storm. Lillie moved quickly to stand by Moon's side.

“I'm worried.” It was difficult to get one's arms out of the heavy white cloak intended to protect against the desert's sand and sun, leaving Moon struggling to reach out to Lillie properly, instead fighting to get one arm through the point the cloak’s edges overlapped, her other holding onto Poipole who had decided to nestle beneath it. Lillie shook her head, holding onto her bag, taken as she'd dismounted Hapu's Mudsdale before, Nebby within making soft noises as Lillie opened the zipper keeping it inside. The Nebula Pokemon quickly poked its head out to see what was around.

“Moon, I...” Lillie looked almost apprehensive, but Moon reassured her things would be alright. The girl nodded. “I think I need to explore the ruins... if only to distract myself until the others are back. Would you come with me?” Moon nodded back immediately. She would stay by Lillie no matter what. Lillie smiled at her for that.

Then turned and continued on inside.

There was little to the Ruins of Abundance that was not ruined beyond use – sand choking some corridors, collapsed stone blocking others. Lillie and Moon walked down the main path, all that was kept in good repair, each keeping a Pokemon clutched to them. Though the goal had been to come here for some time now, now that she was Lillie wondered what it was she should do. She'd believed the answer would come to her. That somehow, by being here, she'd realise what she needed to do for Nebby. But Nebby was giving no signs of anything being different, and Lillie was having no grand revelations within. Even at the deepest point of the ruins, standing upon the staircase leading to the altar dedicated to the Land Spirit itself, she'd found nothing.

What then should she do?

“Moon, I-” she'd turned back to Moon, who'd followed behind her every step of the way, intending to ask for her advice. Instead what Lillie saw transfixed her as Moon herself was transfixed. As both stared at the sight of Tapu Bulu itself, floating before Moon, the Guardian Deity, reaching out to her and tapping at her arm. The arm holding Poipole.

The Guardian Deities could not stand the presence of Ultra Beasts. In that moment Moon
remembered Professor Burnet telling her that, remembered Tapu Lele driving Poipole away from the Ruins of Life. She'd forgotten. She'd brought Poipole, an Ultra Beast, here without remembering it was at risk. Moon turned away from Tapu Bulu, her arm cradling Poipole keeping the Pokemon held tight.

With a deep but almost pitiful noise Tapu Bulu continued to poke at Moon.

It was like a Lillipup trying to get a toy out from under a cabinet, Lillie considered, watching as the Tapu pawed at Moon while making the deep whining sounds. It was trying to be gentle, yet unrelenting in taking the Ultra Beast from her, Moon constantly telling it to leave her be, even moving an arm to push its own aside. The sight of Moon arguing with the Tapu like it was any unruly Pokemon, constantly batting its arms away, stuck with Lillie. The Tapu grew more and more insistent, pushing harder and harder to make Moon drop the Pokemon she clutched no matter how much she told it to stop. Moon gritted her teeth.

She'd had enough!

The loud crack of sound echoed in the hall of the Tapu, Moon's hand outstretched, palm stinging violently. Tapu Bulu, before her, in shock raised a hooved hand to its black cheek, touching at the point Moon had struck it. Silently the Tapu floated back, upwards, and out through the corridor, disappearing from sight, a heavily breathing Moon standing with palm still raised. Lillie stared in shock.

She... hadn't just imagined that, had she? Moon looked down at her palm, slowly bending each finger in then out. Then with a resolute gaze looked up again, Poipole still clutched to her. That had been right. Turning back to Lillie, for a moment Moon faltered under her wide-eyed expression. But then Lillie raced down the steps of the altar, back to Moon with only concern for her alone in her eyes.

“Moon are you alright?”

The chance for Moon to answer, to express any of the torrent of emotions she was feeling in this moment – distress mixed with some sense of victory, and a righteous satisfaction she wasn't entirely sure was her own – was lost as another voice called down the halls of the ruins, reaching the ears of the two girls within.

Both Lillie and Moon turned to move to Hau as he tested the echo of this place.

“Yooooo, Moon, Lillie, are you thereeee?”

At the entrance of the corridor leading to the altar room was Hau – Hapu and Acerola standing behind him. He grinned and waved as Moon and Lillie approached, the raised hand holding Lillie's wide-brimmed hat. As Lillie came to a stop before him he held it out to her with a flourish.

“I got it!”

Lillie pushed his hand aside and grabbed him by the shoulders instead.

“Why do you and Moon keep doing that?” Shaken by Lillie as he was Hau struggled to reply, Moon standing silent behind Lillie as she very much couldn't say anything in this moment. “The two of you keep doing dangerous things thinking it will be okay and scaring me please stop it! You could have been hurt! I don't... want to see you hurt. Not for something as silly as a hat. Hau, please don't ever do something like that again.”

Only when Lillie stopped shaking him did Hau move a hand to ease her grip from his arms. He
smiled still, but it was a slightly more embarrassed expression. He'd hoped to avoid a scolding by finding the hat.

“Okay, Lillie,” reaching up his hand Hau set the hat on her head, Lillie leaning forward so it obscured her face, “I'm sorry. I promise not to do anything crazy like that again.” A mumbling sound of some sort of acceptance came from beneath the hat. Moon moved up too to make sure Hau was okay. Hapu, standing behind him, shook her head.

“Honestly,” the young girl held out her arms in a wide shrug in the same motion, “I found him beneath an old ruins pillar out there – he must've gone right to it.”

“It worked out though,” Hau held up his other hand, unveiling the other thing he had found in the storm. Moon stared at the bright pink crystal, eyes widening moment by moment. Wait, she looked between Acerola, Hapu, and Hau, really? The Captain joined Hapu in an equal mix of nodding and shaking her head. Unbelievable luck.

Hau just grinned and set the Psychium-Z into his own Z-Ring. He'd do his best to keep his promise to Lillie, but for his last time taking such a big risk, wow it had worked out too! Moon and Lillie both quickly joined the others in scolding Hau for his unshakable smile. Honestly.

They were glad he was alright.

Chapter End Notes

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ochrosia_kilaueaensis

Special credit to my good friend and excellent writer Alexilulu, and her fantastic Persona 5 story Black & Red (Mature warning: https://archiveofourown.org/works/13757526) which just updated before I posted this and upon reading it I finally noticed "Oh AO3 has actual proper paragraph breaks, I should stop using '---' to do so." If you scroll back to older chapters you'll find I've updated all of them to use the better looking paragraph breaks too. It took me 33 chapters but hey, I got there! Thanks Lexi.

This chapter ended up being one of the larger of Eldritch - a number of factors being the reason. I don't feel like a chapter can flow on a single scene alone, so while the Totem battle was very important, there needed to be something else beside it. I could have cut at the entering of Haina Desert which would have made the chapter decently sized but average, but I knew I wanted the key scene in the Ruins of Abundance in this chapter, as the title of it ties deeply to both major scenes.

Organising chapter length and events so things are placed correctly, and I am able to end on the points I desire to, is very important to me: I have a number of closing scenes for future chapters I intend to hit, which requires me to think properly about the ordering between them. It's a complicated balance, but my goal is to create powerful content and so that's just how it is. I hope that, despite this chapter being a big read, it held you the entire way through. These are scenes I've been thinking about for a while now.

That's it for this chapter though, my thanks to all readers. I'll be back in due time with the next, as we move on to the west side of Ula'ula Island and the events that will soon unfold. Look forward to them. I know I am.
Remnants of Tapu Village

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In the end little more came of the investigation into the Ruins of Abundance. Even after allowing Nebby out of her bag, following the Nebula Pokemon around as it investigated this way and that the sandy halls of the once temple to Tapu Bulu, Lillie found no answers. No solutions to the mystery of Cosmog, or what she must do to help Nebby get home. She sighed, defeated.

Hau and Moon, in step behind her, immediately set to cheering her up.

“Hey it's okay, Lillie!” Hau led the charge, aware he himself had only caused her stress today. “These ruins are really old and all messed up by the sand, so it's no surprise there's nothing here to see!”

Moon nodded. Then pointed to Nebby, the Pokemon playing with a pile of fallen stones, climbing them again and again before floating off to drift across the hallway of the ruins. Even if there weren't answers, Nebby seemed happier and more lively now, and wasn't that good itself? Lillie looked at Nebby as Moon said this, then back to Moon.

And smiled.

“Thank you.” The smiles answering Lillie from Moon and Hau were both bright and encouraging. She nodded, determined. She'd come this far. And it was not yet the end. So with Moon and Hau with her, she'd have the courage to go on. There was one more place yet to see. “In that case, I will take Nebby to the Ruins of Hope on Poni Island. I don't know if there will be any more answers there, but I will still try to find them all the same. Although…” a brief pause, Moon and Hau tilting their heads waiting for Lillie's thoughts, before she pushed at her thick blonde hair, the cool dry air inside the Ruins of Abundance a welcome relief from the desert heat outside, and continued. “If possible... I'd like if the both of you were to come with me.”

“Of course!” Hau agreed immediately, Moon's own words quieter but similar all the same. The expression on each, as if there were no question they'd be there for her, touched Lillie deeply. It had been just under three months since this journey began, since she'd met Moon upon Mahalo Trail and begun following her and Hau's Pokemon Journeys in step with Professor Kukui. Now she was the one leading ahead, setting a direction, and they were as eager as could be to follow her. People who wished to stay with her, to support her own wishes, and to care for her no matter what she... the strong twinge of emotion had Lillie bow her head, her wide-brimmed hat covering her face once more. Not for the risk he took, but even still, she was thankful that Hau had returned it to her.

That she had something to hide behind as the overwhelming happiness she felt in this moment threatened her with tears.

“Hey what about you, Hapu?” Hapu, the short-statured but immeasurably resolute resident of Poni Island, frowned at Hau's invitation. So Lillie wanted to visit the Ruins of Hope? It was not that Hapu would not delight in showing Lillie all of Poni Island, her home and the land she grew up with, but she... Hapu breathed out a sigh and shook her head.

“My apologies,” she answered honestly, not hesitating for a moment in what she was saying, “but I do not yet think I am ready to return to Poni Island. Not until I have finished my journey and my training. For now I will stay close to Haina Desert, and attempt to call upon Tapu Bulu for guidance.
and testing.”

“Huh,” Hau tilted his head, Hapu's determination not fully understood. “You're really trying to get stronger super fast, aren't you?”

“I have important reasons.” Hapu replied firmly in a tone that said there was little more she wished to say. Hau nodded and accepted that as that. Acerola, with the group as well, having kept silent while they spoke, looked about in confusion.

“That is kind of weird though,” she stopped turning for a moment to look at Moon directly, catching Moon's attention from where she was standing with Lillie, “I was really sure Tapu Bulu was going to show up. I'd heard Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele both came to see you near their ruins, Moon.” In response Moon and Lillie both kept their mouths tightly shut. Moon had no desire for her actions to be known, and Lillie understood that telling anyone Moon had struck the Tapu would only invite further trouble.

Though Lillie also worried that Moon had invited great trouble upon herself as it was.

“It's a rare person a Tapu approaches.” Hapu, who had not heard any such stories about Moon and the Island Deities before, mused. Moon from the Kanto Region. A non-Alolan native, approached by two of Alola's own Guardians. For as much as Hapu appreciated her fellow Trainer, a part of her still found the thought of that frustrating. A much more vocal part of her started yelling at her bad attitude for thinking that at all, and set off a spiral of thoughts inside of her own head. Hapu shook it to dislodge them. “It must be hard, to draw even their curiosity.” The expression Moon gave Hapu in response, one of total agreement with her words and relief for her understanding, soothed the slight jealousy Hapu had experienced. Perhaps for Moon a visitation from the Tapu could not be considered a blessing like it would be for so many others.

Maybe she was happier for not seeing Tapu Bulu after all.

In the silence of thought a loud and high-pitched sound turned the attention of the group to two Pokemon playing about, Poipole holding Nebby and zooming up and down the corridor at high speed, the Nebula Pokemon in its grip making a loud laughing noise of its own. Moon smiled, but also called her partner back, Poipole descending and offering Nebby to Lillie after Moon asked twice. The first time it seemed unwilling to let go.

There was something to be said of an Ultra Beast insistently holding onto a Pokemon treasured by the Tapu, and the response of the Tapu to Ultra Beasts themselves, but the depth of thought that began taking those thinking on it proved too much and each decided to deal with those ideas later. Acerola took a few steps away from the group so she could turn and face them all.

“So what's next?”

“For now I will stay here,” Hapu answered, nodding to the others all looking to her. “I have supplies to camp at the Ruins for some time, and so I can hope to supplicate Tapu Bulu's good will in my training. I cannot promise when I will return to Poni Island, and so cannot promise to be there for you when visiting the Ruins of Hope, Lillie. I apologise deeply.”

“It's okay!” Lillie shook her head, before giving Hapu a smile. “You have something really important you're trying to do as well, right Hapu? In that case what matters most is that we support you on your journey too!” Hau and Moon both nodded and agreed with Lillie's words, Hapu feeling her heart warm seeing this trio before her. The small population of Poni Island, the lifestyle of caring for the land, and the growth she'd pushed herself on faster and faster as her grandfather's age took its toll, had kept her from forming many friendships with others, especially those her own age. These three,
their smiles and appreciation and care... she bowed her head to them.

“I am deeply thankful for each and every one of you.”

The smiles back said more than enough. Acerola nodded too.

“Okay, so if Hapu's staying here with her Mudsdale, we can head back on the two Ride Mudsdale we have! We'll stop in the Refuge Zone, say hello to Auntie for lunch, then head on through Tapu Village to Mahihinu!” Receiving nods from the others accepting her plan, Acerola waggled a finger towards Hau. “And Hau, you're riding with me, so you don't go jumping off into the desert any more!”

“H-hey-” an attempt to complain from Hau was ended quickly by first Moon elbowing him with a grin, then Lillie giggling while trying to give a stern look when he looked to her for support. The two girls quickly lost the ability to do anything but laugh at Hau for the judgement that had been served upon him. Fully deserved at that. In the end Hau just gave up and shrugged. “Okay then!” And that was that.

At the entrance of the ruins, the sky clear and bright despite the sandstorm that had raged not long ago, Hapu bid farewell to the group as they mounted up upon the two Ride Mudsdale, the one Acerola rode leading with a rope tying it to the second Moon was sat upon with Lillie behind her. Lillie had once more strapped her bag, containing Nebby, to the side of the Draft Horse Pokemon, while Moon called for Poipole to stay close to her, the Ultra Beast choosing to nestle into the thick mass of black hair stretching down the Mudsdale's head and neck. As the group prepared to disembark Moon called on Rotom-dex, who answered smoothly, alert and responsive unlike the silence it had given in the illusory dream the night before. The device was steadily, day by day, recording more and more information on Poipole to build a true profile for the Pokemon, though still obeying the request and lock Kukui had given it. Moon studied some of the information, on Poipole's poison and speed, before responding to Acerola's call to head off.

Rotom-dex had suggested the classification of 'Poison Pin' Pokemon for Poipole. Moon found the title agreeable indeed.

The journey through the sands of Haina Desert was far quieter this time, no storms raising an impenetrable vortex of particulate and sound, no adventurous Hau jumping off and disappearing from sight. With this peaceful moment Moon found herself thinking deeply, all too aware that behind her on the Mudsdale she rode sat Lillie, likely deep in thoughts of her own. For Lillie, consideration of Poni Island and the Ruins of Hope. Her next chance to find some way to help Nebby find their way home. For Moon... thinking of something else entirely.

The ghosts of Tapu Village had constructed an illusion and caught Moon inside of its dream. By Acerola's words it should have been nonsensical and confusing, but instead for Moon had been built of memories. Not her own but those of that place. The old Tapu Village before Tapu Bulu had destroyed it. The people she'd seen who were part of it, she hadn't known them – at least not as they had been then. Any whom she might have also met in reality... the memories of the dream were too hazy to recall.

But there had been two parts of the illusion that were not from the memories of that place. Hau and Lillie had been there, not as members of Tapu Village's memories but... bait? Reasons to lure Moon and make her accept what was happening around her? She didn't know. That wasn't important, not really. What mattered was what Acerola had said. The ghosts had taken Moon's memories and mixed them up to trick her. So the Hau and Lillie she had seen then, they had been the Hau and Lillie she thought of. Hau and Lillie as she saw them.
That Lillie... had been so quick to take her hand.

They’d danced together and *that* Moon still remembered. Could still picture that moment, spinning in circles with Lillie's hands clutching her own. The smile and laugh on Lillie's face as she stared at Moon. All those things her mind had conjured up.

“Moon?” Lillie's voice, so close behind her, made Moon jump, turning and looking back at Lillie, feeling warmth that wasn't just the heat of the desert sun on her face. Lillie, who had chosen not to wear her hat even without the storm, just in case, offered sunblock she had just finished treating her own face with. “You should use this to avoid being burned.”

Nodding quickly, perhaps too quickly for it rattled her own head, Moon reached out to accept the stick Lillie was offering. The moment of exchange, fingers touching, only flared Moon's sense of touch further and she rapidly turned back around after taking the sunblock stick. Lillie, surprised by Moon's motions, looked over her with concern. Moon just focused on applying the sunblock and trying to calm down as best she could. She felt overwhelmed, like her senses were too sharp and her thoughts too muddled. Just stared out across the desert and fell into the rhythmic pace of the Ride Mudsdale's steps. Silence escorted the four neatly out of Haina Desert, and as each passed under the stone archway framing its entrance, each breathed out in relief for it.

The oppressive heat and pressure of Haina Desert wore down any who walked its bounds.

“Fuwah~!” With a loud exhale Acerola looked back, to Hau behind her and the Mudsdale with Moon and Lillie just slightly further still. Held up a hand in her celebratory victorious 'V' pose. “We're back!”

“Thank you, Captain Acerola.” Lillie bowed her head as she stepped down from the Mudsdale first, reaching up to unhook the bag containing Nebby from its side. “Without you we would not have been able to visit the Ruins.”

“No problems, Princess!” Acerola shot back, Hau taking a smirk at the title the Captain had come up with for Lillie, Moon looking very interested at the term she had not heard used that way before. Mouthing the word at Lillie Moon received a very flustered look in return. She decided to remember that.

Ride Pokemon travelling through the Refuge Zone were not an uncommon thing, although there was no Ride Pokemon Station itself in the local area. The two the group had ridden were borrowed from the research expedition in the Rocklands, and once Acerola had led the trio with her to Mahihinu she’d take charge of returning the Mudsdale with her thanks. That would come later though – first they needed a break for lunch, as their time in Haina Desert had already eaten so much of the day. Then on through Tapu Village, along its main road which the ghosts let be, to Mahihinu where, eventually, Kahuna Nanu would show up to see Moon.

It might still take a little cajoling from Acerola first to make that happen though.

“Okay let's go see Auntie!”

Though today Iki Town holds claim as the oldest living residence of Alola, ten years ago that title belonged to Tapu Village. Much like Iki Town the residents of Tapu Village held close community, its members able to rely on one another, and taking strongly to the concept of communal family. Acerola, one of the last children of Tapu Village to hold on to its culture, practised this in her every approach to the world – labelling older adults as 'auntie' and 'uncle' and relying upon them as easily as saying hello. Those others formerly of Tapu Village, whether living in the Refuge Zone or Mahihinu, found the young girl's actions comforting. Acerola would never hear this directly, but
many of the village's former residents would say she carried on the spirit of that place better than anyone else.

Certainly superior to the former Kahuna's daughter, given her choices.

“Alola, Auntie! I've brought Moon and her friends!” With loud voice Acerola called from the entrance of the caravan the older woman lived in now, staying close to Tapu Village's remains herself. It was a difficult location, dusty and dry, requiring much daily effort to remain there. But for as much as it was difficult, as much as it made things harder for her granddaughter to visit, still she persisted. Penance for her perceived failure to guide things correctly? Or the belief that she still had a reason to stay? Those were thoughts she did not speak of.

Those who understood well enough knew it was not their place to ask.

“Alola alola, Acerola dearie,” she smiled, coming to the caravan's entrance to look over the four children gathered together. It was a delight to see Acerola with other young ones, even if the girl were a few years older than them all the same. Many who came to the sixth Trial of the Island Challenge were already older than Acerola, and her near-constant work as Captain kept her too busy to often interact with many others. This was good for her that these other young ones were staying by her side. She smiled. “And alola to all of you as well!”

Behind Acerola was Moon, the heavy desert cloaks she and the others had worn now removed and placed over the Mudsdale pair tied to a nearby tree. The darker skin of Moon's face was still tinged enough to show the Haina Desert sun had gotten to her, and the older woman made a quick note to ensure all these children were given water as soon as introductions were done. The other dark-skinned youth, a boy with hair tied up at the back of his head, smiled and waved.

“Alola! I'm Hau!”

She smiled back. “Alola, Hau, how are you today?”

“Good!” Hau answered loudly, the slight hitch of expression on Acerola, Moon, and Lillie's faces all telling a different story when compared to the wide grin on the grandson of Kahuna Hala. It had been some time since she'd last seen Hala actually, as busy as the Kahuna was with Melemele. Still, in his grandson she could see him clearly, and that brought a smile to her face all on its own.

Third of the trio was a young girl of similar age to the other two, pale of skin with long blonde hair that no doubt had done her no favours in the heat of the day. Her skin was reddened too, the sunblock she'd used helping, but not preventing the effects of the day. All three would definitely need some care. Hau turned to her and uttered her name, jolting Lillie to step forward.

“Hello ma'am,” she bobbed her head, “it's nice to meet you.”

“And you as well,” in response the woman smiled to Lillie, having heard the name spoken by Hau, “though please, feel free to call me Rosia.”

“Auntie Rosie,” Acerola, who'd settled on that rhyme long ago, grinned wide, “always takes care of me when I'm heading through the Oasis! She's the best!”

“That is the meaning of Alola, after all,” Rosia replied with a caring smile, “reaching out to others around us. I'm sure the three of you have seen and done that on your Pokemon Journeys yourselves!” Hau was quickest to nod, raised in the culture of Alola as strongly as he had been. Moon spent a moment looking at Lillie, who looked back at her, before nodding as well, knowing she had reached out to another. Then made a whisper to Lillie about her bag for Lillie to understand
she had also done the same. All three gave their nods. Rosia smiled with a pleased noise. Wonderful, how wonderful these children were. The light and life of Alola continuing on.

Her daughter would be proud.

Lunch was a busy affair with four guests, Rosia needing to station them outside while she cooked inside her small caravan – best for one person and able to accommodate two when needed – though made sure each had water provided immediately so they might recover from the desert's touch. Poipole, not kept in a Pokeball as many other Pokemon were, required food far more consistently, eating at every meal Moon did – the same as Nebby, though Lillie took charge of slipping food into her bag containing the Pokemon rather than allowing it out. While gathered together the three of them, with Captain Acerola, weren't likely to be approached, but there was still a basic awareness that various members of Team Skull could be found around the Refuge Zone. Acerola waved a raised concern from Moon off with a “They're just slacking off!” but it was still obvious she was keeping an eye on them herself.

Maybe the best motivation for no-one to cause trouble was simply that Rosia herself had made clear she never wanted such in her front yard. For what counted as a yard here. Really she just meant in front of her caravan. But it worked. Team Skull never gave her any trouble. Why would they? Their Big Sis would have their heads for messing with her gran.

Lunch progressed with the four children and two Pokemon, as well as two Ride Mudsdale, receiving food, the feeding of the rest of the Pokemon with them saved for later: Rosia's stocks not capable of supporting two, three counting Acerola, whole teams of Pokemon. But she enjoyed the presence of the group all the same, watching as Acerola laughed and joked with them – Moon, Lillie, and Hau possessing such vibrant energy together. Moon from the day before, and even this morning, had been nothing like she was with those other two around her. She had spoken of missing home yesterday, but her second home clearly moved with her. Wherever those three were together...

It was a wonderful thing to see.

Though for as much as Rosia found herself delighted by this group being here, another did not. Compared to the majority of Team Skull members lounging about the Oasis, some fishing, others simply chatting and slacking off somewhere no-one would give them grief for just chilling – the Refuge Zone a home away from home where the constant downpour of rain wasn't a thing – one in particular was in a fuss. She paced in circles, ducking behind trees and bushes to watch over the pack in front of Rosia's caravan. She'd wanted to see Aunt Rosia today! What were they doing here? Grumbling, complaining, being ignored by the other Grunts lazing around, Riley of Team Skull remained in a huff.

She was back in her Team Skull getup today, the silver pendant and white beanie with skull motif to each, bandanna covering her mouth but in no way preventing anyone from being able to tell her frown. One of the others looked up at her as she fumed and suggested she chill. The inarticulate gesturing and complaining sounds she made as she indicated the pack occupying Rosia's attention did nothing to make her point. Unbelievable!

It was at about this point that Hau spotted her for the fuss she was making and pointed her out to Moon, Lillie, and Acerola. Rosia noticed as well.

“Oh that looks like Riley!” The older woman smiled, “she's very much a firebrand the young dear.”

“Uhhh,” Hau watched as Riley turned back to the group, spotted everyone looking at her, flinched, then dived into a bunch of bushes by the water's edge. “I don't think she likes us very much.”
“She's quite sensitive,” Rosia noted, Hau making a strange noise of disbelief when he looked back at her. She nodded her head as if to reinforce her words. “Truly – she cares very deeply for many things. Perhaps to the degree that she excludes everything else. I know she is a member of Team Skull, but try and spare a nice word for her if you talk to her. She is searching for the right way in life as well.”

“A lot of Team Skull don't do much with the name,” Acerola chimed in, adding her own observations of the gang in her time. “It's really only a small group that actually go causing real trouble. Just everyone tends to follow whoever's the loudest.”

All three children frowned at that. Moon considered her experiences. Team Skull picking a fight with Ilima. Attempting to steal berries and insulting her for getting in their way. Showing up to mess with her Melemele Trial. Causing trouble – Riley specifically – at Brooklet Hill. The attacks – Riley again part of them – in the Diglett's Tunnel. Some harassing Aether Foundation members on Memorial Hill. Plumeria facing Moon down. And the massive attempted takeover of Malie City led by their boss. Moon shook her head. Did Acerola and Rosia really mean that though? To Moon all Team Skull did was cause damage and trouble. And she'd heard the same from many other people around Alola too. They weren't practising Alola, were they? Sharing and supporting one another? She didn't think Team Skull were any good at all.

Rosia frowned. A strong opinion from Moon, but not a particularly rare one. She wasn't entirely sure what to say. Acerola, seeing the group had finished eating, took charge in diffusing the tense conversation. “Okay okay, it's time to get going!” Clapping her hands as she walked around, Acerola bowed her head to Rosia. “Thanks Auntie for the meal, you've really cared for Moon yesterday and today, and we're all really thankful for that!” Quickly Moon bowed her head as well, thanking the older woman for looking after her. Rosia set aside her concerns about discussing Team Skull and just smiled at the politeness of the young girl.

“And thank you for visiting, Moon. I hope that on your Island Challenge you continue to take Alola into your heart as a part of you.”

Moon raised her head with a smile. She definitely would. Reaching out to those around her. Being part of the world connected together. Part of the weave. She was happy.

Rosia of Tapu Village stared, mouth hanging slightly. Acerola intervened. “Okay okay okay!” Stepping in front of Moon this time – which didn't help as Acerola was shorter than the girl by nearly a head – the Captain called out. “We're heading out! Moon, Lillie, Hau, hop onto the Ride Mudsdale and ready up!” Bowing her head Lillie thanked Rosia for the meal, while Hau waved and praised her cooking. Moon watched Rosia's stare at her, before Acerola spun around and flapped her hands to shoo Moon off, Hau calling for her to come play him for who was riding and who was behind the Captain. Slowly Moon turned and took her leave.

Rosia reached out to Acerola.

“Acerola, why did Moon-”

“It's okay!” Saying that way too fast for it to actually be okay, Acerola spun back to Rosia and shook her head, nodding in the same motion to the degree that she briefly dizzied herself, having to hold a hand to her head to steady. Rosia stared.

“What she said was-”

“Auntie it's fine!” Acerola repeated, stressing it this time, “I need to get Moon and the others to Mahihinu, sorry but we're heading off!” By her forceful words Acerola disengaged from the
conversation, but the stare from Rosia even as she watched the four mount up was one distressed. Those specific words from Moon, how had she known them? And Acerola's reaction to it... Rosia's stare lasted even as the four children waved back to her, setting off with their Ride Mudsdale heading along the main path to Tapu Village and beyond. Even as Riley finally crept up out of the bushes now that the rest of everyone was out of the way.

'Part of the weave', Rosia shook her head.

Maybe her daughter would find peace knowing another carried on her words.

As Captain Acerola had promised, the main road through Tapu Village could be travelled unaccosted at all hours. Entering through the Trial Gates on the side of the Refuge Zone was to declare yourself to the ghosts of the village, claiming you were there to undertake their challenge. Entering via any other path was to be an intruder, to be chased out rather than tested. Such was the nature of this place.

But the main road, which the two Ride Mudsdale paced evenly along, Acerola with Moon in the lead, Hau with Lillie behind, was quiet. Quiet enough for Moon to once more be caught in her thoughts, even as Acerola pointed out another branch forking off the road to the others just behind.

“So there's two main paths up Mount Lanakila – one from the north and one from the south,” the Captain explained. “It used to be only the south one, because the only people climbing Mount Lanakila were those heading to their Final Trials, but because the League is being built up there now, a road from Malie City through the mountains to the north of Lanakila was built, and a big lift system set up there. That's how they get all the construction materials up, and will be bringing up everyone who'll be taking part in or watching the League go down! Moon, Hau, you're probably going to end up climbing Lanakila from the south sooner or later. The ghosts won't mess with anyone taking that road either, it just... wasn't really a great way to get construction going up there, you know?”

The rambling of the Captain, interesting Hau actively and Lillie passively, only briefly went acknowledged by Moon. She was thinking deeply. Rosia's reaction to her words of the weave... where had Moon heard that? Her memories were growing fuzzier still of the dream world the ghosts of Tapu Village had sent her to, only bits and pieces remaining clear, but Moon was sure she’d taken the term from there.

From Kahuna Holei, she imagined.

Yet when Moon attempted to ask Acerola, the Captain only repeated that Moon would have to brave Mount Lanakila at the end of her Island Challenge, wanting little to discuss of the night Moon had had before. It was stark opposition to that morning, when Acerola was hanging on Moon's every word of the experience. More things that confused and concerned her. But she didn't push it any further as Acerola made it clear that wasn't up for discussion. Moon sighed and continued to half-listen to the Captain, watching as the Mudsdale strode past plant-covered buildings Moon was sure she could almost remember the true form of.

Looking at this ruined place, remembering what it had been in the illusion she was shown of the past, Moon recalled the sensation of striking Tapu Bulu earlier that day. In the end she didn't feel bad about that one bit. Called Poipole, floating above the group, down so Moon could rub the Pokemon's head.

She wasn't sorry at all.
The name of Mahihinu was applied some four years ago to the town stretching along the south-west coast of Ula'ula Island; as the takeover of Po Town under Team Skull took hold and its population split and spread – some travelling east to Malie City, others south to the small coastal villages along the western shore. The more Po Town became a mass of the unruly members of the gang, the more people on the western coast of Ula'ula moved south, eventually joining up with the refuge camp created by the Aether Foundation after the Tapu Village Incident six years prior. The names of those villages collapsed together, becoming Mahihinu, a stretching range of buildings both Aether and Ula'ula native containing most of the population of Tapu Village, the collection of smaller locations along the western coast, and half of those who'd fled Po Town after Team Skull's annexing of the place.

That was the town Acerola rode into with Moon, Hau, and Lillie behind her – the place she had spent most of her life growing up. First it had been quick white cube structures established by the Aether Foundation within a day of Tapu Village's destruction. Then larger buildings for care of more people and supporting of life here. Those who explored the ruins of the village took back what they could find, styling the relief housing as their own, over the years the buildings transforming to suit each of their occupant's tastes. Other buildings erected by others coming to Mahihinu continued its change, and the town took on its own unique life along the south-western coast. That was its story.

Moon, looking about the place, seeing the mixture of Aether-branded relief housing and larger traditional Alolan structures, felt sad. She wasn't entirely even sure why. Just that this sight, this place, raised an aching feeling in her heart. She stayed quiet as Acerola led the group on.

While Mahihinu stretched far around Ula'ula's west, a bay of curving sands and grassy hills with further lush islands peppering the clear waters just off the coast, close to the ruins of Tapu Village was one of the largest structures of the town. It had been the first major building erected by the Aether Foundation, aggrandisingly named 'Aether House', a residence for those orphaned by the destruction that had taken place. To this day Acerola still called that place home, acting as big sister to those living within, both younger and older than she. She was the Captain so she had the responsibility of caring for Ula'ula's south, and leading by example the concept of 'Alola'. It meant to share and support, right? So she shared and supported all those she could.

Combined with the rest of her Captain's duties, it kept her very busy. But she didn't mind being so preoccupied.

It helped keep her from dwelling on the past.

"I'm ba-a-ack everybody!" Announcing herself as soon as she was through the doors of the large facility, Acerola was quickly swarmed by the youngest of its residents, all eager to have big sis Acerola back again. Honestly, she hadn't been out that long! It was only yesterday she'd gone out to fetch Moon! Wow, pausing on that thought, Acerola's smile slipped. So much had happened, but it really had only been such a short amount of time. Maybe that was true for the entirety of Moon's journey. It hadn't even been a week yet since Moon's return from the Dragon Tamers.

Stuck on the rapid flow of events that had gone by in recent days, Acerola momentarily blocked the doorway until Hau called out to her. She spun around and gestured the three behind to follow her in.

“Aue, come in, come in,” she waved over and over, “and welcome to the Aether House! The three of you can stay here while you're in Mahihinu! Then Uncle Nanu will know where to find you when he gets here, Moon. Sooner or later.” There was little actual proof Acerola had that Nanu was eager to put Moon to her Grand Trial, but he had to be, right? How could he not be interested in her – everyone was! So Acerola nodded, confident that soon Kahuna Nanu would be here for Moon's next
As Captain of Ula'ula's south, it was part of Acerola's job to ferry Island Challengers towards their third Grand Trial.

Aether House was headed by a Pokemon, not person, an Oranguru of significant age, intelligence, and experience. While the legal ownership of the building was still that of the Foundation's, and members could always be found working there, in the end it was that Pokemon that acted as primary caretaker for those within. Acerola, as much raised by it as she was the residents of Mahihinu, waved brightly with a smile to the headmaster of Aether House. The slightest grunt and tilt of its head meant the world to those used to it. Moon, Lillie, and Hau all just found the sight rather strange. An Aether Foundation member sitting at the front desk of the building looked up at last to see the group.

Then sat up far straighter.

“Oh! Moon, Hau!”

Both children jumped, quick to recognise Jace, and moved over to the desk to greet him. Lillie hung back.

“Hey! Mr. Jace!” Hau put his arms on the counter, stretching half over it in general excitability, “What are you doing here?”

“That’s a good question,” Jace, as surprised as he was to see Moon and Hau – wait had they both completed their sixth Trials? No way, that was... way too ridiculous, right? – still slumped a little after acknowledging them. “Branch Chief Faba organised for me to be stationed here – said it would do me good to do some administration work. I don't really know what he's thinking.”

Jace had been part of making the Ride Pager, hadn't he? Moon looked confused. At the Aether Paradise all Faba had been talking about was the technology they had. Shouldn't Jace be working on that?

“That's what I thought too,” Jace didn't hide his disappointment in it being so obvious he was being stationed here as some sort of punishment he didn't understand. “But the Branch Chief's orders are to be followed so... here I am. I'm glad I at least got to see you two. How are your Island Challenges going?”

Hau was quick to mention he still had to do his fifth Trial, was travelling with Moon first while working on getting stronger. Moon though, she did confirm it: she'd completed her sixth Trial the night before. Jace just stared. Really really? The sight of the Ghostium-Z in the Z-Ring around her left wrist said it all. Really really. He shook his head, amazed. Really really.

“It's hard to even put into words how incredible that is. Are you...” for a moment he paused, considering whether this was rude, then remembered the damage done by not asking Ilima the same question so many years ago, “okay? Going like this must be stressful.”

The Dragon Tamers had helped, was the answer, Moon showing the red shawl she wore, the darker red dragon stitched across it. Thanks to them she'd come back from... things going badly.

There was a world of things to read into that, but Jace saw in Moon's expression now that she was okay. So he nodded and accepted that. “I'm glad. Are you staying at the Aether House while in Mahihinu?”

“Yep!” Acerola added in, watching as Moon and Hau chatted with Jace, Lillie hanging back at the side of the room. “I know there's space, so Moon, Hau, and Lillie there will all be staying here for a
while!” Jace looked over to Lillie, who did her best to avoid meeting his eyes, before nodding and typing up the claimed space on the computer system for the Aether House.

“Moon. Hau. Lillie. Alright, done. Welcome to the Aether House, the three of you.” Jace leaned back into his chair, the brief moment of being able to do literally anything a welcome relief from just sitting around being bored. He wanted to be working – why was he even here? What had he said or done? Wracking his mind wasn’t giving any answers, and only served to make him more and more distressed. Caught in his thoughts, the young man did not make the best conversationalist. Moon and Hau drifted back to Lillie.

“So tomorrow I can show you around the west side of Ula'ula!” Acerola was excited to do this, having found that spending time with these three was some of the most fun she'd had in ages. “We can go see the Ula'ula Meadow, and even the Lake of the Duske! There's lots of great places to check out before Uncle Nanu gets here for Moon's Grand Trial!”

Hau nodded first. Lillie, after a moment's thought, realised the alternative was staying here in the Aether House and that she'd rather be outside of Aether sight as often as she could.

Moon had something else on her mind.

She... kind of wanted to go back to Melemele. Just for a little! she confirmed as all three others looked at her in surprise. Just... to see her mother again. For a little while. She... missed her. Hau and Acerola both grinned wide at the words from Moon. That was a good thing, of course Moon should visit home then! Lillie... had too many thoughts about family to be able to react to Moon's own.

“I'm going to stick around here though,” Hau spoke after Moon, interlinking his hands behind his head and leaning back against them. “I haven't actually done anything on Ula'ula Island yet, so I really don't want to leave until I have. I still need to train more before I can take my fifth Trial!”

“Most Island Challengers get stopped here though,” Acerola looked thoughtful. “It's not that weird: plenty of people show up, realise they can't go forward yet, then head home for a while. It wouldn't be that bad to get away from it all!”

“Well I'm not about to go leaving Lillie on her own,” Hau chirped back, Lillie jolting at his use of her name. Then frowning.

“Hau, you shouldn't put yourself out just for me-”

“I'm doing it because I want to!” Hau answered back cheerily. “Moon, you go visit home, then when you come back and take your Grand Trial, we can both go with Lillie to Poni Island. It'd be nice if I could do mine first but... we're in a hurry, yeah?”

“That's...” Lillie looked around, clutching her bag with Nebby inside tighter to her, “Hau I don't want you forcing yourself in strange ways. Please just do what feels best for you.”

Hau, bright smile still worn, shook his head. “It's all good, Lillie! I'll keep working on my Island Challenge, but Moon's got hers and you've got your own special one too, right? And we should stick together as best we can! Just come back with me to Ula'ula after?”

The snap answer from Moon and Lillie both was that of course they'd stick by Hau for his challenges too. His smile grew just the tiniest little bit relieved. Phew! That was good then. Moon and Lillie were both racing so far ahead in their own ways, it was starting to feel like he was falling behind! But that sort of attitude about keeping up was what had made everything go wrong to start with. So instead... they just had to all stick together no matter what. That was what was best.
“And congratulations, Moon.” Some hours later, notified the group had made it to the Aether House, Kahili Hano strode through its doors, able to appear anywhere in Alola within hours thanks to her powerful bird Pokemon. Moon, Hau, and Lillie all greeted her, Kahili pleased to see them together and well. “I hope your time with Samson Oak’s research expedition was enjoyable?”

“It was!” Hau quickly began recounting getting to see all the Pokemon around the Rocklands, Lillie correcting him on research terms with more than enough accuracy to show the topic was very interesting to her indeed. The discussion of Ryuki Oda appearing and testing Moon's Shelgon drew raised eyebrows from the Flying-type expert, but Kahili chose not to push the subject. Questioning every single ridiculous thing that happened around Moon was quickly growing passé. So instead she turned to Moon with the question that really mattered.

“Moon, how are you?”

Moon answered honestly that she was fine. Her Trial the night before had gone well. A quick glance at Acerola showed no significant reaction to those words, so Kahili accepted they must be true. “Your sixth Trial complete then. Next comes the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island's Grand Trial. Then the Trial and Grand Trial of Poni Island. Though without a Kahuna that will be difficult.”

“How long does it take the Tapu to pick a Kahuna?” Hau asked, not having heard much about the appointing of the last. Kahili shrugged. “Tapu Bulu took some time to pick the current Kahuna of Ula'ula Island, but it had a reason. Tapu Fini not doing so is... strange... especially with such a candidate as Captain Mina there.”

Maybe Mina didn't want to be a Kahuna, Moon suggested, knowing nothing of the Captain of Poni Island. Acerola, standing behind the group, gave a wide-eyed expression to Kahili, sticking her with the duty of explaining it properly. The woman sighed.

“The role of Kahuna isn't exactly something that can be refused.”

Moon's pause then, contemplative, was also tinged by annoyance. She didn't like the sound of that either. If a Tapu tried to make her a Kahuna she'd reject it outright.

This time everyone went silent and stared at her as she said that. Moon, catching their expressions, shrunk back. Kahili shook her head and attempted to move things on.

“I will be here in Mahihinu for as long as the three of you are. You may call upon me should you need me for anything.” All three children thanked Kahili for that. Moon had told the others after arriving at the research camp what Kahili had said to her, that Professor Kukui wasn't allowed here. None knew why, but Kahili's resolute statement that she would be relieved. They thanked her for that.

Moon asked about visiting Melemele.

“There's a dock just south of here!” Acerola chimed in, knowing Mahihinu inside and out. “We can get you on a ferry to Melemele tomorrow, and you can come right back here when you're ready to! I'll keep Hau and Lillie busy and not too lonely while you're visiting home, okay?” Moon nodded. Then looked to the other two. Were they okay with that? This time Hau and Lillie both gave Moon their reassurances.
“Moon,” Lillie stepped forward, “go and see your mother: she will be so happy to see you. It is good... that you can do that.”

“Yeah!” Hau's agreement covered the chance to think on Lillie's words, “We'll be waiting for you to get back, but we'll also be doing our best with our own Island Challenges, okay Moon?” She nodded, thankful for each's words. Thanks to them, she'd be able to sleep easy that night. And head back home, for a little while, knowing she would be back soon enough to see them again. All were happy with that.

And the night closed around them in peace.

A notification popped up on a screen, a match of information found. At her desk, the point of command for the Aether Paradise and Aether Foundation as a whole, Lusamine, Madam President of the Aether Foundation, smiled widely.

“Ah, there you are.”

Chapter End Notes

Compared to my usual pace this chapter came out a little slower - life had a lot of things to say over the last week. I mean overall I know I'm still going crazy fast, so I'm not too fussed about it, but it does still irk me slightly. Creating Eldritch once a week is part of my habits, y'know? That said, while at the start of November I made noises about maybe being able to write enough Eldritch for Nanowrimo, there's definitely no way I'm going to hit 50k words of it in this month. Sum total is about 35.5k over four chapters, and that's perfectly fine, just not nano. That's okay though. We had fun here. That's what really matters.

In more exciting news, there's two milestones for me to talk about! First as of the last chapter, Eldritch has passed 10k views on AO3! Yay! As Eldritch gets bigger and bigger, I know it will turn people off who view it as too big to get into, but I'm so thankful for every reader, from those with me from chapter 1 to those who saw this behemoth today and said "You know what yes, I will do this" and caught up. Bless you. Bless you so much.

Second news, and something I'm really pleased with, is that Eldritch has a recommendation on tvtropes! Under the FanfiRecs/PokemonGeneral page you will find a link to Eldritch and psst, hey, if the person who did that is here, <3. In a mass fiction environment like AO3, a completed fic becomes harder and harder to gain attention as time passes on and new works appear - so stuff like that which means people will still have the opportunity to discover Eldritch even after it's finished in however many months means so much to me. Knowing that this work I'm giving my all to has places people can find it... I'm so genuinely thankful. So thank you for that. It's deeply appreciated.

As of this chapter we've arrived in Mahihinu, a location I designed to better fit this environment and situation than just the Aether House chilling on its own. For now things are at peace, but you all know full well something is simmering beneath the
surface. We'll likely find out what soon enough. Look forward to it... if you dare.

Okay that's it for these notes, thank you all so much for reading, every hit, kudos, bookmark, and comment on this fic is treasured dearly by me. The next chapter will be when it is, and we'll continue on with the Ula'ula arc. I've got a good estimate and flow of events set for how much is left, and I can say we're on our way to the arc's conclusion. I'd advise you to prepare for that but...

none of us are ready.
The Hau’oli City Marina was just as Moon remembered it: cool air, the thick smell of saltwater on the breeze, and the shadows of nearby buildings cast long across the area. It was strange how nostalgic it felt as she disembarked from the ferry that had brought her here. She’d left from this point just two months ago, secreted away in the early morning on the boat of Professor Kukui, taken from Melemele Island to Akala so she might continue her Island Challenge. Hidden from the prying eyes and relentless hounding of those too interested in her strange abilities to give her a moment’s peace.

Nowdays the eyes that settled on her were both contemplative and oft-cautious. Her display in Malie Garden, standing up to the Team Skull Boss Guzma with an array of Pokemon someone her age simply should not have, combined with her ability to perform Z-Moves without limit, combined once again with the strange sensation of her Bonds and Z-Moves – other Trainers with the sense for Bonds finding Moon difficult to approach, and the feeling of her Z-Aura frankly unnatural – had made Moon a target of caution. Children running around with one or two Pokemon were fine and normal. Teens and young adults with partners of greater strength notable but accepted. Those adults with full teams of power all figures of respect.

But Moon had a team that made her equal to adults at the age of eleven. And seemingly no restriction on her ability to perform Z-Moves. A child with such ability... caution, was the word. People felt they should be careful. Shouldn't provoke her. And that wariness often overrode sense. Prevented people from acting normally in her presence. Only those who knew Moon, those without any such sense for Bonds or concern for her abilities, or those with the wisdom to understand she was still herself, rose above that. In the end she didn't mind as much as she might have.

Pitaya had warned Moon. Had, in Moon's time with the Dragon Tamers of Alola, helped her find a measure of inner peace, enough to wrangle the power she held. And the other half of Pitaya's advice, that Moon would still have those truly important to her by her side, had been the key. Moon had returned to Hau and Lillie and they had still stayed by her. She'd gone on and been able to be friends with Hapu, with Captain Acerola, and have them treat her in no odd ways. The abilities she had may make people wary, but there were still plenty who'd reach out to her all the same.

But then that had already been proven again that very morning.

She'd been woken early by Poipole, the Poison Pin Pokemon active from the first light of day. Aether House's sleeping arrangements were large groupings of beds, both single and bunk, which Moon, Lillie, and Hau had all distributed themselves amongst claiming open spots that Acerola indicated. She had a bed she'd been using from the beginning and wasn't changing from that no thank you very much.

To keep Poipole from disturbing the others in the room – Lillie especially as the Pokemon appeared intent on getting at her bed and the bag beside it with Nebby sleeping within – Moon had taken the Pokemon outside of the sleeping area, out to the main foyer of the building where it could make more noise. Actually she'd intended to take it outside entirely, but Jace, at the front desk looking as tired as could be for the early hour of the day, occupied her attention. He'd been interested in hearing everything Moon wanted to talk about – from her journey, to her Pokemon, to Poipole itself. Upfront and honest, the Aether Foundation employee had stated he could recognise the creature as an Ultra Beast. And also knew that somehow that hadn't been reported to the Aether Foundation because a lot of people would've come running if they'd known Moon had such.
Still, Jace had smiled and held a raised finger over his mouth, he knew Moon would be happier keeping out of that for as long as she could, so he wouldn't be the one to tell on her. She appreciated that. Spoke with him, for a little while, about each of their Island Challenges, and the journeys they'd had. Jace seemed wistful talking about his. Did he miss it? she'd asked. He'd looked surprised by her question.

And hadn't found a satisfactory answer before she left.

The boat leaving from the docks of Mahihinu had been an early one. A roused Hau and barely awake Lillie greeted Moon at the entrance to Aether House, reassured her they'd be there when she returned, and saw her off with Acerola. Moon got the feeling Lillie was heading immediately back to bed. She'd didn't blame her.

The ferry from Mahihinu made its way to the Hau'oli City Marina slowly: first stopping at Konikoni and Heahea City on Akala Island, then at the Aether Paradise for those working there to disembark – and those returning from night shifts to get their own rest – then on to the main city of Melemele. It had been on the way from Aether Paradise to Hau'oli, the only time the boat had been emptier the first leg between Mahihinu and Konikoni, that a young boy had leaned over a seat, stared for a moment at Moon sitting with Poipole resting in her lap – the Pokemon listening to her request for peace on the ride, mainly so Moon herself could rest – then hauled himself out of his seat and sat down next to her. Moon, shaken from her restful state, looked at the younger boy of perhaps six or seven sitting beside her. He smiled.

"Hey what's that Pokemon?"

Poipole, aware it had caught someone's interest, set to preening and showing off, posing while floating above Moon's lap now, before flipping upside-down and spinning in the air. The young boy laughed and clapped at the showoffish Pokemon as Moon gave its name and made sure she mentioned how much of a troublemaker it could be. Poipole didn't seem to respond to her barb.

For a minute Moon, though mostly it was Poipole doing so, entertained the child, the boy enraptured by the energetic Pokemon. He was looking forward to having his own one day! His mom had a Furfrou that was big and friendly and he wanted one too! Did Moon have a Furfrou? She did, she'd answered, talking about catching it outside of Hau'oli City, and the times she'd battled alongside it. Not many, though Moon didn't speak about this part, as her quickly rotating team had moved many Pokemon she'd caught to the Pelago, but Furfrou was doing well there too. It seemed to enjoy digging in the caves Mohn had discovered on one of the Poke Pelago islands. It had been a while since Moon had visited the Pelago too. She should go back there as well.

So many places to be...

"Excuse me, I- oh!" The voice of an older woman, standing up now after noticing her son had disappeared from his seat, came to a halt as she spied the boy sitting in the seat behind where they had been, next to another young girl. Older than her son, just enough to be on a Pokemon Journey, with a vibrant purple Pokemon out and about. That wasn't really the interesting part though. What mattered was who the girl was.

That was Moon.

"Please forgive my son," she quickly tried to excuse him, so as not to disturb the young girl racing across Alola, with Pokemon of incredible power and who – the Masked Royal had said – should be left well enough alone. "He didn't mean to disturb you." The shake of Moon's head and insistence it was fine didn't seem to assuage the woman's worries. She reached down to touch her son's shoulder, pushing slightly to move him to stand. He huffed at her.
“I wanna sit with her Pokemon!”

“You shouldn't hassle her!”

“We were just talking!”

The argument taking place quickly concerned Moon, who had actually been enjoying just talking without concern. But her attempts to placate the woman failed to cross over. She seemed determined to move her son back to their own seat.

An older man sitting in a seat nearby piped up.

“Ah let him be, love, I think the young miss was enjoying chatting!”

“But-” she looked at the man, shaking her head, “-he shouldn't be-”

“It's fine,” a waved hand from him blew off her worries, the few others seated around listening in on the conversation, aware the girl sitting there was the Trainer Moon. “Hey you should tell her about your Furfrou, she was just talking about having one of her own!”

“Oh, I...” startled, the mother glanced back at Moon, who was now looking up at her with some measure of expectation. “Well, his name is Mr. Scruffs, and...”

The remainder of the trip to Hau'oli City was conversational. Moon listened to and spoke with those around. When asked what she was heading to Melemele for, explained she wanted to visit her mother after being away for so long. Immediately as she said that the older woman herself became more relaxed, warmer of tone, supportive of Moon and insisting that Moon's mother would no doubt be delighted by her return. A few other people with their own Pokemon spoke to Moon about them. One or two asked how her Island Challenge was going. No-one stopped talking or moved away when Moon expressed she'd finished her sixth Trial.

This was Alola as it should be.

And as Moon disembarked the ferry onto the docks of the Hau'oli Marina, Poipole clutching onto her back, as the others who'd travelled with her wished her a good day and the best of luck in her endeavours, Moon had smiled. Smiled because even though that current of caution and wariness lurked about her, the true spirit of Alola was stronger still. She knew now, in her heart, that that worry would fade. But the warmth of this region would not.

She was happy.

As Moon walked she looked for a point in the ground, the place where three months ago a crater had been, left by the Z-Move Ilima had used to scare a pack of Team Skull Grunts off, the first Z-Move she had ever seen. Experiences since then, seeing other Captains using Z-Moves, had told her that Ilima's had been a little more forceful than regular, given how winded he had been in its wake. Maybe he'd needed to go overboard to get Team Skull to back off.

Maybe he'd just been showing off for her sake.

However it may be, where that damage had been was paved over and repaired long ago now, and there was no sign of anything having happened in its place. Just the memories Moon could superimpose over this location, seeing Ilima standing there with the Yungoos before him, performing the Z-Pose for the Normalium-Z. Moon had used that pose time and time again, both in battle and in training – her experiences with the Dragon Tamers an extensive daily volume of Z-Moves – and traced her knowledge and appreciation for it back to this moment. She was thankful for Captain Ilima
having taken the time to show her such.

He grinned wide to see her wandering down the street.

With the seven Captains of Alola being in constant contact with one another, and all taking on a significant intent in being responsible for Moon, Ilima had been informed the night before by Acerola that Moon would be returning to Melemele. So he'd known the ferry she was catching’s schedule, known when she would be here, and moved to greet her in turn. Moon, looking up and seeing the brown-skinned and pink-haired Captain ahead, called out his name and moved faster towards him. Ilima smiled gently at her excitement.

The last time he'd seen her she'd been under such stressful conditions. Now there was vibrance and life to her. It was incredibly pleasing to see. He couldn't help his smile.

Not that he wanted to.

“Greetings, Moon, it is good to see you again. I see your Island Challenge has treated you well.” In response to Ilima's words Moon nodded immediately, surprised he'd come to see her. Poipole stuck its head over her shoulder, Ilima gazing into the bright blue eyes of the Ultra Beast. Captain Sophocles had told everyone about that too. Ilima waved a hand absentely. “What one Captain knows every Captain knows – and I would be remiss to not welcome you back to Melemele Island. I understand you wish to visit your mother, so took the initiative in retrieving a Ride Tauros for you to take across the city. Please do go ahead – I would hardly wish to get in the way of such an important reunion.”

Moon bowed her head and gave her thanks, Ilima appreciating her manners. Sophocles, after Moon's first attempt at his Trial, had broken down the entire event and thoroughly shocked the four Captains to have overseen Moon before. Her treating others rudely, not properly caring for her Pokemon in battle, and losing herself as explosively as she had, came as a surprise beyond measure to each and every one of them. They'd never seen it coming, and each of their prides had taken a hit realising that. There was a genuine sensation, in each Captain and Kahuna to have come before this moment, of failure to properly understand what Moon was going through as she took her Island Challenge.

Then immediately after a solid resolution to never let her or anyone else down in such a way again.

If Moon stayed on Melemele for long enough, Ilima considered as he directed her to the Ride Tauros waiting nearby, he would enjoy occupying her attention for a moment. Testing her Pokemon and her training, and giving what advice he could to help her prepare for her third Grand Trial. But Acerola had mentioned clearly that Moon would likely only go so long before being driven to return to Lillie and Hau, and in the time she was here her time with her mother was first priority. As much as he'd missed his chance to test her in the beginning of her journey, Ilima had found some measure of patient acceptance that his moment would come. And the more able Moon grew, the more joyous that moment would be.

He'd still try to get a battle while she was here though. He couldn't be blamed for that much, right?

With her thanks to Ilima given Moon set off across Hau'oli City, reliving the moments she and Hau had completed the Ride Pokemon Safety Course together those few months back, earning the right to rent and ride those Pokemon across Alola. They'd simply been enjoying growing, and exploring, and seeing new things. She really had fallen from that mindset as her Island Challenge continued.

Maybe after taking Lillie to the Ruins of Hope they could all go back to Malie City. Hau still had his fifth Trial. And Moon had never had the chance to explore the city proper. The three of them going about it together... that would be nice. She'd enjoy that.
She’d mention it when the chance arose.

From the southern marina of Hau‘oli City Moon rode, Poipole holding onto her back and letting the racing wind rush over it, up through the city centre, then east, past residential houses and a beach-front overlooking golden sands, shimmering blue seas, and countless people and Pokemon taking it all in. Out along the road leading to the Trainer's School of Melemele Island, closed today for the weekend had begun. Then further beyond into the Hau‘oli Outskirts, that region between city and Iki Town that wasn't quite either but wasn't quite neither either. Her house was close to the sea, the path leading from it down to the waters where the laboratory of Professor Kukui could be found. Moon was unsure who had been looking after it while Kukui and Lillie were gone these past months. But she didn't focus on that for now.

She focused on home.

The Ride Tauros had been returned to a station at the city's edge, Moon heading on foot from there. And now she was here, before her home, a place she had only lived in for a little while in total. She'd gone on her Island Challenge soon after arriving in Alola. The house wasn't familiar to her in the way a home one lived in for years was. But there was still a feeling to it, a presence, that made it home. Moon made her way to the door.

Children often struggle to think of their parents' lives as their own, and so as Moon reached out to the door she fully expected her mother to answer. She'd spent time considering whether to knock or simply enter – no warning given so she might surprise her mother – and chose in the end to knock. For now Moon's belief that her mother would always be there remained true. An echoing “Just a minute!” answered the rap of her knuckles. The sound of her mother's voice in person struck Moon deeply just hearing it.

Ah, she was home.

The door opened. For the briefest of moments Jewellery looked forward, before angling her eyes down, meeting her daughter's. Recognition filled in an instant as her mouth widened and the first notes of absolute delight formed in her voice. Moon smiled at her.

Jewellery embraced her daughter without a second thought.

“Moon!” The cry of her name in her ear Moon answered by tightening her own grip back, her own hug of her mother, feeling Jewellery give her all into holding her daughter close. They stayed like that for moments that stretched together, one length of time just holding on to one another. Poipole mirrored the motion and pushed its head against Moon and Jewellery's as well. Happy to call anywhere Moon did home.

When Moon slackened her grip as sign to let go Jewellery drew back, but first planted a kiss upon her daughter's forehead. One of Moon's hands found one of her own and squeezed it tightly.

Jewellery nearly cried right then and there.

“Why didn't you tell me you- oh you just love surprising your mother don't you? Come in come in, let me make you something, oh Moon tell me everything I want to hear absolutely everything!”

Wasting no time Jewellery guided her daughter inside, the Kanto-native Meowth that lived alongside Jewellery eyeing off Moon as she returned. The Scratch Cat Pokemon did not make nearly as grand a show of welcoming Moon as Jewellery had, but it did approach and butt its head, cool metal coin set within it, against her leg. Moon smiled down at it and said hello. The Pokemon made a noise of approval back and stayed close to her. Poipole watched from where it stayed hanging on to Moon's
shoulder.

Immediately Jewellery set to preparing a meal, one made of all her daughter's favourite foods – the ingredients for such always kept fresh within her house. A surprise beyond surprises her daughter had returned, unannounced once more, as she seemed wont to do. And with a new friend as well! Looking out from the kitchen Jewellery watched as Moon spoke to the purple Pokemon with her, an affectionate, if high-pitched, sound coming from it in response to her daughter's words. It was the picture of a Trainer with great love for their partner and a partner who clearly loved them back. Jewellery couldn't stop smiling at the sight. She'd been considering being a homebody today, not quite in the mood to head out and greet the friends she'd made around the area. Her reward for that? Her own beloved daughter showing up on her doorstep. She couldn't believe her luck.

And she couldn't be happier.

It had been just over five weeks. Just over five weeks since the call came in the early evening, Professor Kukui on the line. He'd checked in before, now and again, the same as Moon had: to let Jewellery know how things were going on. Because of that receiving a call from him wasn't a surprise or cause for concern.

Because of that what he said shocked her as deeply as it did.

To hear her daughter had undergone what was essentially an emotional breakdown brought on by failing a Trial in her Island Challenge had Jewellery prepared to march to Ula'ula Island herself with hellfire in her eyes for those responsible. Kukui, constantly apologising and accepting he had to take blame in this, succeeded in staying Jewellery for a moment, her attention refocusing upon Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, who had taken Moon in. So Jewellery spoke to Pitaya.

Jewellery spoke to Pitaya for a very long time indeed.

“She feels ashamed,” the Guildmaster had said clearly, “though it is in no way truly her fault. The pressure upon her, and our ignorance of it, created this moment, and it is the responsibility of everyone who has taken a role in guiding her to shoulder that blame. Nonetheless seeing those she values, those she cares about, is too much for her now that she believes she has failed them all, and let them down. I will do my utmost to help her recover from this. I am sorry that I must ask you to trust me with your daughter's care.”

Few times in her life had Jewellery felt as impotent, as powerless, as she did hearing Moon's voice that day. Pitaya had passed the call to Moon, who had answered with few words. Just that she was training with the Dragon Tamers now. Didn't want her mother to worry. How could she not? All Jewellery could do was worry. Only the voices of others stayed her hand. Kukui firstly, promising that Pitaya knew how to care for Moon. Then Hala, the Kahuna seeking out Jewellery later that day. Still she'd worried, and stressed, and fretted, and nearly boarded a ferry to Malie City the next day.

Living with that stress had been some of the worst few days of her life.

Yet in the days and weeks to pass Pitaya did as she had promised. Each time Jewellery called, or Moon called her, there was news her daughter was feeling better. More stable. Understanding that the demands she'd placed upon herself, that had been placed upon her by everyone's unintentional expectations, had pushed her too far. Call by call Jewellery felt her fear and concern melt away. In the end she struggled to express how thankful she was to the Guildmaster.

Pitaya had been unwilling to accept her words.

“I too am at fault,” the woman had said when they finally met, Jewellery travelling to Malie City to
join the Guildmaster for a meal and speak to her face-to-face. “For I too assumed Moon's progress was made with head-held high, as unaffected by the stress of this challenge as she is by the power of her Bonds. When I first approached her it was with a flawed mindset intending to entice her with further challenge. That only drove her further to that point. I cannot accept thanks, for my actions are my apology. I hope that you will forgive me.”

She would. As long as Moon did first.

Moon, sitting at the table of her home, happily dug into the food Jewellery provided her, Poipole similarly enjoying what was on offer as Jewellery watched over her daughter with a feeling so jubilant it felt as if her heart would burst from her chest. Moon’s Pokemon Journey was so different to so many, staying away from home so long after first heading out, that it had left Jewellery wholly unprepared for the silence of the house. She knew, in her heart of hearts, that she would not have her daughter for long before Moon returned to her journey but while she did she...

“I'm so happy to see you.”

Moon stood up and moved to hug her mother again. She really was going to cry!

“Moon, you...” looking down at her daughter, Jewellery realised what stood out to her, “you've gotten taller!” When Moon stepped back her mother was quick to raise a hand, holding it out to rest upon Moon's short-cut hair. Yes, Jewellery was sure, her daughter was a little taller! Just a bit, in these two months past, but still! Actually more than that, now that Jewellery looked at her daughter closely and with focus, she saw slight other differences too. There was slightly more sharpness to her face. And from her journey across Alola, so often trekked on foot with Pokemon beside her, Moon glowed with health as well. The first images of the woman her daughter would grow up to be.

Oh now she was definitely going to cry!

Pokemon Journeys were deeply interlinked with the growth of children, their first steps on the path to adulthood. Taking responsibility for their partners, learning to care for others and see the world around them: it was the nature of this world as it was to support such. For many children the length of a Pokemon Journey would be same as their own growth, times spent away from home learning more about being a part of this world, and time spent at home preparing to face their next challenges. But Moon's difference, her inexhaustible pace, kept her away for so much longer than most. Her journey, by the definition of its end, would be over so much sooner.

But these beginning moments of her growth, of her first steps into maturity, Jewellery would miss. She did not regret Moon’s ability. She did not regret Moon’s journey. She did not regret anything about Moon at all.

But she did regret she wouldn't be able to be there as much as she wished she could.

“Now Moon,” with the food served eaten, Jewellery settled Moon with an excited look, “tell me everything! All about your journey and about your partners too! I want to know everything!”

So Moon told her.

One by one Jewellery was introduced to Moon's partners, Poipole first of course, but Decidueye, Shelgon, Sylveon, and Larvesta too. Compared to those five Milotic was slightly too large to show off inside the house, and so when Moon and her mother later walked down to the beach Moon unleashed the Tender Pokemon then. Jewellery had seen all of them – besides Poipole – in the recording of Moon's battle with the leader of Team Skull – something else that had nearly given her an attack! – but meeting them in person was an experience all of its own. Jewellery, though not a
battling Trainer for many years now, still had stood on the League stage herself. She could sense a Trainer's Bonds, not well but ably enough. So she could sense the impossibility around Moon, the sheer wall of presence to her Bonds that could not be told apart. But she saw her daughter too and her daughter she loved with all her heart.

So Jewellery just embraced her and heard her story instead.

Moon told most of it. In the end there were pieces she kept silent, things she did not want to discuss. Tapu Koko challenging her in Verdant Cavern. Tapu Lele grabbing her at the Ruins of Life. Tapu Bulu's destruction of Tapu Village, and her striking of the Guardian. No words of Team Skull's Plumeria threatening her. Nor of the Aether President Lusamine's hurting of her arm, the woman's presence felt all across Alola, whether in advertisements for the Foundation or the work the Foundation did itself. Moon spent little details on the early days of Ula'ula Island, where she'd lost herself to the pressure she felt. And spoke absolutely nothing of the illusions of Tapu Village, or the meeting with Kahuna Holei and her words.

But even keeping all those moments silent, times Moon struggled with understanding how she felt about them, or did not want to worry her mother with, there was still so much to the story as to enrapture Jewellery. Her daughter talked freely and for hours, happy to discuss all manner of things. It was, without question, the most life and light Jewellery had ever seen in her. Moon was, truly, happy beyond measure.

The feeling of that was so intense Jewellery almost couldn't bear it.

And so for the rest of that day the two stayed together, talking and sharing their experiences and their love for one another. The happiness Moon felt with the mother she loved, it helped her. She'd needed this, truly needed this. And so she stayed. And the first of these two nights back with her mother passed joyfully on.

Captain Acerola had left Mahihinu shortly after seeing Moon off, taking the two Ride Mudsdale she had borrowed from Samson Oak's Research Expedition east, through Tapu Village, then Haina Oasis, and into the Rocklands back to that camp. She had her own Pokemon for travel, and could easily return to Mahihinu using her Drifblim, though the Blimp Pokemon often took roundabout ways depending on the currents of the air. The total journey would still be a good few hours. While she was away, Lillie and Hau took charge of entertaining themselves.

“Come on Lillie let's head out!” Hau's call was agreed to quickly, Lillie following him outside of Aether House's enclosure, making no eye contact with the Aether Foundation worker at its desk. She'd never been particularly exposed to the regular members of the Foundation, kept separate to them in the majority of her lifestyle, and so hoped this was one who would not know her.

But she'd still rather not press her luck.

Mahihinu was a different place to anywhere else in Alola, for even after ten years it was still a location struggling to define itself. It was no city like the largest of Alola. It was no ancient town like Iki, or Wahiola either. It stretched wide like Konikoni City, curving around the western coast of Ula'ula; held a population more like Wai'oli, buildings spread out with space between each; and remained disconnected in so many ways to the rest of the island itself. Go too far north and the territory of Po Town would block the way. East was Tapu Village's remains, then the Rocklands, barriers on the journey to Malie City. And the mountainous landscape bisecting Ula'ula Island wasn't fit for any sort of travel at all. No, Mahihinu's main connection to other locations was by boat, and a
life lived by boat was the most common for its residents.

Fields grew vegetable produce, boats fished in the clear waters off of the coast, and the town lived a quiet life, no grand motions made to turn it into anything more. Maybe the actions of Tapu Bulu, destroying the last residence of so many of Mahihinu's people, had afeared them to the concept of change. Maybe so many people had decided the best way to continue on was to just live quiet lives from beginning to end.

Maybe this was just the way it should be.

But even in this quiet town, the people about friendly and welcoming to Hau and Lillie, each keeping a Pokemon close – Hau with Pancham out and holding onto one of the legs of his shorts, Lillie with Nebby in the bag she always held tight – there were still sparks to be found. Little seeds that might one day blossom. Today, as the two friends spent the time before Acerola returned just exploring the local area themselves, loud voices and a rush of younger children drew their attention. Something was going on down by the beach.

So of course they followed along.

“There he is!” The voices of not only children but a number of adults filled the air, people gathered at the shoreline down from the Aether House and other housing around, a crowd watching out over the water as a figure atop a Pokemon cut a line through crashing waves. It was an elegant and stylish display, the group greatly entertained by the action. Hau watched riveted, the sight of someone easily surfing over the water capturing his full attention. He wanted to try that!

“I want to try that!”

Lillie, who while aesthetically appreciated the show very much did not want to attempt riding a Pokemon amongst surging waters, made some form of non-committal noise when Hau looked at her. He looked back at the man surfing, and whooped as the figure closed into the shore, joining the crowd of children and young adults swarming down around him.

The man, tall and wrapped in a kimono of white with black lining, the similarly dark long scarf he wore matching the spiked hair styled back behind his ears with a crop of it hanging over his face, came to a stop just before the shore, remaining atop the Brutal Pokemon Sharpedo, a four finned Pokemon with three blue atop head and from sides, one white from below, and cavernous mouth lined with sharp teeth. He smiled and waved to the gathered group. Up close Hau heard a name amongst the people gathered.

Grimsley.

Hey hadn't he heard that name before?

“Man oh man, you're all bustling today, huh?” The smooth voice of Grimsley stretched over the waves to the shore, those gathered folks waving with delight to see him. He waved back with a lazy motion. Held a lopsided grin. “It hasn't been more than a week since I went out on my surfing trip, did you all miss me that much?”

“Uncle Grimsley!” One of the younger ones amongst the crowd shouted out. “You promised you’d teach us how to surf Pokemon when you got back!” Various other voices agreed with that. Grimsley paused.

Oh heck he had too hadn't he?

“R-right!” Nodding his head, Grimsley gave a smile slightly less natural, “that's no problem then, do
you all have Pokemon to try and surf with? A Mantine is best, but there're plenty others you can try with too. Who here has a Water-type Pokemon with them?"

Mutters amongst the crowd, voices confused and sure that Grimsley had mentioned he'd prepare the Pokemon for surf class, failed to eclipse Hau's loud voice, raised hand, and the relief Grimsley felt in having someone bail him out for forgetting entirely about his promise. He'd need to move quick after this to get a bunch of Ride Pokemon together for lessons. For now Grimsley waved Hau forward.

“Alright alright, step forward young man, I'll start off by teaching you the basics and everyone else can watch you learn. Then tomorrow we can try proper – I'll go find some Ride Pokemon we can use for those who don't have their own.” Continued muttering amongst the crowd didn't stop Hau from bounding forward, or from the other young ones excitedly agreeing and nodding along. Grimsley, internally, breathed out a sigh of relief. Phew. That could've been embarrassing.

He really should have remembered that.

“Your name?”

“Hau!”

Oh, Grimsley nodded, showing little reaction, so this was Hau, huh? Grandson of the Melemele Kahuna, one of the two Trainers going beyond one-hundred percent speed on their Island Challenges. Look at that Pancham clutching tight to him, cute as a button little girl, she clearly trusted him fully. What an astounding boy.

A brief look over Hau's head, scanning the crowd gathered, showed no signs of the second young one known to be journeying beside him. Grimsley had followed all the news, knew full well the entire Moon deal – as much as was known in the public sphere at least – and would admit he had his curiosity. No sightings today though. He focused back on Hau.

“I like your partner there, but I don't think she'll be able to help with surfing lessons.”

“Oh!” Realising, Hau turned to the Pancham and knelt down, talking to her for a moment, patting her head, before returning her to the Luxury Ball he used for her. Grimsley grinned at the sight. Hau was the doting sort. Well he didn't mind that either. A moment later Hau had pulled out a different Pokeball, and activated it to manifest a Pokemon that would do well in the water. The Pop Star Pokemon Brionne, a blue seal-like creature with ruffled rings of white and teal along its body, strong flippers and a bright pink nose, appeared right in the water, balancing up on its tail and clapping its fins together happily. Well alright then.

“Not too bad, not too bad,” Grimsley nodded, well aware that for the amount of time Hau had spent on his Island Challenge, having evolved a starter Pokemon to this level already was completely unreasonable, “they're definitely ready for a swim. But if you want to ride, the only way they're going to bear your weight is by going at speed. This won't be an easy learning experience, still want to try?”

“Yeah!” Hau nodded, Brionne joining the motion. Look at the two of them so in sync. Seems there was no way this wasn't going down. Grimsley tapped a foot upon his Sharpedo's back, the Pokemon beginning to retreat from the shore with its Trainer atop it.

“Alright then, lose the shoes and come join me out in the water.”

“Okay!” Hau quickly turned to find Lillie, who agreed to mind his shoes and bag while he was out on the water with Brionne. Others around, many recognising Hau, wished him well with trying out
Pokemon Surfing, receiving smiles and thanks from Hau in return. Shortly after, holding onto Brionne's back, Hau was brought out by the Pokemon into the water, paddling with his own legs while clutching tight, looking up at Grimsley on his own Pokemon before him. Grimsley nodded. Lesson time.

“Since you're a Trainer and this is your partner, here's an advanced lesson to get you started,” the tall and pale-skinned man advised. “Because you have a Bond together, because you can share your thoughts, you can move together as one and maintain better balance than someone trying to react to the Pokemon they're riding. So that's lesson number one, rely on your Bond to keep pace and balance. That's not really something I can tell a bunch of kids who don't even have their own Pokemon yet you know.”

“Right!” Hau nodded, before attempting to haul himself up onto Brionne's back, the blue-furred Pokemon dipping under the water from his weight. Brionne was strong enough, but carrying a person on its back was still an issue. Hau struggled to find balance before slipping back into the water with a loud “ack!” Grimsley just smiled.

“Let's try again.”

From the shore the gathered crowd watched as Hau continued attempting to ride his Pokemon: after a little while figuring out his balance, trying to move over calmer waters and keep his footing, failing a few times more before accomplishing that, and eventually working up to keeping even on Brionne's back as the Pop Star Pokemon zoomed across the water. Then right into a wave and the two wiped out hard. A collective vocal flinch from the crowd sounded out, before shouting encouragement across the water as Hau, soaked thoroughly but as happy as could be, popped his head back above the water and tried again. He was relentless.

Voices praising him sounded out around Lillie.

She listened with interest hearing others speaking of Hau, about his pace, mentioning that he and Moon were often seen together, some even asking her about both. Lillie attempted to handle their interest, but was better saved by other members of the crowd telling those curious not to be rude in prying. This supportive wave of people, this spirit of Alola, Lillie found it comforting.

Even she joined in yelling out reassurances for Hau as he continued to practise upon the waves.

By the time the afternoon was setting in proper Hau had found his pace, he and Brionne working together, leaning into each turn and wave in perfect synchronisation. It was exactly as Grimsley had said: by relying on his Bond with Brionne Hau was able to match his partner in every way. This closeness, this focus, it would manifest again in Hau's next battle, his ability to focus on and direct through Bonds honed by this act. Grimsley, watching over the boy's growth, shook his head at its speed.

He'd been years older before he'd gotten nearly as close to the ability Hau was showing here. Honestly, ridiculous.

This younger generation really was prepared to shine.

“Alright then,” when Grimsley returned to the shore, a tired but happy Hau paddling after while holding onto Brionne's back, the tall man addressed the crowd. “You can see that learning to Pokemon Surf is going to be a lot of falling into the water and starting by just figuring out how to stand. We can start tomorrow whether you have your own Pokemon or not, so come meet me here in the morning and I'll teach you how, alright?”
Appreciation from those still around, the riveted children especially, relieved Grimsley that he was going to get away with this after all. He reached down a hand as Brionne passed his Sharpedo by and patted Hau on the head. “You're a fine student,” he nodded his appreciation, “and an excellent Trainer. Good luck with your Island Challenge.”

Hau, surprised by the compliment, let his mouth hang for a moment before a wave pushed seawater into it and he spluttered and coughed, an almost immaculately dry Grimsley laughing at the motion as Brionne hauled its Trainer ashore. Lillie greeted the soaked Hau, standing just a few paces back so he wouldn't get her wet himself.

When he bounded to his feet and shook like a Herdier to throw as much water off of him as he could she still ended up splattered by seawater all the same. Huffing and complaining did nothing to shelve his smile. So she just gave up with a sigh and smiled at him too.

“You did very well.”

He grinned as wide as he could.

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Kahili and Acerola both caught the two for the night's meal, the four enjoying one another's company for it. The stories of the day for Hau and Lillie had both Kahili and Acerola nod. That sounded about right. Acerola went first.

“Uncle Grimsley came out to Alola last year, he's waaaay popular with everyone because of his Pokemon Surfing!”

“He's also an exceptionally strong Trainer,” Kahili added on, “a former member of Unova's Elite Four, and a registered competitor in the first Alolan Pokemon League.”

“That's where I heard his name!” Realising in an instant, Hau slapped a closed fist against an open palm, “from the dinner in Heahea!” Kahili nodded. That was right. Hau huffed that he hadn't remembered that sooner. If he'd known Grimsley were that cool he would've had loads of questions about ways to improve as a Trainer. Little did Hau realise Grimsley had already taught him one of the most important. He still contemplated it as he turned and looked at Brionne, asleep before a plate of food he'd served. The heavy exercise of the day had worn his partner out, and they were sleeping deeply indeed. He smiled at them. They'd done well.

Moon had evolved her partner to its final level, Decidueye, evolution of Dartrix, evolution of Rowlet, so quickly. But Hau understood well that had taken something maybe no-one else could do, he could just tell when looking at it. So the fact Brionne hadn't evolved, the fact they wouldn't for a good while yet, didn't worry him too much. They were still getting stronger together. Still doing their best. And that was what was most important. Doing their best.

And continuing to take part in Alola as they went.

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The next morning of Moon's visit to her mother on Melemele dawned with the two sharing another meal – Jewellery too intent on cooking for Moon all her favourite foods to fall prey to the desire to go out together on the town. Poipole and Meowth had reached less of an understanding as much as a division of space – the floating Ultra Beast to remain always above the ground, only landing to hold on to Moon or sit on taller furniture, the Scratch Cat disapproving Poipole descending below table
height. Moon and Jewellery both fussed with their respective Pokemon, but the two remained at odds for the moment. Jewellery would suggest taking both out for a walk around later on – her partner Meowth more diurnal than most just by the life it lived with her – but for now they all had to wait.

After all, they had a guest incoming!

It wasn't long until the knock on Jewellery's door had her call out and stand to welcome the woman inside, one of many friends she'd made living around the area! Jewellery was at heart a socialite, and far moreso in Alola than back home in Kanto it proved easy to greet others and make a new friend. She'd even travelled out to see the other Islands too! Yes, Alola had welcomed her readily and she was thankful for it. Today the woman she greeted was one of the first to approach her. On the grounds to discuss her daughter initially, but as opposed to the vast majority she was not an individual Jewellery had to reprimand for their interest.

After all, her interest was for the proper care of Moon going forward.

“Moon,” Jewellery introduced the woman stepping into their household, “this is Asuka, head of the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola.”

Asuka was a woman of dark skin and blue-black hair, slightly taller than Jewellery, a few inches between them at her full height, though that was rarely seen as so often she leaned upon a cane she always carried with her – an old leg injury that didn't quite heal right not enough to stop her going about her day, but enough that if there was an option to reduce the strain when out and about she'd take it. The highlight colour she preferred was blue – evident in the large and round earrings hanging from her lobes, the necklace resting atop her clavicle, the colour of her nails, the shirt beneath her dark grey jacket, the lines along the hem of that jacket, and the rolled back sleeves revealing the same colour within. Blue wasn't Moon's own signature colour – the girl preferring brighter reds, yellows, oranges, and pinks, her disguise when upon Akala composed of colours that least suited her – but looking at Asuka she still found the woman's styling impressive.

She was clearly someone who took pleasure in the appearances she could create.

“Alola, Moon,” Asuka spoke with a nod of her head, a calm and steady voice that implied years and years of focus and control. Moon had heard her name before, mentioned as one of three significant figures in Alola invited to take part in its first League. Given the impact Jackson and Pitaya had each made upon her, Moon immediately felt a swell of respect for this woman too. She greeted her in the same terms. Asuka smiled to hear it.

“Asuka and I became friends soon after you left for Akala,” Jewellery filled in the story for Moon as she waved Asuka in to join them, the family Meowth deciding this was one too many people and disappearing to go sleep on Jewellery's bed, Poipole seizing the opportunity to go and upturn the Meowth's own kitty-bed out in the living room. Moon caught the motion and tsked at her partner, Poipole floating over and grabbing onto her leg with a tight hug. It seemed to have picked up on the gesture from watching Moon and Jewellery both.

Moon rolled her eyes and reached down a hand to rub its head. Asuka studied the display with interest.

“For many trainers it can take months for a partner to trust them fully, opening their hearts enough for true power to flow through their Bonds and allow them to fight at full force.” Accepting Jewellery's offer of a seat, Asuka sat down at the table, resting her cane across her legs. “I wonder if your ability to connect with your partners so innately is another part of your gift, or another gift entirely. I suppose it doesn't matter. I just cannot help my own curiosity meeting you in person at last. I am sorry I did not get the chance when you visited my school at the beginning of your journey – I was
indisposed at the time. Though by what she told me, Ms. Emily did a fine job caring for you in my place."

Moon nodded, remembering the day she had visited the Pokemon School just nearby. So long ago...

If she returned again their 'Elite Four' would be ducking for cover to avoid her challenge. Asuka laughed at Moon's joke. Then shook her head.

"Stronger or not, they would still benefit from challenging you and enjoy the act. You shouldn't place yourself above others just because you have power, correct?" Moon's eyes widened as Asuka casually recited a precept of the Dragon Tamers. The Principal smiled. "I've had my own education."

"Principal Asuka and I," Jewellery spoke up in the silence to follow, "have been discussing the plans for your education, Moon." Moon looked from her mother to Asuka in confusion. Asuka nodded her head and explained.

"Traditionally the structure of a Pokemon Journey is done in cycles – times spent close to home resting and training, then times spent further afield pushing forward, exploring new locations, and overcoming new challenges. A Pokemon Journey begins after completion of the first round of schooling, with the second round being done in blocks during those rest times." Moon nodded, understanding Asuka's explanation. She'd finished her initial schooling in Kanto, and had the record from it transferred to Alola when she'd arrived. Asuka nodded back and continued.

"However as opposed to many Pokemon Journeys that take years and have large time blocks between ventures, you have already completed a significant portion of the Alolan Island Challenge, the Pokemon Journey of this region, and – correct me if I am wrong – I believe you intend to continue with it to finish before the League begins next year?"

Moon confirmed that. She wanted to stand on that stage. Asuka showed nothing of the intense feeling Moon gave her in that moment. The power of the Bonds swirling within her, impossible to understand the full or true shape of. Just nodded and went on.

"Because of that, you haven't attended any education blocks since your previous graduation, and I would not expect you to in the near future either."

Asuka's words were calm and direct, without judgement or complaint. Still, Moon couldn't help but feel a little put off by them. Was she expected to? Asuka shook her head in response.

"It is simply a matter of planning otherwise. Your mother and I have discussed studies she can assist you with, as well as tasking and information you can be provided with that you might do on your own time – perhaps resting after a day's exertion, or when the weather prevents you from travelling afield. I am glad that I have had this chance to meet you directly, and explain this to you myself. And, of course, to see you for myself as well. Again, forgive me my curiosity. I hope you understand."

Moon nodded, but slower this time. Asuka wasn't pressuring her, or being forceful. Nor was she acting fearful in any way. In that case, wasn't this best? She thanked Asuka. For the first time the Principal showed a little raw emotion – a surprised expression. She hadn't expected that response. Jewellery rested a hand on Moon's shoulder and smiled. Asuka nodded to them both.

"That is the core of what I wished to express," the Principal began to stand, though Jewellery quickly moved to ask her to stay for a little, to share some food as well. Seeing what the woman had prepared that morning, Asuka obliged. "And I would like to say that should you feel you require any help with your own studies, please ask for me or any member of our school. We too practise Alola."
Reach out to us as you need.”

Moon smiled wider then, hearing the concept of Alola always drawing from her a sense of happiness. Nowdays more than ever.

Asuka settled into the food Jewellery offered before fixing Moon with a different expression entirely. One slyer, and more entertained. “Stand on that stage', was it?” She chuckled at Moon's slight jump to be addressed like that. “You will see me there too then. Even with your abilities it will not be an easy journey to make in so little time. But then you have already come so far in so much less. I look forward to you surprising us all, again and again, Moon.”

Moon, taking a honey tart her mother had served, smiled before biting into it. She fully intended to.

Red flowers swayed in the breeze, currents of air eddying the thin mist that carpeted the Ula'ula Meadow, a thick forest of trees surrounding the area creating the cooling point that transformed the humidity soaked air of Alola into this vaporous fog. Bug and Grass-type Pokemon thrived within the waves of red flowers, wooden boardwalks built above the plants and pools of water allowing humans to cross the field without disturbing its natural residents. The avian Oricorio, specifically transformed by the nectar of the unique red flowers that only grew in this one location, held back their new-found powers of flame, so as not to torch the environment they hunted in.

Many who caught the Baile Style Dancing Pokemon soon discovered it possessed far more power than it displayed within its native territory.

Acerola grinned as she led Hau and Lillie over the boardwalks, pointing out every Pokemon she spotted, telling them all about this locale. The Ula'ula Meadow, renowned for its beauty across Alola and even beyond, proved a popular location to visit despite its closeness to the territory of Po Town and Team Skull: the very few attempts made by members of that gang to try and take over or at least extort visitors to the meadow ending poorly for them thanks to a combination of the Captain and the local policeforce around. So visiting here was all good all good! Acerola spun around, shifting into the steps of dance mirroring the movements of the red Oricorio, a traditional Alolan form. She was having fun playing tour guide for Hau and Lillie, showing them all the places in her territory as Captain of Ula'ula's south. Getting to show off the Alola she loved, she hadn't done that nearly enough!

Maybe she'd get more into the habit of showing Trial-goers the beauty of this Island before throwing them headfirst into the ghosts of Tapu Village’s clutches.

“So all the mist comes down from the Lake of the Duske, which is oooover...” spinning as she was, Acerola had to stop, steady herself, and wait for the brief dizziness to cease before she could properly point east, showing the path leading upwards into the mountain range of Ula'ula. “That way!” Hau and Lillie followed the Captain's gesture, nodding at the direction shown. Hau stuck up a hand, playing along with Acerola's newfound occupation.

“What's the Lake of the Duske?”

“Good question!” Acerola pointed decisively at Hau. “It's a probably unnatural lake, perfectly round, with a big ol' stone disc sticking out of the middle and an old tunnel going under the water leading to it! Waaaay ancient, we have no idea what it was before! But! Cause of its name, which survived all
the way from the past, we definitely have reason to think its related to the Altar of the Dawne on Poni Island!”

Lillie, similarly taken with Acerola’s high energy show, raised her hand as well. Acerola immediately continued.

“The Altar of the Dawne is built high high hiiiiiigh up at the very back of the Vast Poni Canyon! It’s one of the highest places in Alola after the mountains here and Wela Volcano on Akala, and is known as ‘The first place the light of Alola touches each day’. Pop quiz! What is the Lake of the Duske known as?”

Lillie, quick to apply logic, raised her hand with a guess. “The last place the light of Alola touches?”

“Correct!” Acerola pointed at Lillie with full drama, Hau politely applauding her success. “Neither is objectively true, but both are very relatively true! Because of its position up above the forest on this side of Ula'ula Island, the Lake of the Duske can see the sun as it goes over the horizon! And similarly the Altar of the Dawne can see the sun as it rises in the east! So we have these two locations, both with similar names and titles, that we don't actually know anything about! Mysterious, huh?”

Hau and Lillie both nodded in response to this, moving into clapping as Acerola took a bow. Then, as she raised her head with a giggle that turned into a laugh, the other two joined in. That had been ridiculous.

She'd done so well though! Acerola led them on.

As they walked along the boardwalk, heading to the path that would lead them to the Lake of the Duske, Hau stopped, hearing a sound in the fields below. Watching, he observed a red Oricorio dashing through the swaying sea of flowers, a cloud of red pollen disturbed in its wake, the Pokemon clearly on the hunt. Lillie and Acerola stopped and watched too.

“It’s a beautiful Pokemon,” Lillie remarked, the entire location of Ula'ula Meadow strikingly wondrous to behold. Hau nudged her with an elbow and a smile.

“Want to try catching one, Lillie?”

Lillie's response was to quickly shake her head and step back, clutching the bag containing Nebby tighter to her.

“Oh no no no no, I'm not- I can't form Bonds... or I would have... with Nebby already.”

Hau and Acerola both tilted their heads and considered that. It wasn’t like the age of eleven was a cut-off ’you either have it or you don’t’ type of thing, it was just the age by which most people had developed the ability to maintain a Bond. There were stories of those who'd go years more before developing the ability, and even some tales of those who never did. Hau didn't quite buy into that though.

“Are you sure though?” He seemed to be thinking deeply on the topic. “Nebby's special, right? Maybe it's them who can't form Bonds. Or maybe a Bond with them takes soooo much you keep trying to start one without knowing and it never sticks.” Lillie frowned in response to Hau's words. Then looked down at her bag, wondering. Maybe. But...

“Still,” she looked back to Hau with a determined expression, “I would like to wait.”

Well that was fine then. Hau nodded and turned back to watch the Pokemon going about. “Moon’s
definitely going to try and catch one,” he decided after a moment. To that Lillie immediately agreed.

“Another for the Pelago, huh?” Acerola laughed. Then in the time it took Hau and Lillie to turn to her with looks of question on their faces, clapped her hands over her mouth with a wide-eyed expression staring through. Oh no.

“Pelago?” Lillie asked it. “What is that?”

“Nothing!” Acerola answered back far too fast and forcefully for it to be nothing at all. Both Hau and Lillie took a step forward. Acerola moved to take a step back and ended up on the edge of the boardwalk. Dang it!

“Captain Acerola?” Lillie tilted her head, “Do you know something about Moon and the Pokemon she's been catching?”

“Nope nope nope!” Acerola shook her head and her outstretched hands in a clear display of someone absolutely terrible at lying, “I don't know anything and if I did I definitely promised not to tell anyone and am going to be in a lot of trouble if I do!”

“So it's where she's keeping all her Pokemon, right?” Hau asking this cut right through Acerola's weak defenses, the Captain's shoulders slumping, arms dropping to her side as Hau nodded at the clear answer. “It's cool though. I mean, I already knew.”

Lillie and Acerola both turned to Hau. Both asked. “You knew?”

“I mean yeah?” Hau shrugged, seemingly nonplussed. “Not like, what it was called or where it is or anything but I knew she had somewhere all the rest of her Pokemon were staying.”

Acerola, the faintest shocking suspicion starting to form in her mind, took a step forward. “How did you know that, Hau?” Maybe he'd just figured it out because Moon had never once worried about the two week release system. Guessed there had to be somewhere looking after Moon's Pokemon properly. If he thought that deeply on it. Hau had good senses, but he always seemed to take the world as it came to him. Had he really spent that much thought on it? He answered with exactly what Acerola was unprepared to hear.

“It just feels like she's connected to a lot more than just the ones with her.”

Okay.

Cool.

Acerola's head was spinning. Hau could sense Moon's Bonds? She barely had the sense yet and that was just because she saw Trainers on the regular as a Captain! So how did Hau? Was it because of his Psychic-type bias? He had an Espeon with him, was that enough for his own sense of Trainer's Bonds to have already developed? Or was Hau just that special himself? Of course he was, look at what he'd done over the past three months. Moon had obscured him, time and time again, but Hau was... not impossible so much as at the very edge of possible. Wait but literally everyone else, from the Captains to Kahili and Kukui, said that they couldn't tell Moon's Bonds apart! Could Hau? Acerola shook her head. Hang on-

“Hau, can you tell how many Bonds Moon has?”

“Nope,” Hau answered easily enough. “There's a bunch but I can't like, picture them. It's just a feeling that she's got a lot.” Acerola's shoulders slumped again. This was too much. She spends one day without Moon defying sense and then Hau comes along and does it himself!
Lillie, last to catch on, glanced between Hau and the Captain. “Moon has more than six Bonds?”

Acerola flinched.

“Please please please don't tell anyone!” She clapped her hands together, bowing her head. “Moon specifically asked us all to keep that secret because she's worried about being treated even more weirdly, we know it's not going to last but also we shouldn't be the ones giving it up!”

Hau rubbed a hand against his head. “I didn't say anything to her yet but does that mean I shouldn't?”

Lillie frowned. More than six Bonds? Moon defying a cardinal rule of Trainer's Bonds? Lillie hadn't expected that. But now that she thought about it... she should have. When Moon described meeting Poipole, she'd said the Pokemon had bonded with her immediately. But there was no way Moon didn't go into her fifth Trial with six Pokemon already on her. Lillie should have realised then. She frowned harder. She'd completely missed that.

“If you can feel them, in some way at least,” speaking slowly, Lillie put together the idea, “then you can say that alone to Moon without mentioning anyone else. And I think... if Moon is worried about being treated strangely, having you tell her you know and aren't concerned would help a lot.”

Immediately Hau nodded. “That's a great idea!” He smiled at Lillie. “I'll bring it up when she gets back.”

Acerola, watching these two formulate a plan for Moon's sake, felt some form of pride just in the way they clearly cared for Moon, and a lot of relief knowing she wasn't going to get dragged for not being able to keep her mouth shut. Not that the other Captains would do anything but forgive and understand but... she'd still end up feeling like she'd disappointed them and Moon both. At least this way she didn't have to feel that.

She hoped.

Few other people were out and about in the Ula'ula Meadow that day, the current time being the beginnings of afternoon, Acerola aiming to spend an hour or so around the Lake of the Duske so they might see the sunset from it. A view that absolutely should not be missed. Yet before they could make it there, two things coincided. Firstly, the closer Lillie got to the path leading to the lake, the more her bag began to shake, repeated noises coming from within. The touch of her hand against its side, whispered reassurances to Nebby, even opening the bag slightly – not enough to let the Pokemon out, just enough so Lillie could see it and it could see her back – did nothing to calm the Cosmog down. Something was up with Nebby. By the time they were near the edge of the meadow, Lillie was struggling to even keep hold of her bag.

The second thing was the member of Team Skull wandering into the meadow from the path leading to Po Town in the north.

“Ayy!” The snap call of his voice had Lillie flinch deeply, curling around her bag with it pressed against her stomach, Hau and Acerola moving to stand between her and the Team Skull Grunt approaching, his hands moving in the rhythmic pattern the gang members were so proud of. He didn't stop doing it even as he came to a halt before them. “S'in the bag, yo?”

Before Hau could even open his mouth in response Acerola had stepped forward. The Grunt narrowed his eyes as she shrugged. “Does it matter?” She spoke in a cheery tone, “It's her business not yours.”

“Hey now Captain A, don't be like that.” The Team Skull member worked a shrug into his elaborate
routine of hand movements. “You and me we practically grew up together, let a brother in on a secret for old times' sake yeah?”

“Sorry,” Acerola smiled wide, “I can't tell who you are with that bandanna over your face.”

“Yo!” Hands outstretched as if to hold off the weight of Acerola’s words, the Grunt reeled backwards. “That's savage, yo, straight up a harsh beating! I see this moving bag and think hey maybe there's a rare Pokemon to check out and you straight up hash me like that? Uncool, C A, uncool.”

“You should go.” In a flash of red a Pokemon appeared over the group, the Blimp Pokemon Drifblim floating ominously above them. The Grunt took a step back. Acerola held her smile. “Let's not make a mess in the meadow, okay?”

“Yo okay okay!” Hands raised, the Grunt back-pedalled, “scuse a guy for a bit of curiosity, I ain't a Meowth to be got in by it but I guess I'll go take a catnap anyway. Gotta say C you really shoulda picked different. Playing Captain after all that? Not cool.”

Acerola took a step forward, the smile sliding off her face as she began to raise a hand, Drifblim moving with her. The Grunt took that as his cue to beat feet, sprinting off before making a sharp turn on his heel, racing back along the path to Po Town. Acerola, left behind with frustration simmering just beneath the surface, breathed out deeply, Hau and Lillie watching over her. Hau watching over her.

Lillie was still struggling with her bag.

“Nebby!” Her short tone did nothing to still the Nebula Pokemon's movements, “Look at the trouble you're causing! What's wrong with you?” Hau moved a little closer to check too. That bag was really shaking. It was kinda worrying.

“Is Nebby okay?”

“I-” Lillie, unsure of what she should do, simply kept hold of the bag, Nebby within struggling still. “I don't know.” She'd promised to care for Nebby, but once again was faced with her inability. She couldn't connect to Nebby. She couldn't sense their wants and moods the way Trainers easily could with their partners. She had no Bond. And as the struggling finally slowed, Nebby exhausting themself with the heavy activity, Lillie could not help the feeling that she had just failed the Pokemon in a significant way. She felt awful.

Hau patted her shoulder.

“Hey,” he didn't really know at all what to say, or how to reassure Lillie that things would be okay, “if we head to the Lake, we can let Nebby out of the bag safely there, right?”

“That's right,” Acerola, who'd calmed down from her moment – that Team Skull member had really said the wrong combination of words to set her off – finally rejoined the pair. “The Lake's high up enough that most people don't go there, and the centre disc is in the middle of the water, so nice and self-contained! We can fly up, Drifblim'll get us there quick.”

The Lake of the Duske wasn't too high up in the Ula'ula mountains, but the climb on foot was still a decent one. Ride Tauros would easily make it, but the Pokemon weren't allowed through the Ula'ula Meadow in order to avoid disturbing the environment, and there were no Ride Pokemon stations on this side so close to Po Town. So the Lake of the Duske was reserved solely for Trainers with Pokemon of their own to climb the mountain or the most determined of hikers.
Acerola was most definitely not the second.

Her Drifblim was larger than the average of its species, and did not complain as not only Acerola, but with her prompting Lillie and Hau each grasped on to one of the four ribbons hanging from its balloon-like form. Lillie glanced at the Captain.

“Uhm, Captain Acerola, is this alright? I've read about Drifblim and—”

“No worries no worries!” Acerola spared a hand to show her signature 'V', “Ghost Pokemon with partners are totally safe! Just hold on and we'll get up there no problems!” Nodding back, Lillie did so, the ribbon tendril curving so she could stand on it as well as grasp it with her hands. With a jet of black air emerging from its base the Pokemon lifted, Hau giving a whoop as they rose up above the meadow. Acerola pointed east.

“Let's head out!”

And the Blimp Pokemon began its ascent.

Lillie had experienced flight with both Professor Kukui and Kahili in her time travelling with them, and while it was unnerving had grown accustomed to it enough not to panic when in the air. To Acerola's credit, while Drifblim continually ascended, so too did the path, and the Blimp Pokemon never strayed too far above ground-level. Hau, who had experienced far less flying than Lillie and Acerola, laughed and cheered and was very enthusiastic about this all. He needed to get a Flying-type Pokemon so he could fly as well!

He said, despite having five Pokemon at age eleven already. Acerola just shook her head. Honestly he was just as bad as Moon when it got down to it!

Moments later Acerola remembered everything that had happened over the past few days with Moon and decided no, that wasn't true at all.

It really was impossible to disturb sense as well as Moon could do.

Through steady ascent the trio arrived upon the entrance to the Lake of the Duske, the crumbling ruin at the beginning of the path leading into an underground tunnel stretching beneath the clear waters, surfacing again in the middle of the lake where a grass-covered disc of stone awaited. Acerola skipped dismounting here to fly right out over the lake and land upon the central structure itself. A circular rock platform, fields of grass grown over what were once trimmed gardens, trees growing wildly across it. But its centre ring, the raised platform and symbol indicating the passage of sun to moon, remained there. It was a sight worth seeing.

That was why she'd timed this part of the trip so they might see the setting of the sun from this point.

“Welcome to the Lake of the Duske!” With proud announcement Acerola hopped off of her Pokemon first, Hau following, Lillie waiting for it to lower her to ground level before disembarking. She thanked the Pokemon when she was on the ground. It made a noise like wind rattling dry leaves against a window in response. Lillie moved closer to Acerola and Hau.

“'It's so quiet here.'” Gazing about, Lillie took in the environment. It appeared empty. “Are we the only ones here?”

“Yep!” Acerola nodded, “No-one else in sight! You're safe!”
Taking that as reassurance, Lillie opened her bag and began to lower it so she could make sure Nebby was alright. The small and blue wispy Pokemon was still clearly exhausted, but conscious, giving a weak 'pew' as Lillie lifted it from the bag and held it in her arms. Hau, halfway across the disc already, was loudly telling Acerola about how cool this old place was. Lillie shook her head at the sight. How did he have so much energy still? The flight alone had taken so much out of her. She huffed and Acerola pattered her on the back in understanding. She was a little tired too. Hau was just... unstoppable.

“The fact you're keeping up with him and Moon at all means you're amazing,” the Captain smiled at Lillie, who couldn't help the giggle she gave in response. Hau and Moon were amazing. And so was being able to be with them. She wouldn't deny that at all.

“It's still...” Acerola struggled for the words, so much to express warring inside her mind, “so much.” To that Lillie nodded as well.

“They're incredible.”

Yep, Acerola could agree with that. They were.

“You doing okay?” Her question surprised Lillie, who was focusing more on Nebby in her arms. She reassured Acerola she was fine, but in an absent way that said she was brushing off the question more than anything else. Her almost single-minded focus on helping Nebby find a way home, it had filled all her thoughts for months now. Failing to help, especially now when Nebby had seemed so intent on telling her something, hurt. Mixed into her other worries. About Gladion, her brother. About Team Skull apparently looking for Cosmog. And about...

That moment of thought, her briefly slackened hold on Nebby as Lillie considered Acerola's question only after answering, gave the Nebula Pokemon its chance. With a surge of movement Nebby launched itself out from Lillie's grip, arcing a wide leap from her arms across the grassy fields of the centre of the lake. Lillie yelling its name did not dissuade it as Nebby bounced upon landing and scurried up the stairs to the central platform of the structure, high-pitched cries coming from it as exhaustion and further exertion warred with determination. Lillie caught up with the Pokemon just before it reached the platform's peak.

“Nebby! What's wrong?” Scooping the Pokemon up into her arms, Lillie struggled with it fighting to get free once again, one of the two star-speckled blue 'arms' stretching from its main body gesturing constantly towards the centre point. Lillie yelling its name did not dissuade it as Nebby bounced upon landing and scurried up the stairs to the central platform of the structure, high-pitched cries coming from it as exhaustion and further exertion warred with determination. Lillie caught up with the Pokemon just before it reached the platform's peak.

“Nebby?” The Cosmog was still fighting against her grip, but lacked any of the power to escape her arms wrapped around it. Lillie frowned. “Were you... trying to come here?”

Bringing Nebby to the highest point of the structure on the lake, the centre piece where the symbol of Duske was carved into the platform of stone, even kneeling down so Nebby could be closer to it did nothing to calm the Nebula Pokemon's gesticulations. It seemed intent upon communicating something, but Lillie did not know what. Hau and Acerola each joined her at the peak.

“Hey, is this what Nebby was-” Hau's trailing question was met with a shake of Lillie's head, an 'I don't know' of answer. Acerola frowned.

“It's trying to tell us something.”

The specific message Nebby failed to communicate, the small Pokemon waving its arms again and again, crying out in a piercing voice, but achieving nothing of its desire. In frustration it glowed
brightly. Lillie gasped and tightened her grip around the Pokemon. It didn't help.

A moment later she appeared just above one of the grassy fields at the outer ring of the structure, dropping only the slightest distance but unbalanced by it all the same, toppling backwards onto the grass. Nebby, held tight against her chest, was breathing laboriously now, the act of teleportation incredibly draining for it. Cries of shock from Hau and Acerola, who'd just seen Lillie disappear, changed into calls asking if she was alright as they spotted and rushed over to her. Lillie stood up, a gasping Nebby in her arms. Her own heart was beating like a jackhammer too. She shook her head again.

“We should get Nebby away from here.”

In response Acerola and Hau, once close enough, nodded as well. Though she'd been looking forward to showing these two the setting of the sun from the lake, Acerola would not allow a Pokemon's distress in her presence. And Nebby, this place was clearly affecting it in a way it was not prepared for. So she called upon her Pokemon again to help carry the three of them back down from the mountain. They could use this height to coast all the way to Mahihinu, and get Nebby food and rest away from this place.

Moon had already called and said she'd be back tomorrow. So they'd see what tomorrow brought them. Together, these three took off, and left behind the Lake of the Duske for the moment.

Never saw the tiny crack in the air above its centre, faint rainbow light beginning to pour forth.

Chapter End Notes

Me, finishing writing this chapter: it's okay, I know it's more than 10k words but it's still not my longest chapter. Just.

Unfortunately I know in my heart of hearts that record will not last, there's no way some of the upcoming stuff that I'm determined to have part of the same chapter won't blow this count out. Once upon a time I said 5-6k made a good chapter. Now I write double that on the regular. Help. It's no wonder my chapter schedule is slipping, I'm still writing at the same rate, there's just so much more I feel I need per chapter. It's really getting out of control. I have a problem.

But I won't stop.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, a chance to rest, relax, and recuperate for both our cast and yourselves. I think we all understand that we're moments away for the cascade of constant events to begin. We're rapidly approaching the kickoff point for when things just go go go. I'd say I hope you're all ready, but given my own high hopes for what I've got planned, that shouldn't be possible. But I do hope you'll enjoy.

Thanks for reading, and rest assured that every kudos is appreciated, and every comment seen and treasured. I'm not going to apologise for this chapter being slower than the regular rate I've been doing, because my output is still ridiculous and if I try to pretend it's something I should be forcing myself to do that would definitely not be healthy. Next chapter will be when it is.

I'll see you then.
Moon's promise to return to Lillie and Hau kept her awake far longer than she intended, eventually driving her to leave her bed behind and seek her mother's door. It was only the second night back home, back with her mother on Melemele Island, but already Moon felt the need to return.

She couldn't bear to be apart from them for too long.

Jewellery understood. The way Moon spoke of them, spoke of spending her time with them, spoke of her excitement to keep going with them, it was clear she'd found the people she'd spend the rest of her life with if she could. Jewellery was excited for Moon. Thankful for her daughter's friends, those who she'd connected to so deeply. Back in Kanto Moon had been sociable enough with others, but she'd always had that quiet and distant air. Yet speaking of them, of Lillie and Hau, Moon shone with vibrant happiness. Who could deny that?

“We'll have you on your way back to them tomorrow.”

Moon embraced her mother with the fullness of her love.

The next morning they spent together: watching the sun rise with their Pokemon, sharing a meal, Jewellery taking Moon into the city at a slower pace than one racing for the docks. Moon showed no complaint, happy to spend these last hours with her mother, but happy too that she was on her way back to Ula'ula. Back to Lillie and Hau. Lillie who had her journey to Poni Island. Hau who had his fifth Trial. And Moon who had her third Grand Trial. Each of them had their goals. Each of them had places to be. And each of them would help the others get there. That motivation, the more time they spent together the more it set deep within each.

A momentum built of supporting one another, rather than competing as Melemele and Akala had been, would take them so much further than anyone could believe.

Aboard the ferry, just past mid-morning, Moon set off for Mahihinu once more. Her mother had promised to let Captain Ilima know – and through him Captain Acerola – so that the Captain, Hau, and Lillie might meet Moon at the docks of Mahihinu upon her return. For now Moon enjoyed the ferry trip, the shake of the waves, the sights of the docks of Heahea and Konikoni. The Aether Paradise, which many dressed Aether Foundation workers both boarded and alighted at, drew a slight pause from Moon, but it was more contemplation than judgement. The after-effects of the Aether President Lusamine's actions still overwhelmed Moon to think about, but beyond her everything Moon had seen from the Aether Foundation was good. A benefit to Alola. So just letting her complicated feelings fade out again, Moon continued her trip.

Back on Melemele, as Jewellery reported to Captain Ilima that Moon was returning to Mahihinu, the young man let his shoulders slump with a rueful smile. He really wasn't getting that Pokemon Battle any time soon, huh? Jewellery smiled widely in response. Patience would only do him good, she quipped. There was little Ilima could do but accept that. Moon was now in the hands of Ula'ula's Kahuna, and soon enough Poni's Captain. He'd just have to wait.

Even if he didn't want to.
At the docks of Mahihinu two figures awaited, notified by Captain Acerola that Moon was inbound. Acerola herself had gone north earlier that day, seeking the Kahuna to organise Moon's Grand Trial, while Kahili checked in with Kukui atop Mount Lanakila, her flying Pokemon capable of bringing her anywhere in Alola with ease. That left just Lillie and Hau, who'd both jumped at the call from Acerola informing them Moon was returning, and raced down to the docks to wait for her.

In the shadow of buildings nearby, a figure watched over the pair as well, waiting for her chance. And then the moment came. Just past the peak of the day, the bright light of Alola's sun coming and going in waves as haphazard clouds marched across the sky, the ferry arrived. Moon disembarked. And oh how she smiled to see Lillie and Hau waiting for her. Oh how they smiled back. These three, each with their own drives and goals, travelling together and sharing their experiences and support, how closely they'd come to rely upon one another. Just these two days apart, the last time being when Acerola fetched Moon for her sixth Trial, the time before that the month where Moon had been with the Dragon Tamers, had felt off to the pair.

It really was only right when all three were together, each decided. More and more, an intensity to ensure they could remain that way settled within them.

Each soon to put the other two before them without care.

“Hey Moon!”

“Welcome back!”

Hau and Lillie's twin calls were echoed by Moon returning to them, Poipole always with her racing for Lillie's bag, the girl having to spin around with it until Moon could intercept and grab hold of the laughing Ultra Beast. Her lecturing went ignored as it made grabby hands at the bag again, Hau joking that maybe Moon just needed to get her own bag for the Pokemon. Moon strongly considered finding somewhere to store it.

The three were together and the day was theirs. Hau was quick to suggest heading down to the beach, eager to show Moon the Pokemon Surfing he'd been taught by Grimsley. Wasn't that one of the Trainers taking part in the League, Moon queried. “Yep!” Hau confirmed, “that's him!” As they walked Moon recounted another meeting with one of the confirmed participants, Asuka of the Pokemon Schooling System. Hau stuck his tongue out as Moon mentioned the discussion of further schoolwork.

“Boo,” he ignored Lillie rolling her eyes at his rejection of the proposed course load, “study's no fun, we're on Pokemon Journeys! We're meant to be out there seeing Alola and meeting new people and Pokemon! Why've you gotta study?”

“You should be doing schoolwork too, Hau,” Lillie added in, “education is important.”

“Pfft,” Hau waved a hand, “I did enough of that at home, I'm good!”

Lillie strongly doubted that.

“Anyway, Moon,” she turned to her, “I would be happy to assist you with any of your studies – working together we can easily stay on top of your work.” Moon nodded quickly, the thought of studying alongside Lillie appealing. She'd enjoy that a lot.

Hau remained uninvested. “I'll pass,” he waved a hand, the concept of study and schoolwork unable to capture his interest no matter what form it came in, “you guys can have fun on your study dates I'll be getting stronger for my Trials!”
“Honestly Hau,” Lillie, successfully annoyed by Hau's disregard for learning, turned on him. “It's very important to maintain an education even as a Pokemon Trainer! Surely you understand that the learning opportunities provided by the schooling system are-” Lillie continued her lecture unabated, Hau smiling through it having successfully poked at her preference for bookwork. Moon just stayed silent.

Was that... what it would be?

Hau casually glanced around as Lillie continued. Then paused.

“Hey isn't that Riley?”

Indeed it was, the older teen girl with a thick mass of curling pink hair lurking nearby, out of Team Skull regalia once again. She looked much like she had when Hau had run into her in Malie City – a white sports cap instead of skull beanie, no silver 'S' pendant, no bandanna over her mouth. Though even if she were wearing the bandanna it would still be obvious what her expression was. Her frown stretched to every corner of her face with ease.

Spotted, the Team Skull Grunt stood up a little straighter from her slouch, glanced around, then waved an arm, as if beckoning towards the trio. Hau and Moon glanced at each other. That was weird, right? Yeah, that was definitely weird. They stayed there agreeing how weird that was long enough for Riley to sigh, huff, then walk right up to the group and grab Hau by the wrist. “Come on already!” And tug decisively at his arm.

Riley of Team Skull was not a particularly strong individual.

“Are you serious?” She threw her arms up into the air after letting go of Hau, who had not budged, this entire affair incredibly rude. “I'm asking for you already come on and get over here!” Turning and storming off, Riley spun around after a few steps and gestured again. Hau looked for Moon's attention. Then shrugged.

“Auntie Rosie did ask us to be nicer to her.”

She had... Moon glanced back to the more and more furiously gesturing Riley. Well... she looked back to Lillie, who remained cautious behind them, and smiled to reassure her. They'd be okay. That promise stilled Lillie's nerves enough for her to nod.

The trio made their way over.

“Unbelievable I cannot even begin with you so rude,” Riley had worked herself up into a peak rant by the time the three younger children gathered before her. “Here's a girl just asking for a moment of your time but nooooo you make me have to basically prostrate myself before you oh great Trainers please grant me an audience I am but a humble girl just trying to live my life I hope I'm not bothering you too much I guess if I am I can just go walk off the docks over there would that make you happier? Huh? Would it?”

Hau, choosing to ignore Riley's entire diatribe, smiled wide.

“Hey Riley, how're you doing?”

Riley genuinely had to pause after he asked that.

“Okay.” Putting her fingers to her temples for a moment before drawing them apart again, Riley fixed Hau with a strong look, one that did little to shake him, “don't ever, I mean ever, act all buddy-buddy with me again. You think you get to be nice to me once or twice and then I'll say 'oh I guess
we're friends now'? Get real. That's not what this is.”

Hau showed little concern at Riley's rebuke, but Moon had a problem. Riley was being rude to her friend. She stepped forward and asked her to stop.

“Depends,” Riley settled her gaze onto Moon, focusing on the impossible girl with the incredible Pokemon. “If you help me out I'll consider it. See I've got a problem and you, you've got a solution. Actually it's a problem for you too, so you'll doubly want to help me out, got it?”

Moon stood there, silently watching Riley. She took that as an opportunity to continue.

“Listen up,” the teen folded her arms, “I'm Team Skull for life, yo, they're my family and I'm sticking by em, no matter what.” Hau moved a little closer to Moon, the two of them occupying Riley’s line of sight with Lillie, holding her bag tight, Poipole clutching onto Nebby through its outside, behind them. Riley continued. “But this whole thing going on right now, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I don't like where it's going. So I want you to make it stop.”

Her stare was directly aimed at Moon. Moon stared back. Riley kept going.

“See there's this big deal going on about some rare Pokemon everyone's out looking for. Actually they found it. So now they just have to get it.” Raising her head, Riley looked bluntly at Lillie, who gasped and stepped back, Moon and Hau moving backwards too to cover her. Riley shook her head.

“Like I said,” she emphasised, “I don't like it. It's a bad idea, I can just tell. The Boss got this weird machine from somewhere, said it's the core of the plan. So if it goes, the plan goes, and everything works out, yeah? But I can't get at it without getting caught and I'm not leaving Team Skull no way no how. So I need someone else to get into home base and bust it up. Someone strong enough to push through without being stopped. That's why I need you.”

Pointing at Moon, Riley interrupted both Hau and Lillie's attempts to reject the idea. “I've planned it all out, the way to get to Po Town, the way to get you into it without being seen, and the way to occupy Big Sis and the Boss. Then you've got a straight shot at that weird machine and can bail out. No more machine no more Pokemon stealing plan no more problem: for me or for your friend there, yeah?”

Riley's gesture at Lillie did not go missed by Moon. No more threat of Team Skull against Lillie? She contemplated it.

“This is ridiculous!” Lillie put her foot down. “Why should Moon do it? If you need a Trainer who cannot be stopped, then we will let Ms. Kahili know! You won't be seen approaching her, and she can dispose of that machine herself!”

Riley shook her head. “Nah.” Lillie's noise of objection went spoken over again. “Listen: this plan's been in the works a while. You think Kahili can just run off to Po Town without being seen? That there isn't an emergency plan the moment she moves weird? There's Team Skull watching all the strong Trainers around here. That's why it's gotta be you.” Riley's point at Moon earned only a continued cool stare in reply.

Hau glanced between the three around him.

“Uh,” ignoring Riley's ‘this isn't about you', Hau spoke his mind, “shouldn't there be someone watching Moon though? She's really strong.” Riley laughed.

“Yeah. There is. Me.”
Lillie frowned. “That's... convenient.” Riley rounded on her with a far more disapproving expression.

“Yeah,” she spoke sharply, “real convenient. So glad everything worked out so I could more easily betray my family. Whoopie.”

Lillie went very still.

“Now here's my plan:” turning back to Moon, Riley put her foot down. “You've got that big water serpent, right? So head out into the bay, behind the little islands, and then around the west coast. Once you're past the meadow and can see Po Town's walls, you can land, and approach from the south. There's a hole in the walls I'll meet you at, and sneak you inside. That way you'll get there without anyone spotting you. From there we can get after that machine and put this all behind us.”

“I dunno,” Hau continued to speak his mind, “this all sounds really weird. We'll just keep Lillie out of Team Skull's way.”

“Are you serious would you think for once?” Riley, frustrated, banged a fist against the wall of the building the four were beside, before hissing and clutching her now sore hand. “You gonna be on guard every hour hoping Big Sis or the Boss don't show up? You gonna stick around the big leagues every single day for things to work out? Gonna live your lives always looking over your shoulder? That's dumb as heck and I don't want my family plotting on some weird Pokemon for some weird plan that makes no sense! So gimme a hand here! Help me put this down and make things right! Please!” Clapping her palms together, Riley bowed her head. “I really don't want things to go the way they're going.”

Moon and Hau glanced at each other. Then at Lillie. If... if this would make Team Skull leave Lillie alone, stop planning on taking Nebby, it would be worth it, right? Lillie shook her head.

“I don't agree,” she continued to hold her bag close, Moon finally reaching over and prying Poipole from it. “We should inform Ms. Kahili of this and leave it to her.”

“Yeah, I-” Hau glanced back at Riley, who still had her hands clasped and head bowed, “I feel bad but, we can't really do anyth-”

Moon would do it. Immediately Hau and Lillie told her otherwise.

“Moon, no,” Lillie shook her head again, “this isn't for you to do.”

“You shouldn't just go into Team Skull's base like that,” Hau agreed with Lillie, “it's not safe!”

Their concern Moon appreciated, but... doing this would make things better. Then they could go on with their Island Challenges, and Lillie's journey, without a worry. If Lillie and Hau stuck by Acerola and Kahili until Moon got back, then everything would be fine! She could make all of this right.

Riley, with hopeful expression, raised her head at last. Lillie was giving her a dagger stare.

“Moon don't do this.” She knew that if Moon chose to do something there would be no way to stop her, but still Lillie tried. “This isn't a good idea.”

But Moon wanted to help. Lillie absolutely, keeping her safe. But also now... she looked at Riley. Rosia had said only a few people in Team Skull caused harm. So if Moon stopped that, wouldn't that help them all? The things they'd done, the trouble they'd caused, if she helped to stop that... then things would be better. For everyone. For Alola.
The Sixth Precept. Moon and the power she could command had been called on to help another. She should. Hau and Lillie glanced at each other now, hearing Moon speak of her training with the Dragon Tamers. Even still...

“But Moon, didn't you say you weren't made a member of the Dragon Tamers? Their precepts aren't rules you have to follow.” Lillie glanced at Hau for help. He was looking contemplative. “Hau?”

“I dunno,” he was seriously thinking deeply, rubbing at his head, “It's... Alola, right? Reaching out to one another? Moon do you... really think you should?”

She nodded, resolute. She could make things right. And make sure that what was next for all of them was better. She wanted to go. She wanted to do this.

Hau saw that there was no changing her mind.

“Okay, then, let's go!” He nodded at her, Lillie's gasp of his name not stopping him. “We'll bust up that weird machine Team Skull's got and make sure they can't take Nebby!”

Riley stuck a hand right between the two.

“Point of order,” she waved her outstretched arm up and down, “I'm sneaking Moon into our base. You know what you do when you're sneaking? You're quiet. I've never seen you be quiet once in your life.”

Hau's complaining at Riley went rudely interrupted by Moon actually having the gall to laugh at him for that. He looked at her betrayed, the expression only deepening when Lillie couldn't help but giggle as well despite the tension of the situation. Riley smiled to have gained this effect.

“Seriously, this is a one person mission. She needs to sneak in, bust the machine, then get out again while the Boss and Big Sis are busy. More people more chances of getting caught more chances of everything going wrong. You stay put. The both of you.” Riley's glare levelling on Lillie caused her eyes to widen, the thought of going along not even once crossing her mind. There was nothing she could do if she went. But even still...

“Moon,” Lillie made one last attempt, “are you sure you should go? It doesn't feel right.” Moon stretched out an arm to rest a hand on Lillie's shoulder. If she went she could make things right. That was the core feeling inside of her right now. She wanted to do this more than anything. Please trust in her. She'd make everything better, she promised. That much reassurance, that much confidence, wore down Lillie's own misgivings. She still doubted but... she believed in Moon more than her own self. So she ignored her doubts to favour Moon's belief.

Moon nodded back to Riley. She'd go. The Team Skull Grunt grinned wide.

“Yes!” It was, without question, the most honest happiness she'd ever shown to Moon or Hau. Both felt it. Maybe it was okay... Riley moved past the group. “Okay,” turning back, she nodded at Moon, “I'm going to head back – if you take off in like an hour, that'll be perfect. I'll see you at Po Town. Remember: south side of the wall there's a hole, and keep out of eyesight. You'll see me.”

She would. Moon, Hau, and Lillie all watched as Riley disappeared off to the north, a real spring in her step. Well, that had happened. Hau and Lillie both turned back to Moon.

“Moon are you sure?”

“Are you really going alone?”
She was, Moon confirmed. She'd need Hau and Lillie to stay here, with Acerola and Kahili, until she was back. Then everything would be okay. Her determination, her sheer belief that this was the correct path, finally convinced the other two. They nodded, trusting in her.

Things would work out.

And so in an hour's time Moon raised a Net Ball and manifested the Tender Pokemon Milotic, the cream-scaled with pastel red and blue features serpentine Water-type Pokemon, into the waters of Mahihinu Bay. Once settled onto the Pokemon's back, Poipole floating above her, Hau and Lillie on the shore watched Moon go, having promised to keep the mission silent as best they could. Each had their misgivings, but Moon's raw confidence had pushed them down. She'd be okay.

That, each member of their trio believed.

Moon sailed on into the waters of Ula'ula Island's western side.

The azure seas of Alola welcomed travellers readily, whether they be swimming, travelling with Pokemon, or transported via ship. No matter the form by which one might cross the water, the water supported them, and all those who bore witness to it saw beauty. The roll of the waves. The leap of Pokemon from beneath the ocean's surface. The pulse, rhythmic, that could so easily reveal the song to those who listened. For those with Pokemon of their own who could travel these waters, it was all but impossible not to hear the song once they were out there. Out on the water with only their Pokemon and Alola around them.

Were Lana more the type and Kiawe less, Brooklet Hill would become the place to hear the song of Alola, instead of Wela Volcano. Though all three Trial Sites of Akala provided an opportunity to see, and hear, Alola in a different way. All of Alola did. That was its magic, and a core of the Island Challenge. Seeing, and taking part in, everything that Alola was. It was a truly welcoming and embracing place to call home.

He appreciated it.

Grimsley's relocation to the Alola Region had been to get away from it all: the busyness of Unova, especially as a member of the Elite Four, finally wearing him down. It didn't come as much of a surprise to his fellows that he was bowing out, which he would've taken as fairly insulting if they hadn't been completely correct. All that hustle and bustle, not to mention the responsibility, was a little much for his taste. He'd done his time. Now he was retired. For however long Alola kept him, at least.

It had made a pretty strong play by its waters inviting him to take up Pokemon Surfing, and the offer to be a member of the first Alolan Pokemon League was quite flattering too. Marshal had nearly stormed out to Alola when Grimsley had let his former cohorts know to ensure he was still up to scratch for representing Unova abroad. It had taken some serious work to get the Fighting-type expert to chill and leave Grimsley be. Honestly...

Well, he was quite looking forward to this League, he had to admit. There were some real impressive and interesting Trainers here in the Alola Region.

Speaking of, here was one now.

“Man oh man, here's a surprise.”
Moon, upon her Pokemon's back, looked up in shock as the voice came from just nearby, a tall man garbed in a white and black-hemmed kimono standing atop a Pokemon just cresting the water's surface. A Sharpedo. Moon glanced from it back to him. He gave a nod.

“Grimsley.”

Oh! Moon nodded, aware now who he was. The slight relaxation of her posture, the acknowledgement of his name calming her tension, amused Grimsley so. She was a careful one – probably had to be: all the stories were that she'd been hounded from the day of her first Grand Trial. Then a little over a week ago made a big enough splash to cause everyone to think maybe they shouldn't bug her instead. He looked at her closely.

Yeah, that was what he'd heard, couldn't tell a thing about her Bonds. Just a sheer wall, no definition that made sense. A sensation unlike anything he'd ever seen before. He grinned. Awesome.

“You seem busy,” his Sharpedo was keeping pace with Moon's Milotic, who was continuing to head north, the two being out past the islands that dotted the bay of Mahihinu. “Going somewhere?”

Once again Moon's posture and expression changed, caution and reservation setting back in. Hmm, seemed she was up to something. Fishing in a sleeve, Grimsley withdrew a silver coin, the sunlight breaking through overhead clouds glinting from it. Waving it a little got Moon's attention fully. The tall man smiled.

“Time for a game at least?” He flipped the coin through the air, catching it with ease. “You guess heads or tails, and depending on how it goes, you take a break to chat or go on ahead. Since you've got this far, I bet you're feeling real confident about your Pokemon and your abilities, but somewhere deep down you probably still realise you can't keep up with the bigger challenges. You're trying to ignore that and pretend going ahead and doing your own thing will always work out, but you're still doubtful. The only thing that'll really shore up what you lack right now is luck. Feeling lucky?”

Moon stared. Grimsley... was right. She was pretending her confidence, to a degree. She knew her Pokemon were strong. And that she could do incredible things. But the Team Skull leaders, Plumeria and Guzma, she still didn't want to see. Was trusting in what Riley had said, that there'd be an opportunity for Moon to avoid them. For that to work... she did need luck.

So she nodded to this too. Grimsley smiled wide. And flipped the coin high.

“Call!”

There was a wave incoming. She hadn't been looking in that direction, both she and Grimsley focused upon the spinning coin. But the message, the sense, came to her. Milotic was watching the waters and acknowledged the wave, the thought coming to Moon's mind too. They were about to be shifted. In that case...

It wouldn't be either.

Grimsley looked at Moon in shock and in that moment the wave passed them by, both Milotic and Sharpedo adjusting for its movement, Moon grabbing on to her Pokemon's neck and Grimsley having to focus on maintaining his balance. He never even raised his arm to grab the coin.

It disappeared beneath the sea.

Quiet moments followed the wave's passage before Grimsley raised a hand, pressing it against his forehead. And laughed.
“Hah! Hahahaha, astonishing, truly astonishing.” Shaking his head, he couldn't help the mirth. “It seems Alola is caring for you, Moon, so it's hard for me to find fault with your decisions. A loss is a loss, so I suppose I'll see you again in your own time. Come join me with your buddy Hau again, I'll teach you the art of Pokemon Surfing too. It'll be fun.”

Moon, pleased that Grimsley seemed to have accepted things the way they went, nodded back to him in response. She'd enjoy that. Their Pokemon began to drift apart. Grimsley called out one last time.

“If you're really heading north, take care. Team Skull are all around Po Town, so you're going to get into a load of trouble unless you're the real clever type. If you can't afford to lose, remember that the best option is simply not to play, got it?”

Moon nodded affirmation, Grimsley's advice odd and needing her to think on it. She wasn't really sure what to make of it at all.

But it stuck with her as she continued across the waves to Ula'ula's north.

A quiet cove ringed by heavy tree growth awaited Moon as she guided her Milotic towards the sandy shore, a singular path winding from beach to the east, the high walls of Po Town visible in the distance towering over the forest around. Following Riley's directions, Moon knew now she'd have to head north, towards the south wall of Po Town where a hole Riley would be waiting at could be found. So once on her own two feet Moon ran her hands along her Pokemon's scaled hide, words of thanks and praise responded to by pleased trills, the Tender Pokemon delighted by her touch. Moon returned it to its Net Ball.

Time to move on.

Poipole, who'd happily alternated between floating through the air and resting on the Milotic's head during their trip, made a high-pitched warble that drew Moon's eyes, first to it, then in the direction it was pointing. Towards the path into the trees.

Towards the figure who'd just emerged from it.

“ Weird place to end up.”

By first impression to Moon this grey-haired man seemed... disinterested. The passage of his dark eyes over her and Poipole never really lingered, the slouch he stood with, hands in the pockets of his black trousers, showing a lack of care. He wore a vest of dark navy blue patched with the symbol of the Alolan Police Force over a deep red tee, and a pair of sandals besides that. Unlike when he'd appeared before Kukui a few weeks prior, today Kahuna Nanu had neither his Z-Ring nor Z-Crystal on display. For all the world he was just some random police officer.

Just the way he wanted it.

“I'm not about to ask you what you're thinking,” he stood in the middle of the path, the way Moon was to go, “just go back. You go any further and it's Po Town and Team Skull ahead. Worse still they've been antagonising the local Pokemon for years, and it's looking like things are finally about to break real bad. No-one should go walking into that. Turn around, girl. You don't belong here.”

She had business. Nanu cocked an eyebrow at Moon's retort. Honestly, what was this kid doing with that much attitude? Felt like she was trying to pressure him out of the way. “Alright kid I see you've got a reason to be up to this, but I'm still getting in your way. So you're either going back the way
you came or through me, one or the other. Which are you feeling?”

She didn't like either. Getting into a fight would waste time and her Pokemon's strength should she need to defeat any Team Skull members, or use their power to escape Guzma or Plumeria. Whoever this man was, he'd offered her a terrible set of choices.

So just like Grimsley had taught her, she simply wouldn't play and instead take a third option. The flash of a Pokeball was Decidueye appearing behind her, Nanu shaking his head at her raw ridiculousness. Honestly, this kid. “Alright,” he took a step forward, pulling out a Pokeball of his own, “let's stop this here.”

Decidueye wrapped both wings around Moon, who held on tight to her Pokemon's chest, and leaped, bouncing from tree-trunk to tree-trunk before settling into the branches above and taking off. At that speed, with that agility, Moon quickly disappeared from sight carried by her Pokemon, Poipole flying after with a loud complaint at needing to keep up.

Nanu, who hadn't been expecting that, stared in the direction Moon had gone. Seriously? What was that kid up to? He shook his head and sighed, before pacing in the direction she'd gone. This was way more trouble than he needed right now. He pulled out a phone and made a quick call.

He was really the last person who should be dealing with this.

Riley of Team Skull smiled wide behind the bandanna covering her mouth as Moon emerged from the tree-line south of Po Town, just a little ways from the secret entrance into the Team Skull base. For as much as 'ignored' and 'slated for repair but no-one ever did it' counted as secret. Mostly it was for people to wander out through and head down to the beach to slack off. A lot of Team Skull culture was built around slacking off.

Preferably outside of Po Town's embrace.

Moon, looking up, marvelled at the clouds overhead. They covered the sky now, compared to the patchwork they had been earlier that day, and rain was falling clearly just before her. Seemed she was on the very edge of a rainstorm, one pouring fully upon Po Town ahead. It almost seemed like the town itself was the target of the storm.

That was ridiculous though. Right?

“No-one saw you?” Riley's question was met with a shake of Moon's head, a mention of Grimsley on the water, and a police-officer on the shore. Riley frowned at both. Not ideal. But... “Let's just hurry up, I've got a place for you to hide out inside the walls. Then I can get the Boss and Big Sis outta the way and let you know. Keep behind me and watch for my signal.”

The plan continuing smoothly Riley strode back into Po Town, not even flinching as a deluge of rain settled upon her shoulders. Anyone staying at the base of Team Skull got used to it pretty quick. Moon, not nearly as prepared for this, held her dragon shawl over her head, Poipole clinging onto her to keep out of the water as best it could. It didn't work very well.

Each time Riley waved Moon forward she moved. They paused, waiting under awnings, hopping from place to place across the streets of Po Town, various other members of Team Skull hanging about but never paying too much mind to anything else. Until, eventually, Riley opened the door of a dilapidated building and ushered Moon inside.
“Okay,” she hissed from the doorway, “there's a stack of towels back there, hang out until I let you know, alright? It'll take a bit, so don't go anywhere. This is gonna work. It's all going according to plan. Stay there.” Moon nodded back. She would. Settled into the towels Riley had given her, running one over Poipole before wringing out her red shawl. Maybe she could at least get a little dry.

Riley, outside, closed the door. Honestly, she felt bad about this, this whole plan. Moon had trusted her so fully. That kind of thing was... weird. She shook her head and clicked the padlock on the door, sealing its occupant within. Anyway, that was the bait got.

Just as planned.

There were two messages awaiting Captain Acerola as she returned to Aether House, Hau and Lillie in tow after she'd found them gathered outside. The first was from Kahili, expressing that she was heading back down to the Aether House now. The second was from Kahuna Nanu, which frustrated the Captain greatly. She'd spent a good portion of her morning trying and failing to find the Kahuna and now he'd gone and left a message for her.

The few moments of annoyance as she listened to the message he'd left quickly morphed into something else as she stared blankly at Hau and Lillie, who had just finished telling her Moon was out exploring the islands in the Mahihini Bay.

That was not where Moon was at all though.

“She's what?”

Quickly once confronted Hau and Lillie explained everything Riley had said to them.

Tense minutes of waiting passed, Acerola knowing her flying Pokemon would never make it to Po Town as fast as Kahili's. Soon after the Flying-type expert walked in the door. The mood of the room and expressions on Acerola, Lillie, and Hau immediately told her something was wrong.

“What happened?”

Moments later she and Captain Acerola were on the back of one of her Pokemon heading north to Po Town. Team Skull might be punks and troublemakers, but walking into their home base was still actually dangerous. Moon going there was... a disaster waiting to happen.

The two disappeared into the sky at full speed.

And from the shadows of a nearby building Plumeria, big sister of Team Skull, stepped forth.

Four years of tension had mounted. Members of Team Skull were always quick to take their Pokemon and make a mess wherever they felt like letting off steam, but close to their home base of Po Town it was the worst. The local Pokemon populations were first driven further into the mountains east of the settlement. Then picked on when seen. That this new pressure would change the population went ignored by those it would soon concern. More peaceful and non-combative Pokemon moved away.

More conflict-seeking and aggressive Pokemon moved in.
Again and again there were push-forwards and backs. The walls of Po Town's east side showed heavy damage from skirmishes and clashes. The attempted move to Malie had been to ditch this entire mess behind them. Even the Boss was sick of dealing with this.

But today was the last day it would happen.

Packs of Pokemon had banded together, one specific leader with the strength to command them beginning their march. This battlefield, this territory, they would take, as was their nature.

The Great Battle of Po Town was about to begin.

Chapter End Notes

First thing's first, I want to give a shoutout to Ao3 user peachvodkaa, and their recently begun work Cherry Bomb: https://archiveofourown.org/works/16880706
It is, by their own words, an Eldritch inspired work and I appreciate deeply that my work can help inspire and motivate others. Consider giving the fic a look, I've enjoyed it so far!

The Po Town Problem has been something I've been thinking about a long time now. In the game Acerola and Moon were busy at the Ghost Trial when Plumeria first struck and took a random Pokemon to lure Moon to Po Town so that while she was occupied by Guzma, Plumeria could swoop in and take Nebby. But this time around there were too many extra factors. Moon's Ghost Trial was already done, so she and Acerola were around. And Kahili was here too, who we already know can beat Plumeria. Getting to Lillie and Nebby was suddenly much harder. A stolen Pokemon from some kids wouldn't do anything - there's no way a challenge letter to Moon would work because Kahili would just storm off herself. And Acerola and Moon would stick closer to Aether House with Lillie if that happened.

So my puzzle, how to motivate Moon to go to Po Town without breaking believability, combined with moving Acerola and Kahili, stuck with me for a while. Luckily Riley swooped in to solve the equation. Thanks Riley, glad I created you.

With this my metaphorical gun is loaded. We've reaching the jumping off point. The next few months are going to be... a lot. I'm really looking forward to getting some of these scenes out of my head and onto the page at last. Clear some space up in here.

Some of this I've been thinking about since the story began.

This chapter's quite regular sized, compared to some of my plus sized chapters, which I still feel weird about because I know the next one's likely gonna be huge. It can't be helped though, as much as I considered lopping off some of the next chapter and putting it at the end here, events that belong together must stay together. We get the ending of the setup phase here.

Then come next chapter we go.

Thanks all for reading, I appreciate you joining me on this ride to this point. Buckle up, we're igniting this engine at long last.
Here we go.
Five minutes after Kahili and Acerola's departure from Aether House, the Foundation staffer at its
desk received another call. Despite Jace's insistence that the Aether House shouldn't be left without a
Foundation employee present, especially in this delicate time, the direct orders from the Branch Chief
were not up for debate. Sighing, the young man left the building and its occupants in the care of its
Oranguru Headmaster alone.

Ten minutes after the Trial Captain and Flying-type Expert were last seen flying north from
Mahihinu, Po Town their goal to prevent a disaster, the titled 'Big Sister of Team Skull' Plumeria
approached Aether House's door.

Eleven minutes after the only ones who could've stopped this from happening had left, the
Headmaster of Aether House lay slumped against the wall it had been thrown into, Hau's Pikachu
pinned beneath the weight of the mass of rainbow coloured sludge that was Plumeria's Muk, and
Lillie had stepped forth, arms outstretched.

As the plan had been.

"Please!" She spoke clearly, even if behind her Hau could see the tremble to her form. "There is no
need for this! I... I will go with you willingly. Please do not hurt anyone else."

"You sure about that?" Plumeria considered the young girl before her, the bag over her shoulder
moving ever so slightly. The goal. "There's no hero's welcome waiting for you back home. You're
not going to change anything."

"That is not for you to decide," with resoluteness Lillie stared the powerful trainer down. "I will face
mother myself and convince her not to do this." Hau, who'd been unable to stop Plumeria's attack or
Lillie from stepping before him, tilted his head.

"'Mother'?"

Lillie just maintained her forward stare.

"Well I can't say I don't like that attitude," Plumeria spent only a moment more, knowing moments
were precious, before giving a shrug. "Alright, get moving. We don't wanna keep your mom
waiting, yeah?" Lillie took a step forward. Hau hung on to her shoulder.

"Wait, Lillie!" He shook his head when she looked back at him, "I don't know what this is all about
but you don't have to go with them. I'll... I'll figure something out I just-"

A deep rumble from the Pokemon pinning his Pikachu to the ground drew Hau's eyes, watching as
slightly more of the Muk's sludgy mass rolled over his partner. Plumeria clicked her tongue. "Time's
wasting."

"Hau," Lillie moved a hand to rest on his own, before lifting it from her shoulder, "I- I don't think...
I'll be able to travel with the two of you after this. Tell Moon I'm sorry." Hau's complaint, his attempt
to reach for Lillie, she rebuked, a sharp call of his name stopping him still as she approached
Plumeria. Then passed her, out of the Aether House. Plumeria turned and followed after.
Last to leave was the Muk, Hau racing to his beaten and injured Pikachu as the Sludge Pokemon rolled itself out the door. By Plumeria's order it raised an acidic hand and pushed the door closed, melting and fusing the entrance shut. As Plumeria, with Pokemon returned to its Great Ball and Lillie walking before her, left the scene, the sound of Hau's fists pounding upon the unopening doors echoed behind her.

Package secured.

Now for the delivery.

Moon's patient wait, Poipole's company keeping her occupied as she watched it fly about, played tug-of-war with towels, and petted the Pokemon as it curled up in her lap, ended as Po Town exploded into a mass of yelling voices, Pokemon cries, and the sounds of battle. Immediately Moon was sure something was wrong, Riley's constant insistence having been that the plan was for stealth. But... maybe this was the lure for Guzma and Plumeria?

No, it just didn't sound right.

The door to the house she was resting inside of did not open as she turned its handle and pushed, earning a frown. She'd just entered through the door, why wasn't it working now? A second attempt yielded no better result. There was a loud Pokemon's yell just nearby. The sound of metal and scraping stone. Moon, concerned now, called for Poipole.

Something was seriously wrong.

The Poison Pin Pokemon wasted no time firing a gout of its most acidic poison, the liquid quickly seeping into and dissolving the wood around the door's handle. Another shove from Moon against it caused the jammed part to break free of the door, the handle on the outside now hanging loosely from the chain attached to the wall. Moon stepped outside and into the battlefield that Po Town had become.

The back-and-forth conflict between Team Skull and the local Pokemon had finally borne the worst possible fruit. Local tribes of Pokemon, from families to packs to colonies, had banded together under one who had come for this battle and had the strength to unite them together. And thus, commanded as one, they'd moved upon the home base of Team Skull, their opponents in this fight.

Scavenger Yungoos and Gumshoos, Spearow and Fearow, even the odd Rattata and Raticate who'd awoken for this afternoon battle, raced about, attempting to claim every little thing that caught their eye. More determined and driven Scrafty and Scraggy, Skarmory, Crabrawler, Graveler and Geodude were in battle, Team Skull Grunts with their own Pokemon out engaging their opponents in ones and twos. This kind of unformed mass they could fight back against.

What could not be dealt with as easily however were the packs of Pawniard. Each with a fearsome Bisharp leading them, these commanded packs moved as one and tore through barricades with their bladed arms and heads, gouging trails through stone walls and tearing apart the abandoned vehicles scattered about the town. Pancham could be spotted running with those packs as well, though seemed to be focusing more as scouts and messengers than combatants. At the entrance of Po Town the one who had busted down its main gate, a ferocious Pangoro, was still thrashing about. It, the many Grunts of Team Skull also did not know what to do about. It was bedlam.

Po Town was falling apart.
This army, roused by one who had come to accept this challenge, would do well in their endeavour. Leave their mark on this place filled with those who'd challenged and attacked them so many times. But that leader, that commander, had its own purpose and challenge to see to. So while its packs occupied the ground clutter, while the masses had their war, it went for the head.

The sight of a massive cloud of dust following a sudden explosion from Po Town's largest house, a mansion at the back of the town, drew Moon's eyes.

She set off towards it.

“Ahahahahaha!” The laughter of Team Skull's Boss Guzma, the tall and white haired individual standing with arms crossed, echoed in the far more cavernous than it had been minutes ago room he ruled this town from. Golisopod, his signature partner, the hulking silver armoured Bug and Water-type Pokemon, stood before him. And in the cloud of dust that had been the entrance to this room moments prior...

“What a welcome surprise!” Guzma's rough voice stretched forward to his challenger. “It's not every day someone comes straight to me for a beating! You're a real hard one, y'know that?”

The Pokemon standing up from where it had been slammed had no answer to give in voice. Only by blade, as it lunged forward with arm outstretched, the metallic edge stretching from its forearm grinding against the heavy scale armour of the Golisopod it faced. Guzma watched the Bisharp fighting him with a smile.

“You're the one that did all this, huh? Got all those weaklings riled up and causing trouble? I get that, I do. You don't like something so you wanna smash it, I get you! But you're still trying to crush me, so no hard feelings when I crush you back, alright? Got it?” His Pokemon lifted a massive arm and swung it forward, the Bisharp blocking with its own smaller limbs and proving unable to stop the pure power behind it, being thrown back again.

But only a step as the Golisopod seized the Bisharp's arm, the razor edge extending from the Sword Blade Pokemon unable to pierce the Hard Scale Pokemon's armour. Guzma grinned.

“You pack bosses, you're all about that big head blade of yours, right?” Tapping his own skull, Guzma stared at the metal blade stretching down along the red and grey head of the Dark and Steel-type Pokemon. “I heard that if it gets damaged, that's it for you. Pretty pathetic to keep all your pride on one little thing, y'know? Especially when it's... so... DELICATE!”

In time with his words, commanded through the Bond they shared, Guzma's Golisopod swung the Bisharp overhead, slamming it into the ground, before pinning it with a heavy stomp upon its upper chest, just missing the other blades stretching from its torso. The Golisopod raised an arm as the Bisharp failed to lift its foot away. Guzma just smiled wider.

Let the beating commence.

It was a pretty strong Pokemon, he'd give it that credit. It had rallied all the wild ones. Come right for his head. And fought one to one against his partner Golisopod. But it still wasn't stronger, and Guzma just watched with a smirk as his Pokemon struck its opponent's head blade, again, and again, and again. The Bisharp couldn't stop it. Couldn't prevent this overwhelming force.

And couldn't stop the damage from reaching breaking point.
With a loud splintering sound the metal blade stretching down the Pokemon's head shattered, Guzma's laughter mixing into the noise as his Golisopod lifted its foot, grabbed and slammed the Bisharp into the ceiling, before continuing the throwing motion to launch it through a nearby wall. Dust poured into the room from the impact, Guzma just laughing even more. That's what happened to those who stood up against him! That's what they got!

Muffled by the sound of his own voice, a quieter one spoke behind the dust and remnants of wall. Then light shone bright illuminating a form. Guzma stared.

Through the dust the Bisharp burst once more.

The swing of Golisopod's arm was too slow, the Pokemon sliding beneath it glowing with light, before placing a hand on the massive arm overhead and flipping around to perch atop it. Rearing back one of its bladed arms, the light around the Bisharp built brighter still. Guzma knew that light. And he and his Pokemon knew that move.

That Z-Move.

The Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Clash had been taught to Moon by Molayne, a Steel-type Expert, best friend of Kukui and former friend of Guzma. As Moon stepped through the dust, shawl covering her mouth, Poipole floating behind her and the fading light of the Z-Move she'd unleashed dispersing, Guzma was caught between staring at her – what was she doing here – and his Golisopod, who now had the Bisharp pinning it to the ground instead.

Wait...

“The heck is this, kid?” Guzma turned to Moon first, “That your Pokemon?” She shook her head in answer. But... she'd just let it use a Z-Move. That literally required a Bond. Did she just... walk up and form a Bond with that Pokemon then and there? “You...” Guzma's face scrunched up as he tried to handle this, “What's your problem? What are you even doing here you brat?”

At this point Moon, who'd felt something draw her to this place despite it being obvious the worst of the battles was here, spoke honestly. Because, with that Pokemon pinning down Guzma's own, she felt confident. Surprisingly so. She'd come for the machine for Cosmog. Where was it?

Guzma facepalmed.

“For crying out – couldn't you have just waited in that damn house patiently? What's wrong with you?”

Moon paused. Why... did Guzma know that? He just shook his head.

“Alright kid, since you came all the way here, how about a first-class lesson in real power, none of that fake stuff Kukui teaches. Here's one from the hated boss that beats you down and beats you down and never lets up.... yeah big bad Guzma is here!”

Hyping himself up Guzma whipped around to the pair of Pokemon just as his Golisopod responded to his call, exerting an incredible upwards strike that forced the Bisharp to dodge backwards or be thrown through the roof, the Sword Blade Pokemon – still injured from the prior battle, its head blade completely broken – circling the Hard Scale Pokemon with caution. The Golisopod had taken a full Z-Move, even if Steel wasn't the most effective type against it, and now it was hurt too. Both injured.

But both still went at it.
Blow by blow their claws and blades met and deflected one another, the Bisharp more able to dodge but the Golisopod more difficult to hurt. But... Guzma frowned. That Pokemon... it was doing better. Its reactions were cleaner. And it even seemed... a little stronger? He turned his eyes on Moon. She was just watching the fight quietly. Was she... seriously?

“Listen up kid,” Guzma spoke to catch her attention, “when I tell you you've been going about things the wrong way. The Island Challenge's for idiots and Kukui doesn't know a thing. He just runs away when life gets hard – you know how I know that? Cause he did it to me. He and I were both there back in Tapu Village and you know what happened? He got scared and bowed down to the Tapu. Me? I'm still here fighting. I ain't bowing to no-one. So how about you quit wasting your time and energy on that stuff the Tapu care so much about. Screw them anyway! That's what Team Skull's about, ditching Alola for ditching us and just taking what had happened! Don't that make sense?”

Moon paused. Even as the two Pokemon continued to clash, each dodged attack leaving the other damaging more of the building around them, she turned to look at Guzma. He was truly focused on what had happened in the past.

But Holei had said to look forward to the future.

Immediately Guzma's expression changed.

“You f- you little brat, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW ABOUT HER?”

The explosion of volume, Guzma's peak shaking the entire room, fell upon Moon as anger lashed through his body and the two Pokemon's clash became more and more furied.

“You think I haven't thought about what she said every day since? You know what she told me at the end? 'Don't be bound to them. Don't be their slaves.' The Tapu don't care about nothing or no-one! Just themselves! You gonna act like it's wrong to stick it to them?”

No, Moon shook her head, he was right. The Tapu were selfish. And violent. And went against everything Alola meant. But Team Skull weren't standing up to the Tapu. They were just making things harder for the people of Alola. And that wasn't the point of-

“Shut up shut up SHUT UP!” Guzma's fingers were digging into his face, the pressure the only thing keeping him in this moment. “If you say another word, just one more WORD that makes you sound like her I'm...” his voice cracked, straining as he struggled with the memories he couldn't believe this brat was evoking, “I'm seriously going to lose my mind.”

The conclusion of the battle was threefold. Firstly the Bisharp sunk to a knee, struggling and failing to stand again after the damage it had taken. Secondly the Golisopod retreated to Guzma's side, the injuries it had suffered driving it to this point. He barely reacted as the Hard Scale Pokemon disappeared into the Pokeball he kept.

Thirdly, in an explosion of drywall and plaster caused by a powerful Flying-type Pokemon's attack, Kahili Hano entered the room, her furious aura enough to make anyone quail. Moon immediately flinched at the sight of her. Guzma took off through a nearby hole in the wall. Whatever. They'd done what they needed to here. Po Town could bite it, he hated this rainy garbage town anyway.

He was headed for better things.

“Moon.” Kahili's voice was steel that would never break, even taking aback the boss Bisharp at the intensity this new figure spoke with. “What, pray-tell, are you doing here?”
Moon, quietly, looked down and mumbled something about stopping Team Skull's plan to take Nebby. Kahili wasn't having it.

“You are coming back to Mahihinu this instant.” She couldn't believe this girl, having the gall to act ashamed after choosing to do something as irresponsible and foolish – she could've been hurt! Kahili was barely containing her shaking. “Captain Acerola, who came with me to get you and you should be thankful to her for it, is assisting with de-escalating the battle going on outside, though it is one entirely of Team Skull's own making and frankly I feel they deserve to lie in the mess they have made. Now, let's be off.”

But! Moon looked up. There was a machine in Po Town she had to find, it was part of Team Skull's plan to kidnap Nebby! Kahili paused hearing Moon say that. Then shook her head. “That's ridiculous,” she dismissed the idea, “Nebby will be safe as long as we are...”

Time seemed to slow for the two as Kahili never finished the sentence she was speaking. Her face paled rapidly.

Wait...

“Moon we need to return to Mahihinu immediately.”

The change in tone behind Kahili’s words, the immediate panic in her voice, Moon felt it too. She nodded and took a step forward, her foot banging into a box overturned in the battle between Guzma and the Bisharp earlier. Looking down, Moon stared at the contents pouring from it. Were those... Z-Crystals? She reached down and grabbed one, a pale green crystal with an insect design upon it. Then a second as well. Okay, now she was ready.

A deep hissing sound came from her left as the Bisharp, head blade damaged so completely its face looked almost flat, attempted to stand. Moon stopped and looked at the Pokemon. It had been thrown through the wall just before her mere minutes ago. She hadn't thought twice, reached down to help it stand, and asked it if it needed her aid. The sense in response, of a Bond being forged, was answer enough. So Moon had performed the Z-Pose for the Steelium-Z and helped the Pokemon fight. It was only thanks to Rotom-dex telling her about another Bisharp she'd seen on the way here that she knew which Z-Crystal to use.

Did... it want to come with her?

It couldn't stand. But it did bow its head. Reaching forward, Moon placed a hand against its face, drawing a Pokeball from her bag as Kahili watched. That Pokemon... that was a strong one, wasn't it? Yet it remained bowed and allowing Moon to touch it as she tapped the Pokeball to its head and it disappeared within a flash of red light. Moon held the Pokeball as it clicked to show the capture complete. Kahili's eyes slid to the Poipole floating with Moon. Seven Bonds before her very eyes.

Moon would be the death of her at this rate.

“Moon, we need to go.” This time Moon nodded and followed after. Moments later Kahili’s Toucannon disappeared into the sky, Kahili, Moon, and Poipole all holding on to its back. Acerola on the ground below saw the Pokemon go and breathed out a sigh of relief. Good, that was Moon safe. Then turned her attention back to the rampaging Pangoro.

Someone needed a nap.
The doors of Aether House were torn open. Kahili saw it first as her Toucannon circled in for a landing, but the cry of Moon's voice as they neared the ground showed she'd realised it too. They'd been tricked.

Team Skull had made their move.

“Moon wait!” The forceful command from Kahili went ignored as Moon raced up the stairs to the broken doors, the girl continuing to rush ahead at her own pace. Kahili would need to have a serious talk with her after this about going off without paying care or attention to her surroundings. She'd gone off half-cocked one too many times now.

Not that grey hairs would be particularly noticeable amongst Kahili's pale blue, but she was still sure Moon had managed to give her a few all the same.

“Moon?” Hau, seated just inside the broken doors of the Aether House, looked up with a torn expression at Moon's arrival. Immediately she went to him and asked if he was okay, Poipole entering with her floating about the broken room. Hau shook his head. “I- I'm sorry, that Team Skull lady with the pink hair came and I, I couldn't do a thing. Lillie... she said she'd go with them if they left me alone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.”

Kahili, a step behind Moon, was almost white with fury.

“I see. So they tricked us.” In a way her voice was cold, tone flat, as if making plain observation. But then a heat seemed to radiate around her, a barely contained fire burning beneath her skin. “Moon, stay here with Hau. I will let everyone know and begin our search. And I will find her. Do not go out again. Please. I won't lose the two of you too.”

Moon, who was sitting with Hau now, looked at Kahili and gave a slow nod. Kahili turned in an instant and was out the door, phone rising to her face. First Kukui. Then she'd fly to Po Town and notify Acerola. Then sweep this entire island and tear it apart stone by stone to find any sign of Team Skull. Then all of Alola if she had to. This would not stand.

She wouldn't allow it.

Left behind, Moon sought to comfort Hau. He wasn't receptive.

“When they left they sealed the doors,” he looked at her mournfully. “It took me and my Pokemon so long to get them open, there was no sign of Team Skull anywhere when I got out. And no-one I asked said they saw anything. So I... I came back here because I knew Ms. Kahili would be back soon. That she might be able to do something to get Lillie back.”

In the moment of silence of Hau's despair, Moon failing to reassure him it would be okay and Kahili would find Lillie – her own fears and failures in being the cause of this tormenting her loudly within her own mind – a third voice joined them. A third figure stepping in through the broken doors.

His eyes were wide.

“I. Specifically. Asked you.” Word by word Gladion forced his way through his disbelief. “To keep Lillie and Cosmog safe. Po Town being basically empty of Team Skull was a bad sign but this, I... how could the two of you do that?”

Neither... really had an answer. Hau felt his failure deeply, being unable to stop the Team Skull Admin Plumeria at all. And Moon... she was the cause. The reason this had happened. She couldn't stand herself right now either.
How could she have been tricked so easily?

Gladion cast his eyes around the foyer of the Aether House, only Moon and Hau in sight, the Headmaster escorted to a back room by Hau so they might rest. Usually there was always an Aether Foundation employee here. Not now though. Because of course. He shook his head.

“Then... I hope the two of you are ready to make it up to me for letting them be taken. Because you're going to help me get them back.”

Moments passed as slowly Moon and Hau lifted their heads, staring at the blonde teen before them. Hau asked it first. “Wait... you know where Lillie's been taken?”

Slowly Gladion nodded. Then turned. “Come on. I took a boat from Team Skull's base to get here, we can use it to head to where she is.”

“W-wait!” Hau stood up. “Are you going to fight Team Skull again? I... I already lost. And my Pokemon are hurt so-”

“So we won't do it alone.” Gladion's words cut through Hau's objections. Hau stared at the young man in shock. “Don't look at me like that,” turning his head, Gladion broke eye-contact first. “If we're working together we're stronger than apart, that's basic logic. And the boat is stocked with healing items, we'll have the time to recover your Pokemon before we get there.”

“Gladion...” Hau turned to look at Moon, a moment of light beginning to return to his eyes. “Moon, do you think we should-”

She'd go. A tiny voice within Moon reminded her how much she'd be putting Kahili through by leaving now but... she had to go to Lillie as soon as she could. She had to make up for what she'd done wrong.

She wouldn't be tricked like this again.

“Alright,” Gladion nodded, seeing Moon's resolute gaze, “let's get down to the docks.”

Mahihinu was quiet, an air of tension keeping people more silent than ever. None approached the three youths heading down to the docks, Poipole floating over Moon's head, and none got in their way. Not until they were there.

Not until one did stand before them.

“You kids really don't know when to quit, do you?”

This time the eyes of Kahuna Nanu had a glint to them, the glare of focus and intent. All three came to a stop, two recognising the man. Moon knew him as the police officer who had tried to stop her just a little earlier that day.

Gladion knew him to be the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island.

“Look, I don't know what you're planning, that seems the running theme these days,” Nanu raised a hand, rubbing at the back of his dull grey hair, “but isn't it about time you just sat down and stopped making things worse? Leave it to the adults already. If you know something you can tell us. Ask for help for once in your lives.”

“This is family business, it doesn't concern you.” Gladion stepped forward, ignoring Hau's questioning 'family?' behind him. “These two are helping me fulfil a promise. And I am simply
paying my mother a visit. You're in the way."

“That so?” Nanu focused on Gladion's response as Hau's 'mother?' went unanswered as well. “Kid don't give me that crap, we both know the three of you are about to go charging into trouble. Again. You're not going anywhere. And that's that.”

Moon pushed past Gladion to take the lead. She was going. And that was that. Nanu stared at her with a pitiless gaze. “Oh cause that's worked out so well for you so far.” His response failed to make Moon flinch. She was going because she had to fix what she'd done wrong. Nanu just shook his head. “I thought the old dragon said she was gonna train that attitude out of ya, seems like you still think you can just do whatever and have it work. You won't make anything better if you go. So I won't let you. Got it?”

Moon raised a Pokeball to point at the man before her. She'd skipped their Pokemon Battle earlier, hadn't she? She'd apologise by giving him one now. The same terms as before. If he won she'd go back. If she won he'd get out of the way.

Nanu laughed.

“Don't remember ever saying I'd let you go if you won,” he grinned at her cool stare, “but don't worry about me being a bad sport, it's not gonna happen.” Withdrawing his hands from his pockets, Nanu clasped the Z-Ring he held in one hand around the wrist of the other. Moon's stare didn't shift even a step. Look at her, all determined. Oh well. “Because there's no way you're going to win.”

“Move back,” Gladion raised an arm to bar Hau, stepping back, pushing him that way as well. “It's her fight now.” Moon was, he hated to admit, the strongest of the three of them. If anyone stood a chance of making Kahuna Nanu move, it would be her. He and Hau should at least conserve what stamina they could. Hau didn't seem pleased.

“We should help her!”

Moon called his name and asked him to let her do this. He... couldn't say no to her after that.

So he and Gladion just watched as Moon manifested Decidueye before her.

“That bird again, huh?” Nanu raised an Ultra Ball, a large red and black striped Pokemon emerging from it. Rotom-dex appeared from Moon's bag – last seen in Po Town pointing out all the Pokemon running about – to give the rundown once more.

“Krookodile, Intimidation Pokemon, Ground and Dark-type! An exceptionally violent Pokemon, it is known to never let go of prey once bitten!”

Dark-type... Moon frowned as she took stock of the matchup. She was facing an older Trainer with a Z-Ring and a powerful – she could tell that at a glance – Pokemon with a type-advantage over her. The worst possible situation.

Second worst.

The worst had already happened and Moon was going to undo it no matter the cost.

Decidueye dove forward.

“Crunch.” Nanu gave the command dispassionately, a cold and measured response. That Pokemon of Moon's was fast, but his would exceed her. The seconds between the two impacting ticked down slower and slower, Moon's focus stretching the moment out longer and longer.
Her command flowed silently and her Pokemon responded in turn.

Heavy jaws slammed shut around a burst of leaves, Decidueye above the Intimidation Pokemon drawing back an arrow and shooting it down. A swing of the Krookodile's hand smacked the quill aside, the shot lacking the power to harm it, but Nanu was frowning. That had been... fast.

How far was this kid about to go?

“Put it down.” His partner Pokemon barrelled forward, a mass of power that moved with great speed. In any race it would beat that Decidueye with ease, but it was not raw speed or power that was controlling this match.

It was technique.

Every Pokemon was, at the most core level, unique. Not just across species but even within one there are differences. Slightly different builds. Slightly different attitudes. And oh so often vastly different experiences. Great Trainers learned archetypes of Pokemon they faced and so reacted in a general sense to what they expected. Nanu knew his opponent was a Decidueye and so foresaw a focus on archery, with the potential of powerful leaf-based attacks as well. But though those Trainers might be ready for many things, what they strive most to be ready for are things they cannot expect. Ways a Pokemon has grown, developed, trained, and changed that made it uniquely itself. Of course such events took years upon decades for Pokemon to truly become their own unique powers that couldn't be understood by general knowledge.

But sown seeds might sprout quickly under pressure.

The Decidueye had a technique where every time contact came within reach of it there was a burst of leaves, the distraction enough for the Pokemon – a natural in masking its presence – to reposition itself for a new attack. A variation of Leafage? It was a surprise.

This kid was going wild.

Calm and focus were the cores of the greatest Pokemon Battles, Trainer's maintaining a constant and consistent supply of strength for their Pokemon to tap. But other emotions had their parts to play, and the more intense they were the more affecting they could be. It was hard to tell exactly what Moon was feeling, her posture still, her eyes locked on the combatant Pokemon, but it was clear she was feeling it intensely. More than enough to push things even further than before. Nanu continued to observe the fight. Acerola had mentioned the Captains had chosen to support Moon fully, and raise her into someone fully capable of mastering the potential she held. That should still take longer than three months though.

Seriously, what was even with her?

Every arrow Decidueye fired broke against the body of the Krookodile, Nanu's own focus enough to make his partner far more than Moon's could possibly harm. But, and here was the problem, he couldn't catch the freaking bird. Every time he was sure his Krookodile's jaws had seized tight, or a claw had grasped on to a leg, there was another puff of leaves and the Arrow Quill Pokemon was firing again from another angle. Broken quills were littering the docks now – that wasn't part of her strategy, was it? Nanu did a quick sweep with his eyes while ordering his Pokemon to push further forward. Didn't seem like any shape Moon could make use of.

A torrent of sand whipped up around the Intimidation Pokemon, forming a twister of particulate and catching the Decidueye firing an arrow overhead within it. Nanu watched as the Pokemon disappeared into the whipping winds, holding a focused command for his partner to enact. When the
Decidueye broke free it would be momentarily stunned – he'd have his Krookodile strike it then with its most terrifying gaze. Slow the Arrow Quill Pokemon with fear. Nanu was tired of its evasive nature.

Moon stepped behind the spinning sandstorm between them, momentarily hidden from view. As obvious what she was doing as if she hadn't moved at all. That special thing only she could do. Nanu gave a different command.

“Go underground.”

The fight having pushed off of the docks onto the shore gave room for his Pokemon to dig, quickly tunnelling into the sand beneath its feet. The raging storm cut short to reveal Decidueye not having been thrown free of it, instead held in place by an arrow shot into the ground and a ghostly chain stretching up from it to wrap around the Pokemon's foot. Moon had a green Z-Crystal in her Z-Ring, same unflinching expression on her face even as Nanu read her move. She'd pushed through the attack and was about to strike with a Z-Move in counter. Honestly genuinely impressive.

But Nanu hadn't been kidding when he'd said she was stopping here.

Moon was watching the battlefield, looking for where the Krookodile would break free of the earth, even as Decidueye came to a landing upon the ground. But the arrow it had fired was still binding it in place, making it an easy target for the red and black crocodilian Pokemon to strike. Nanu waited for the right moment to come. Any second now.

Moon completed the Z-Pose for the Grassium-Z all the same.

The explosion of light and energy, radiant floral power surging forth, twisted around Moon's partner Decidueye, spirals of flowers rapidly growing up out of the sandy shore. The effect of the attack was much like watching Tapu Bulu at work, choosing an area to be overgrown. Even the grass nearby had grown forward rapidly to carpet over the sand. The only point left unchanged was that directly beneath the Arrow Quill Pokemon, as the attack had wrapped around it. Nanu noted that one moment too late.

“Wait stay down-” the vibrant surge of power had rattled the Krookodile underground, too close all the same, and seeing a moment of weakness in its prey it moved past Nanu's instruction. That was the problem with partnering up with a real jerk like that – when it saw a chance to close its jaws around a target it went for it, Nanu's commands be darned.

See what that got it.

Moon and Decidueye both knew where the Pokemon would surface. The Z-Move Bloom Doom had not been to attack the Krookodile, it had been to control its next action. Unbelievable, the kind of thing you'd barely see anyone use a Z-Move to do. But this kid, who could perform them without limit, was learning to use them in ways no-one else would.

Ways no-one could expect.

The attack had destroyed the shackle arrow binding it, and so Decidueye leaped moments before Krookodile surfaced. Drew back and fired an arrow, through a gap between wide open jaws and stretched back arms, to hit the ground and explode into shackles again. The tug of the chains the arrow manifested distracted the Krookodile for a moment to focus on them, the surrounding air thick with pollen left in the Z-Move's wake.

Decidueye fired another arrow as it landed further away. And another. And another.
As many as fast as it could draw.

Nanu's partner Krookodile had the strength to shatter any of these binding arrows on its own. If those ghostly chains swapped around it it would simply grab the arrow in the ground and crush it. But the after-effects of the Z-Move was like a Tapu's Terrain, and inside of it the Pokemon was slowed. Each arrow that landed around it, for on contact it would still shatter, stretched out more of the chains it manifested and bound tight. For all Moon's Decidueye was fading after using a Z-Move, she was still firing without relent.

Only when she stopped to breathe out heavily, panting hoots from within the leaf shroud wrapping her head, did Moon give her partner a word of praise. Though it was equally a command to finish it.

The moment came down to a bare second of difference. Decidueye pulled back an arrow that began to glow bright green, charged with a different energy – something that would be far more effective against the part Ground-type Krookodile – the time the Intimidation Pokemon spent bound in place allowing Moon's own to perform this attack. It fired, and in that moment the Pokemon of Nanu broke free of the chains, unable to be held for long. But long enough.

The attack was going to hit.

“Well alright then,” clicking the Ultra Ball his Krookodile usually resided in, Nanu pulled the Pokemon back moments before the attack would have hit, Moon's glare snapping to him as he considered what was next. For all Moon's great strategy, and her partner's incredible ability, the amount of damage they'd done was still little. Nanu clicked the Ultra Ball again and Krookodile manifested once more, pulled out of the attack's path, free and fuming at the shame it felt in requiring this aid. The Kahuna tilted his head.

“And?”

“That's not fair!” Hau was the one to yell it from the sidelines, shocked by the man's action. “You can't just call a Pokemon back to avoid attacks and then let it out again to keep fighting! That's cheating!”

“Who said there were rules?” Nanu drawled back in response. “The only thing I'm here to do is stop you: not to have some sort of fair fight. If you don't have the strength to get past me, too bad. Make sense?”

Moon nodded as she called her partner Decidueye back. It did. She'd been thinking of proper battling rules. But neither of them really had the time for that, right? Nanu paused. Wait.

Moon called Poipole's name as she retrieved and activated Pokeball after Pokeball from her bag. Poipole had remained near Moon at all times since joining her on Mount Hokulani, slowly growing happier and happier under her light. Compared to the darkness it had lived through before, Moon was radiant and it loved her. Today her light was tinged with something that hurt the Ultra Beast's heart. It had remained quiet beside her to be there as she needed it. And now she did.

So now it went forth.

Shelgon continued to grow, gathering energy within its round form for the day its final evolution would come. Thanks to Ryuki's teachings, Moon knew now not to shy from giving the Pokemon the same aggressive commands she had when it was a Bagon. It was still free to exert itself as it desired, stimulating its changing body and accelerating its growth. Called upon once more, it was as ready to fight as ever.
Hungry for the battles Moon brought it to.

Sylveon had evolved as all of its kind did: through the power of its Trainer's love.

The difference between Sylveon, Espeon, and Umbreon's evolution is slight. Some might say the odds are higher upon the second or third when the sun or moon is at its peak, while others would stress it was most likely that knowing a Fairy-type attack would guide an Eevee to evolve into the Intertwining Pokemon. But in the end the truest reason a Sylveon appears is because of the heart of its partner Trainer. Whether consciously or not, those who ask for a Sylveon will receive one. Such is its love in answer.

With Sylveon's evolution came Moon striking back hard against the Dragon Tamers testing her every day, even beginning to pressure their weakest acolytes with her ability. The two together strove each day without fail. That continued today.

Strive onwards and overcome.

Larvesta had chosen to go with Moon. She had spoken with an open and honest heart, and drawn its attention and interest in return. The promise to go further together, to reach the peak, for the first time in its life the Torch Pokemon had looked beyond the silence and the calm inside of its Lush Jungle territory. And saw an image of it and Moon at the top of the world.

Flames lashed up around it as its signalled its willingness to continue further still.

Milotic had been caught in Brooklet Hill as a Feebas, an act of coincidence that could only be fate. They were not common Pokemon, and so for one to bite at the fishing rod of Moon, gifted to her by the Trial Captain Lana, had to mean something. The desire to be beautiful, the acknowledgement of its beauty, the first time it had felt that had been when Moon had used a Z-Move with it. A simple Breakneck Blitz, but the feeling of the light shining around it had... the Prism Scale Moon had been given and then given to it, the moment with the trading system at the Dragon Tamers' hall, they were all mere finishing touches upon the Pokemon's will.

With Moon it was beautiful. And so in beauty it answered her call.

Sixth was Bisharp.

Moon had stood before it not an hour before and asked if it wished for her aid. A pragmatist of a Pokemon, it took her offered strength. The damage it had suffered, its broken blade leaving its head almost perfectly smooth, was unrecoverable. It had nowhere to go back to. But the offering she had made, and the strength it had felt her give, was something else entirely. Somewhere else to go.

Standing here now, most exhausted of the group from its battle before, though recovered enough to remain on its feet, the Pokemon considered those surrounding it. A good pack. Together they could go to a place and a fight even further beyond the one it had answered this day.

To the very ends of the world.

Nanu stared. The Captains had not told him about this. Kukui, and Kahili, and Molayne had kept the information close still. Not one of the Kahuna of Alola knew. So this moment was the one to strike him first.

This freaking kid had seven Bonds.

“You've got to be kidding me.”
Unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable. So the fact she was never exhausted by her Bonds, could maintain them without limit, and use Z-Moves without issue, went even further beyond sense. That six Bond limit, those who attempted to go beyond it quickly losing their grasp and having all their Bonds sever and disperse, Moon ignored with ease. And if seven why not eight? Why not ten? Why not one-hundred? Nanu had just told her there were no rules to this fight.

Moon had answered as clearly as she could.

What a pain...

Hau and Gladion were staring too. For Hau he'd known, at some level, that Moon had more than six Bonds. But knowing and seeing were still such different things. The way Moon had just fought with her partner Decidueye, it had been to a level he'd never imagined. The last time he'd truly seen her go all out, when they'd fought in Malie City the day they arrived on Ula'ula, they'd been equal. Her fight against Guzma Moon had lacked the chance to show her full strength. Her battle with Ryuki had just been a test. And their playfights in the days since her return to them had never been too serious.

So this was Moon as she was now. The Moon taught by the Dragon Tamers. The Moon who'd changed and grown beyond him.

Was there... anything he could do?

Gladion, who had known nothing of the numbers of Moon's Pokemon, was struggling with the implication. But one part of his mind remained resolute. She would be useful indeed in getting Nebby, and his sister, back.

He just had to believe she'd make the Kahuna move.

Nanu unleashed a second Pokemon to join his first.

Triple Battles split the mind too much. You paid too much attention to too many Pokemon and you couldn't properly respond to what was going on. Not to mention the drain upon your Bonds got to be too much. If Nanu had three out he'd be less effective than if he just used two. Besides, his signature partner Persian, the silver-furred Dark-type Alolan Form, synergised well with his Krookodile. The two of them would do just fine. Moon, for all her ability, was still about to attempt to command six. Even if their drain upon her Bonds couldn't stop her, she still wouldn't be able to properly respond to that many. Nanu would just pick off her team members one by one.

He really hoped her impossible ability didn't extend to being able to command six Pokemon at once.

The beginning of the clash went as follows: the Dark-type Classy Cat Pokemon Persian, and Dark and Ground-type Intimidation Pokemon Krookodile, sought to target the newest member of Moon's team. The Bisharp was still weary, and weak to the Ground-type. Not to mention lacked experience with its fellows and so would not be properly in sync with them. So the two burst forward, Persian blasting a shot of energy for the Pokemon to scramble to dodge, Krookodile charging ahead to slam a glowing claw into the Bisharp. Target the weakest one first, after all.

Moon's team, feeling her thoughts as one, moved the same.

The battlefield became obscured in a moment, the combination of Sylveon and Milotic creating a thick terrain of vibrant pink mist, visibility within impossible. Nanu's command for Krookodile to dig once more he could only tell was followed by the sense his Pokemon responded with, pushing into the ground below. Larvesta and Shelgon, at opposing ends of the pink-hued field, breathed flames in with constant force. Poipole remained floating overhead as the aerial view of the fight.
Nanu frowned.

It wasn't like this attack was going to do either of his Pokemon in, they were strong and Moon's simply lacked the raw age and experience to compete. But in terms of pure ability Moon was making this work. The five others had moved to form a perimeter and barrier before the Bisharp and caught up Nanu's Pokemon within. He'd made an assumption and it had backfired immediately. He really couldn't give this kid an inch.

Nanu raised a hand, black Z-Crystal set within the Z-Ring he wore. “Then watch this.” And, bending down so his hands were pressed against his feet, Nanu rose back up to full height, hands outstretched in a pose to inspire fear. The Dark-type Z-Pose.

Gladion stared dumbfounded at how ridiculous it looked.

Moon focused on the battlefield as the pink mist covering it began to warp.

So quickly it was sucked into the red and black orb now hanging in the air, pulling in the misty terrain her Pokemon had created, grasping at their surroundings and lifting them from the ground too. An area attack, one or one-hundred was no concern for the Dark-type Z-Move Black Hole Eclipse. Poipole screamed loudly as it neared the event horizon.

Moon performed her own Z-Pose.

The only way to truly counter a Z-Move was with another Z-Move, and so Milotic shone brightly with light as it spun, unleashing a swirling torrent of water that spiralled up around it. The two Z-Moves met and began to conflict, the attack Nanu's Persian had launched sucking in more and more of the water from Milotic, which acted as a barrier against the Z-Move's pressure to allow the other team members of Moon to back away. Bisharp, who had grabbed Larvesta and tucked the Torch Pokemon under one arm, grimly marched away from the tug on it from the Z-Move, while Shelgon dug into the ground and manifested shattering barrier after barrier, and Poipole flew even higher still. The feedback of the attack still reached the one closest to it, and when the orb created by the Dark-type Z-Move exploded its power fell fully upon Milotic. One of Moon's team bested.

Though in the same moment her thoughts had communicated clearly, her motion to swap Z-Crystals was smooth, and her Pokemon had answered in full. With force behind its throw Bisharp turned around and pitched Larvesta at the Persian shaking the waves of water from its coat, as Moon felt in the Z-Aura around her the motions she needed to perform. Swing her arms around from waist to over her head, then make a cutting motion with her right! Z-Aura flowed from her as Larvesta began to spin in mid-air, a spiralling bullet of Z-Power launched by the Bisharp's throw.

From beneath the ground Krookodile burst up, following Nanu's will and striking a claw right into the Z-Move Savage Spin-Out, created by the Buginium-Z, the Z-Crystal taken from Team Skull Boss Guzma's hoard by Moon not even an hour ago. Power met power but one was of an entirely different class, and the Krookodile flinched at the super-effective force lashing back upon it. The result was what it wanted – the Larvesta shot off past the Persian and did not strike it – but in return the Intimidation Pokemon now had an arm it could no longer use. Nanu frowned. In the snap of a judgement call he'd chosen to do this, but risking someone for the sake of others was... a bad attitude he'd sworn off of when he'd quit way back when.

This kid was starting to push him in ways he did not enjoy.

“Alright, that's enough.” Nanu stood firm. Moon had used a Z-Move for two more of her Pokemon: Milotic and Larvesta, one now knocked out and the other clearly exhausted. Even the training with the Dragon Tamers Guild hadn't changed the result of using a Z-Move. The only thing that could do
that was time.

Like the time Nanu's Persian had experienced, still standing strong even after using a Z-Move of its own. Not that that meant Nanu could use another – even a Kahuna had to wait between such acts – but he and his partners were nonetheless ready to continue against only four now of Moon's. Three if you counted how clearly exhausted that Bisharp was. And it wasn't like Nanu didn't have more Pokemon after these two either.

"The writing's on the wall. You see where this is going to go, don't you kid?"

Moon shook her head. A Pokemon Battle wasn't done until it's done. Nanu shrugged.

"Sore loser, aren't you? You know if your Pokemon take much more of a beating there's no way they'll be able to look after you wherever you go next – even with healing items. You need to start looking ahead."

He'd clearly told Moon she wouldn't be able to continue as long as he was in her way. So she was going to give that everything she had until he moved. It was about as expected an answer as Nanu could get. He still sighed at it.

“And I'm telling you that's thinking too few steps in advance. If you really care about not making your mistakes again, you need to look further than the next battle. What's the end goal? What really matters? Tell me that."

Moon paused. What really mattered? She wanted to go to where Lillie was. And to keep her and Nebby safe from Team Skull. Nanu looked to Gladion as Moon said this. Gladion didn't meet his eyes.

“You go chasing after that kid,” with a jerk of his thumb Nanu indicated the blonde teen by Hau, “you'll just get into the sort of trouble all the Pokemon in the world won't be able to help you with. What'll you do then?"

What Pitaya had told her. Go to those she belonged with. Rely on those who accepted her. The great family that was Alola, those connected by the weave, would be there. It wasn't all the Pokemon in the world she was relying on. It was all that and more.

Much like everyone Moon spoke to, Nanu wasn't prepared to hear the word 'weave' in her voice. Everyone affected by Holei used it. Every time someone compared him to her they used that word. He was sick of it.

“So what's the answer?"

Moon really stopped then. She was thinking, which was a big enough problem on its own. Brats who charged ahead without thought were easy to stop. But the ones that did think and looked for the real answer, they were the ones you just couldn't deal with. Couldn't keep out of trouble. The answer was as obvious as Moon could make it.

She was going.

But... would he help her?

“There you go.” Nanu shrugged, raising an Ultra Ball for his Krookodile and a Pokeball for his Persian. “Turns out all you had to do was ask.” Slowly Moon began to call back her Pokemon as well. Nanu walked on forward to her, pulling the Darkinium-Z from his Z-Ring as he went.
“Alright,” he held out his hand holding the Z-Crystal, “congratulations third Grand Trial complete or whatever. What's that look, you didn't realise? I'm the Kahuna of Ula'ula you know.” Moon's cool and focused stare had finally broken completely, the girl just looking at Nanu in complete shock. Her image of what a Kahuna was, forged by Hala, Olivia, and Holei, cracked a little. Nanu cracked a grin. “That little boat that Gladion kid's got is no good, it'll barely fit the three of you alone. So don't mind me I'll just send the word out and point everyone where they need to go. With that kind of team and that kind of intent it'd be hard for you to get into any trouble you can't also get out of. Guess I have to accept that much.”

Moon continued to stare blankly at Nanu as he walked on past her, giving a lazy wave to Hau and Gladion. Then off into Mahihinu proper, to head to the Aether House and set up a base of operations from there. It'd be too hard to organise the rescue effort while also managing those three kids anyway, better to just let them run wild.

Only far away, his back still to them, did Nanu allow himself one little grin.

That sure had been interesting though.

“Let's head out.” Gladion ushered a still shell-shocked Moon and deeply thinking Hau onto the boat he’d taken from Po Town, a Team Skull branded and spray-painted jet black cruiser. He knew how to drive the thing, and guided it out from the docks of Mahihinu into the open waters of Alola before pointing out a container stocked with medicine for Pokemon recovery. Moon and Hau should restore their teams for what came next.

Hau looked up and asked.

“What is next though? Where are we heading? Where've Team Skull taken Lillie?”

A long moment of silence passed before Gladion breathed out heavy, staring at the blue seas of Alola as the cruiser continued on. It would be a while yet before they arrived, but things would no doubt be rough from the moment they did. He was... thankful, that Hau and Moon were with him here.

As much as it annoyed him to admit it, he definitely wouldn't be able to do this alone.

“We're heading to the place we both came from,” he didn't look back as he spoke. Didn't look away from what lay ahead.

“We're heading to the Aether Paradise.”

Chapter End Notes

And folks, with this we're almost there. There is one chapter left in the Ula'ula arc, and if I have my way I'll finish it before the end of the month to finish Ula'ula in 2018 and start Poni in 2019. We're starting this year right if I have to do it myself! Just wait and see!

I've had a rule against using caps in writing for a long time, but in the end the one core rule of writing is to communicate your intent, in whatever way it takes. I've straight up made up words before because they fit the flow of what I was writing, and my italics
run rampant in charged dialogue, so it makes sense this was going to come up sooner or later. Guzma's a loud boy, there's no other way to truly make you feel it.

And making you all feel things is my ultimate goal.

Po Town's definitely been the topic many people have mentioned as looking forward to over the months, and while it was a short and sharp experience probably different to what was expected, I hope it was still enjoyable. The plan's been this way for a long time now, and with it we've introduced a very important new team member. They're strong. Very strong.

With Moon they're even stronger.

Definitely the latter section of Ula'ula Island's been a challenge to my planning, given the wider and more sensible world I've been trying to create, where eldritch or not a kid doesn't just run off to Team Skull's home base. I've shaped it to the best of my abilities though, and I hope the result has been enjoyable. I'd like to think so.

Thank you to all readers, I'm appreciative of your presence always. Please join me in looking forward to what comes next.

It's all still happening constantly.
Evening light filtered through patchwork clouds and played out streaks of orange dividing purple across the ocean's waves, the black boat Gladion had taken from Team Skull's base in Po Town zooming across the waters, ferrying himself, Moon, and Hau on to their destination. To Aether Paradise, floating construct out in the middle of the Alolan sea, where his sister and Nebby would be found.

Them and so much more.

"Alright," confident now that the boat's direction was set, Gladion turned to the others, "We'll be there soon enough."

Moon and Hau each looked up from the Pokemon they were treating.

For Moon it was her newest partner, the Bisharp that had led the assault on Po Town, and in return had its head blade shattered by the Golisopod of Team Skull's Boss Guzma. No amount of recovery would ever restore the now bare stub of a once proud blade, and so the pride of the Pokemon would never be the same again. But it had chosen to follow Moon and accepted the treatment she gave it willingly; energisers and revitalisers so it might be ready to fight again soon. It would need it.

For Hau it was his Pikachu, the rest of his team still well enough. Plumeria's strike on Aether House had been both instant and vicious enough that Hau had only managed to call out the one Pokemon, who quickly had been pinned down and poisoned thoroughly. He was thankful there were potent antidotes amongst the stock of items on the boat. Without being welcome at Pokemon Centers readily, it seemed Team Skull had taken to stocking up on – likely stolen – recovery items instead.

"I still don't get it," shaking his head, Hau looked up from where he sat with Pikachu on his lap, the boat they were using small enough that with Moon having brought out her partner Bisharp as well, there was barely room to move. "What do you mean 'the place you and Lillie both came from'? You're from the Aether Paradise? And you kept talking about family. And so did Lillie earlier. Are you—"

"It doesn't matter." Gladion forcibly shut down Hau's question, his eyes flicking to Moon to make sure she knew he was including her in this as well. "What's important right now is getting Cosmog, and Lillie, away from there. Don't bother thinking about anything else. You're just wasting energy you should spend focusing on fixing this mess."

The harsh response from Gladion quietened Hau, who looked down at the Pikachu he was holding, the Pokemon shifting a little to lift its head and lick his cheek. He smiled at it, but it wasn't a classic Hau smile. A lot was still on his mind.

"Can I?" His question, asked with such plain honesty, caused Moon and Gladion to both look at Hau with surprise. He shook his head. "You've got Null, Gladion, who's super-strong. And Moon... compared to you two I can't really... do anything. I couldn't beat that Team Skull lady so like, I don't... really know what I'm meant to do."

"Hmph," Gladion blew out a breath through his nose, shaking his head as he did so, "ridiculous." To this Hau made a slight noise of half-complaint half-whimper, while Moon sternly fixed Gladion with
a very displeased look. He ignored her to focus on Hau alone. “You were the one who told me that working together would make things easier. You were the one who insisted that relying on friendship was the best way to go. So now you're going to sit there and tell me you don't feel like standing with us? You don't want to help Lillie? If after all your big talk about friendship you're just going to give up when it gets hard, then I'm sorry I asked you to come along. Sorry I considered you someone I could rely on.”

Moon snapped at Gladion to back off. He snapped right back at her. “Lillie was kidnapped,” he said it so sharply Moon couldn't help but feel the barb, knowing a strong part of the reason that came to be was because she'd run off to Po Town on her own. “Either you're both going to be serious about getting her back, or you're just wasting your time and giving up on her. So which is it? What are you going to do?”

“I-” Hau was struggling. He knew that of the three on this boat he was the least able. He knew he couldn't make the same difference the other two could. But if he could make any difference... if he could in any way help get Lillie and Nebby back he... he looked up at Gladion with resolution the slightly older teen nodded to see. That was better. “I'm going!”

“Then we'll do it together, and we'll get both Lillie and Cosmog back.”

Moon, confident now that her partner Bisharp was healed as best could be, returned the Pokemon to the Pokeball she'd used for it. It was without question the strongest member of her team now: a Pokemon far older than every other one of her partners, and deeply experienced as well. It would make a world of difference in the struggles ahead. Of that she was sure.

The next for recovery was Larvesta, the Torch Pokemon exhausted by the Z-Move it had used. Milotic was the only member of Moon's team she could not heal here, as large as it was. Poipole was holding onto the cruiser's cabin's roof and enjoying the wind rushing over its form. Its delighted squeals helped lighten the mood.

Oh wait!

As Moon treated the Bug and Fire-type Pokemon, she also fished in her bag for the second of the two Z-Crystals she'd taken from Po Town: from the horde of the Team Skull Boss Guzma. Then held it out to Hau.

This was the Bug-type Z-Crystal, so he should have one too! Hau looked at her in shock seeing it offered. “I- thanks, Moon!” Taking it Hau smiled, Moon showing him the Z-Pose for it as well. Gladion observed the two performing the ridiculous gesture. The things you had to do to gain strength...

“Guzma had Team Skull collect every Buginium-Z they could find from across Alola,” the once enforcer of Team Skull explained, “so that no-one would be able to compare to him as a Bug-type Trainer. Walking right into Po Town and then out again with two of those crystals, you're really ridiculous, you know that?” In response to Gladion's statement, Moon just gave a light smile. Then let it fall as she remembered this had only come to pass because she'd gone to Po Town to begin with, which had lured Kahili and Captain Acerola away and allowed Lillie to be taken. She couldn't feel good about this.

Not until it was over and Lillie, and Nebby, were safe.

Hau considered a different stone in his hands, the Pikachu in his lap looking up at it as well. It was somewhat rounded, a translucent green crystal with a yellow thunderbolt core. He'd been carrying it
since the end of Akala Island, gifted it by Kahuna Olivia. Been waiting for the right moment. He still wasn't sure it had come. There was no feeling of readiness. No way to know it was time, but... if not now then when? For the sake of Lillie he had to try.

A leap of faith, right?

The flash of light drew both Gladion and Moon's eyes, seeing the now glowing mass before Hau, the stone he'd been holding vanished into the Pokemon he'd given it to. Slowly the outline of the Pokemon grew bigger and bigger, tail stretching out in a more pronounced thunderbolt shape, ears extending even further from its head. The fading light showed once yellow fur now orange, once red cheeks now yellow. Bright blue eyes blinked, the fading sunset of Alola reflecting in them as the Pokemon hovered a little in the air, tail wrapping around to settle beneath its feet, as if supporting it in mid-air. Slowly Hau breathed out deeply, before opening his own eyes, still focused and alert. He was okay. They were okay.

He and his partner Raichu, Electric and Psychic-type Alolan-form evolution of Pikachu, were okay. He turned with a grin to the two staring at him.

“Ready to go, ya?”

The sun had set over the horizon as the boat taken from Po Town settled into Aether Paradise's harbour, the three children aboard dismounting. For this late hour it was appropriately quiet, but still Gladion was wary. He looked about with a frown as Moon and Hau stood behind him, Poipole floating overhead.

“Stay alert,” he took a step forward, expecting to keep the lead, “I don't like how quiet it is.”

Indeed the level one basement of the Aether Paradise, the point of docking for all visiting watercraft, was empty. As Gladion stalked past shipping containers, carefully looking every which way, he received absolutely no sight of anyone at all. All the way to the main elevator, which would take them to another level of the base, he saw no-one at all. It only stressed him more. What was going on here?

Hau and Moon, a step behind, didn't have the same understanding of how bustling this place should be. Just waited as Gladion messed with the elevator's controls. Prompts for a password he didn't know barred the way down to the labs – Gladion confident that was where Cosmog would be, that place where all of the Aether Foundation's more dubious projects were kept away – so instead he set the lift to rise. Maybe they could find something further up.

They did.

“I apologise,” the reedy voice of Aether Branch Chief Faba was the first sign of something wrong as the lift rose to the next level, the white coated and green-goggled man standing before them, a number of other Aether Foundation members around, “but visiting hours to the Aether Paradise are currently over. I'm going to have to request that the three of you leave.”

“Faba,” Gladion took a step forward, noting that Faba didn't budge while the other Aether Foundation members seemed to be on guard, “where is Cosmog?”

“Oh me oh my,” the man snickered, “how brazen, coming all this way to steal our just recently recovered Pokemon? How far you have fallen, Gladion. And recruiting other children to help assist you in your crimes?” Faba tilted his head, looking over Moon and Hau. “I'd advise the two of you to
better consider who you ally yourselves with.”

“Hey!” Hau, eyeing off the surrounding pack of adults, attempted to reason with them, “isn't this a bit much? What're you all doing?”

“What is required of them!” Faba spoke for those around him, as he always did. “The Aether Foundation has just today recovered a very rare and dangerous Pokemon, and are now on high alert until it is considered safely secured. Whether children or adults, those who come here looking for it are to be rid of! So again, I must implore the three of you to simply press that elevator button and go back from whence you came. There's no need for this to continue.”

Hau saw in the faces of those around him measures of concern but almost equal determination. It seemed those here really would do everything they could to stop them.

Gladion activated a Pokeball.

“Eevee, go.” The small brown-furred Evolution Pokemon manifested, Gladion keeping Null in reserve. Far more powerful Trainers lay ahead, and he did not want to waste Null's energy here.

“Moon, Hau, we're breaking through.” Many of the Aether Foundation members shifted about uneasily, seeing this come to conflict. Moon nodded and chose Sylveon, Hau unleashing Espeon to stand opposite, each flanking Gladion's own partner Eevee before Faba. Faba smirked.

“Well now, the three of you would really let it come to this? I, Faba, am the Aether Branch Chief, wholly unique in this world and irreplaceable. To call me the last line of the Aether Paradise's defense would not be an inaccuracy! And yet you three children would still challenge me?”

Gladion tsked loudly. “Is repeating that worthless title of yours the only thing you're good at?”

Quickly Faba got over being challenged so.

“Well, children, then please accept this lesson in the real difference between you and those accomplished adults of this world! I, Branch Chief Faba, will personally take charge of seeing you out!” A flash of red light was the Pokemon of Faba manifesting, the Psychic-type Hypnosis Pokemon Hypno appearing with held pendulum already swinging. “Now would the three of you kindly go to sleep?”

The moment Gladion tensed his Bond reacted. The term, as used by those attempting to prove the concept, was 'Sympathetic Evolution'. It was a study in Pokemon, raised together but grown apart, having an effect upon one another's growth when brought together again. Competitiveness between such Pokemon then led the weakest member of a group to attempt to catch up forcibly to its fellows, often taking an above average toll on its Trainer to do so.

Gladion’s eyes widened feeling his thoughts grow fuzzy for a moment. He couldn't even focus on the light shining before him. Couldn't parse what had happened until it faded and in his partner's place the Moonlight Pokemon Umbreon stood aside its evolved fellows, ready to battle beside them at last.

In comparison to the lilac fur of Espeon, and white fur of Sylveon, Umbreon's was black, sleek, marked by yellow rings upon upper legs and forehead, around tail and ears. Red eyes focused fully on the opponent Hypno before it, the Dark-type evolution of Eevee taking a menacing step forward. Faba, surprised by the sudden evolution, didn't think to react quick enough.

Gladion did.

“Go!”
Immediately the Moonlight Pokemon closed the distance between it and Faba's partner Hypno, jaws clamping shut on the yellow-skinned arm of the Hypnosis Pokemon, stopping the swing of its pendulum, which had begun affecting Moon and Hau as well, and allowing all three to shake free of its effects. Moon and Hau quickly gave follow-up commands: Sylveon's ribbons wrapping around the other arm of the Hypno, beginning to pull energy from the Pokemon, while Espeon engaged it in a battle of psychic ability – the field between them only evened by the distractions Umbreon and Sylveon were providing.

Faba, who'd so confidently announced he'd take care of this, began to pale as he realised his partner Pokemon wasn't having any effect.

“What are you doing, you lot?! Teach these children a lesson!” His snap command to the Aether Foundation employees jolted them to action, roughly a third beginning to raise Pokeballs of their own. Two flashes of red light from Moon's bag had Decidueye and Bisharp standing behind her, each pointing outwards to those surrounding. Moon turned her head slightly, meeting the eyes of each person around her.

One by one they began to back down.

“W-well!” Glancing about and seeing the complete lack of momentum in the Aether Employees he'd gathered up for this ambush, Faba's demeanour quickly changed. He wasn't about to have them keep one of his Pokemon in such a disadvantageous state! “It is clear the three of you do not intend to stop. You've truly managed to cause us no end of trouble, Gladion.”

“That's your problem,” Gladion wasn't in the mood for Faba's banter. “Where's Cosmog?” As much as he wanted to find Lillie too, securing Cosmog was the most important first step. That Pokemon couldn't be left with those who would use it. Faba, seeing he wasn't going to get any meaningful dialogue, gave a simple shrug.

“Honestly, the world has clearly been cruel to you, to make you so hard a character.” Calling his Pokemon back, Faba stepped forward to the lift controls, Gladion moving away. “I suppose I will do you a kindness then, as a reminder of what you left behind. If you are looking for Cosmog, the laboratories downstairs would be the best place to go. I will give the three of you access. Please restrain yourselves from prostrating at my feet in thanks. Or don't. If you would like to express appreciation I will not stop you.”

“Hurry it up.” Gladion's cold response cut off Faba's diatribe, the Aether Branch Chief huffing before keying in the code for the lift to descend, stepping back off of it as the guard rails rose up, Gladion, Moon, Hau, and their six Pokemon – Poipole, Umbreon, Espeon, Sylveon, Decidueye, and Bisharp – remaining on the triangular structure as it shuddered and began to descend. Faba watched them lower out of sight.

And gave a wicked grin as soon as they were beyond it.

“Fuwah!” Breathing out the great stress he felt, Hau sat down heavily as the elevator descended. “I thought my heart was going to burst out of my chest – how did you stay so cool with so many Trainers around us, Gladion?”

“Most of them weren't proper Trainers,” Gladion answered simply. “Aether Foundation workers generally don't keep Pokemon of their own, and if they do they're usually not very strong. That was just a show Faba orchestrated to try and spook us. Though I don't know how he put it together so
fast—even if they saw us arrive at the docks somehow, he shouldn't have been able to do that.”

“Wow...” Hau stared up at Gladion, Moon returning her Pokemon to their Pokeballs, calling for
Poipole to stay closer to her while they were here in the Aether Paradise, “You've thought a lot about
this, huh? You know a whole lot about the Aether Foundation.”

Gladion gave no response.

Was he alright? Moon turned to him, shifting a hand to indicate the black-furred Pokemon rubbing
up against his leg. Gladion nodded slowly, reaching down a hand to stroke the former Eevee's head.
Umbreon... he hadn't expected that. Knew without question it was only because Hau and Moon had
been here that this had come about. They'd been there when that Eevee egg had hatched. And every
time Gladion had interacted with the Pokemon, he'd remembered the two being with him for that
moment. Even with the current tension upon him, a part of him couldn't help but acknowledge he felt
better for having them around. They really had gotten to him in the best and worst possible way. He
sighed and shifted a hand to scratch under the Pokemon's chin. It leaned happily into his touch.

“Unfortunately this will make Null weaker.” The design of the Synthetic Pokemon was such that it
pulled as much available power as its partner had to give. Compared to its previous form as an
Eevee, Gladion's partner Umbreon was now drawing a significant volume more. Leaving less
available for Null. The evolution wasn't unwelcome, per se, but it had changed things all the same.

The elevator docked on the lowest level of the Aether Paradise, beneath the Alolan ocean's surface.
Gladion straightened back up. “Alright, there are two main labs ahead: Cosmog should be in one of
them. I'll check the first, so you two go ahead to the second.”

“You even know about all this stuff?” Hau gave Gladion an odd look, following after the blonde-
haired teen. “You've been here before.”

“Focus,” Gladion dismissed Hau's accusation with a command. “We need to find and secure
Cosmog, then do the same for Lillie. Faba may have let us down here, but he's no doubt calling up
even more help to stop us from getting out. So the faster we do this, the better. Get going.”

Turning to Moon Hau gave a shrug. She nodded, understanding his frustration. She... felt like she
had slightly more pieces of the puzzle than Hau, but still not all of them. She was still missing
something significant. Something she just couldn't place. Following after Hau, the two watched as
Gladion opened a lab doorway, stepped within, then shut it again. Nowhere else to go but on to the
next.

So into the next they went.

“Ah!” The Aether Foundation employee standing behind the door leaped back with a loud yell as
they entered. Hands raised, he seemed about ready to do... something... to whoever the intruder was,
before suddenly dropping his arms at the sight of Hau and Moon.

Jace blinked in surprise.

“Atu? Moon? What are you two doing here?”

“Mr. Jace?” Hau, who'd also yelled and jumped back at the noise, now looked just as confused as
Jace did. “Why're you here?”

“I'm...” lacking the will to remind Hau he'd asked the question first, and also that he was employed
and expected to be here, Jace let his shoulders sag. “I was stationed here as a guard: I was told the
Aether Paradise was expecting thieves to break in to steal our special research. Not that I have any
Pokemon that could stop someone but the Branch Chief didn't appear interested in listening to me. As usual.”

“Hey have you seen Nebby?” Unsure of what to make of Jace's words, Hau focused on what mattered, wandering about the room but seeing nothing bar a bookcases and computer terminals. He moved to an unlocked computer and typed in Cosmog's name. “I mean Cosmog – the little floating Pokemon that was with Lillie.”

“She had a Poke- she has Cosmog??!” The confusion changing into shock in Jace's voice was as honest as could be. The man just collapsed into a chair, holding his hands against his face. “Cosmog disappeared from the Aether Paradise six months ago and we hadn't heard from it since and you're telling me it was with her all along?”

“Cosmog's from the Aether Paradise?!” Hau glanced at Moon in surprise, who was standing in the doorway while he cased the room. “What's going on?” All Moon could answer Hau's question with was a shake of her head. She didn't know. Hau focused on the information that popped up on the terminal he'd typed into.

“Okay, hang on: 'The Nebula Pokemon Cosmog is hypothesised to be a type of Ultra Beast that hails from a dimension beyond the Ultra Wormhole, presently referred to as: Ultra Space. When placed under sufficient stress, Cosmog is known to create and open Ultra Wormholes in order to escape from harmful environments.' Wait! Nebby's an Ultra Beast? And it can open Ultra Wormholes?"

Moon's frown was growing deeper. The Ultra Wormhole she'd seen at Aether Paradise. The Ultra Beast that had come from it. And the reaction of the Aether President Lusamine to the creature. More pieces of the puzzle filling up her head.

“That's why we were caring for Cosmog: to keep it from creating more Ultra Wormholes.” Jace had stood up again, moving over to the terminal he'd left unlocked and Hau had gone to. “We've been afraid the recent upsurge in their opening was caused by Cosmog's disappearance, but there were orders not to talk about it to anyone. Which... I probably shouldn't be but the two of you already know about it, right?”


“Wait a minute, Moon,” he held out a hand, “could I see your Ride Pager?”

Moon stopped, surprised. Hau moreso.

“You have a Ride Pager?” The shock in his voice startled Moon, who only now remembered she had been keeping it to herself. Hau allowed himself a moment's jealousy. “Man, I asked Tutu so many times for a Ride Pager but he never got me one, how come you get one, Moon?”

“It's less a blessing than you'd think,” Jace held on to the device, eyeing it off with displeasure. “The Branch Chief wanted to make sure I appreciated his genius with the modification he made to this device before giving it to you. Since you're here and I have the tools, I think I'll disable it. His excuse was making sure a rare tool wasn't lost but just giving someone, especially a child, a tracking device is still... off.”

“A what?” Hau's indignant exclamation was matched by Moon's own, the girl immediately incensed to discover the Ride Pager she'd been carrying had apparently been giving away her location at all times. A thought of Gladion mentioning how strange it was Faba had organised the ambush so quickly came into her mind. Oh.
Jace shook his head. “I'll see it back to you when I've changed it but... I don't know what's going on anymore. Are you two... alright? Can I help you?”

“We're okay,” Hau nodded, Moon agreeing with him. “We'll get back to you, okay Mr. Jace? It'll be alright! Right Moon?” Moon nodded back. It would. Jace, still unsure, gave an uneasy smile. His beaten down confidence prevented him from trusting his actions fully, allowing so many things to have gone so strangely so far. But at least here in the labs he could make one difference. He could fix up something he thought was wrong.

Moon and Hau left him to it. Hau didn't mention the tracking device when Gladion approached them outside. Moon didn't either.

“Anything?” The blonde teen frowned at Moon's shake of her head. Hau stuck up a hand.

“There was information about Cosmog! It says that if you stress it, it makes Ultra Wormholes! Also that it might be an Ultra Beast? That's really weird, right?”

“Stress?” Gladion tilted his head. “Like hurting it? Is that... why Lillie took it from here to begin with? What was she- nevermind, let's go. If Cosmog isn't down here then... Faba tricked us. We need to hurry up so he has less time to plan whatever he's doing next.”

Hau and Moon nodded, setting off after Gladion at a run. Neither failed to notice the doorway to the first laboratory, the one Gladion had gone to, was torn outward with deep clawmarks gouging through the metal. Moon asked of it. Gladion sighed.

“This is where Null was made: it was created by the Aether Foundation as a means of controlling Ultra Beasts. It's a specialty Pokemon designed to fight them.” Back at the elevator, the three stood there as Gladion set it rising again. “But the project failed, the created Type: Null were uncontrollable, so instead the Aether Foundation just put them into cryogenic stasis. I took Null two years ago instead of letting it be frozen. The two of us were both made to be a certain way then treated as broken when we didn't end up like that. Coming back after all this time... Null's as frustrated as I am. That's why we have to fix this. I'm tired... of just running away.”

There was so much more to what Gladion said than just his words, Moon immediately feeling overwhelmed trying to comprehend them. Hau patted the taller boy's shoulder. “Hey you've got us with you now, yeah? Like you said I said, as long as we're together we can do this! We'll get Nebby, and Lillie, and all go back and everything'll be okay, alright?”

The thinnest smile edged its way across Gladion's face before he forced it away again. Hau still saw it and smiled wider back at him. He looked away.

With a click the railings of the elevator slid away, Gladion, Hau, and Moon returned to the first floor of the Aether Paradise, where they'd stood against Faba just minutes ago. Once again the Branch Chief of the Aether Paradise barred the way, this time flanked by three Aether Foundation workers who all displayed Pokeballs at their waists. Seemed this time Faba had managed to find members of the Foundation who stood a chance at stopping the trio.

His plan would be a lot more effective if the group weren't presently down the hall being prepped by the Branch Chief for the upcoming battle, as opposed to surrounding the three as they had before.

“Faba, move.” Gladion's stern voice made the Branch Chief jump, whipping around with wide eyes to see the three – each with a Pokemon manifested, once again their Eevee evolutions – children walking down the path. Hastily Faba checked a device he held in his hand, before looking up and focusing on Moon.
“You're meant to still be downstairs.”

Moon smiled serenely and raised an arm to display her Z-Ring. She really wanted to see Lillie. She hoped the Branch Chief would oblige?

Faba took a hasty step back.

“W-well! The three of you may be children, but you are still threatening the Branch Chief of the Aether Foundation and thus the entire Foundation as a whole! As such, the Aether Foundation will respond in full to end this act of aggression! Go on then!” With a wave of his hand Faba directed the three Foundation workers around him as he stepped back behind them. “Put a stop to this!”

Moon placed the Normalium-Z into her Z-Ring. She was about to Z-Move if the way wasn't cleared. Someone very important to her had been taken to the Aether Foundation and she wanted to see her. Please move.

One of the three, almost in shock at the intensity this eleven year-old was emitting, took a step back. The other two gazed at the third with a look of surprise and disrespect. Gladion raised a hand and pushed down Moon's.

“Save your strength, I'll get us through this. Watch.” Changing Pokemon, he exchanged Umbreon for Type: Null. Now the other two Aether workers stepped back as well. A child threatening Z-Moves was something, but a Type: Null was another. Each of these three understood the amount of power that Pokemon was meant to contain. Faba didn't appreciate their backing down.

“Are the three of you really so devoid of pride you'll let children run rampant around the Aether Foundation? You are a line of defense before me, and I before the Madam President! Will you fail me, her, and the Aether Foundation so readily?”

“You should move.” Gladion drew eyes back to him after Faba's admonishments. “We're going through.”

“Nonsense!” Faba put his foot down. “I have sealed the way to the President and as long as I hold the key, you will go no further!”

A moment of silence passed over the room. Hau tilted his head.

“Does that mean if we take the key we can go there? Shouldn't you have just hidden away then?” Slowly the heads of the three Aether Foundation workers turned to stare at Faba. He quickly felt the heat rise on the back of his neck and behind his ears.

“E-enough chatter! You lot, stop these children this instant! That is an order from the Branch Chief of the Aether Foundation!”

Cautiously, one stepped forward, unleashing an Electabuzz to fight. Gladion spent one command on Null, who bowled over the Electric Pokemon then pinned it to the ground, the crackling electricity it emitted cutting off when Null applied enough pressure to make it cry mercy. Gladion's stare was ice.

“Move.”

The three workers, the first calling his Pokemon back, scattered. Faba left behind stared wide-eyed at the trio gathered before him.

“I-I-I-,” quickly discovering the situation turning against him, Faba called another of his Pokemon, this time the Hermit Crab Pokemon Slowbro. A stocky Pokemon known to possess powerful
psychic abilities – though motivation to use them was slow to come – it stood between the three and Faba as a blockade. Gladion gave Null another singular order.

Pinned to the doorway behind Faba in a moment's dash, the Slowbro gave a sad noise, metal creaking from the impact. Faba, turning to stare at the immense power of the Synthetic Pokemon – a not insignificant part of him unable to avoid taking pride in the strength of the creature he'd been part of creating – missed Gladion approaching him until the teen's hand seized his collar and pulled him down to be face to face. The stare of Gladion's green eyes burned through the visor-goggles Faba wore and into his own.

“The key.”

“Oh, uh, yes, of course.” Quickly changing demeanour, Faba rustled in a pocket before placing a keycard in Gladion's outstretched hand, calling back his Pokemon as soon as the teen let him go. Then beat a hasty retreat from the current disaster going on. Hau waved him off.

“Bye Mr. Faba, thanks for the key!”

Gladion looked back to Moon and Hau with an exhale and a nod.

“Let's keep going.”

The three moved on, the doorway Faba had been guarding opened, and into the night air of Alola they emerged, one last distance between them and their goal.

A distance blockaded by the many gathered members of Team Skull.

While the main body of the Aether Paradise structure continued to tower behind the three emerging from the building, Poipole hanging on to Moon's shoulder, before them a mansion awaited in the distance. The way to the private residence of Aether President Madam Lusamine, a walkway over the water lined with gardens and trees, was currently occupied by a horde of Team Skull Grunts. It was hard for Gladion not to feel something, looking at his once home, but he pushed through that feeling all the same. Turned back to the two behind him.

The two who'd helped him come this far.

“Hau,” Gladion's address caused the dark-skinned boy to jump a little, busy being both fascinated and horrified by the sheer number of Team Skull members here at the Aether Paradise. So they really were working together? That was... just wrong! Gladion waved a hand to get Hau to focus on him.

“Can you handle keeping them all busy?”

“Uhhhhhh,” leaning to the side, Hau began counting the number of Team Skull members before deciding that was a bad idea. Gladion and Moon both looked past them to where a figure just before the mansion doors was staring them down with arms crossed. Once again the massively tall white-haired boss of Team Skull was standing before them. Gladion clicked his tongue.

“I need to go on ahead.”

“Wellllll,” retrieving a Pokeball Hau activated it, his partner Raichu appearing floating in the air, suspended by its own newly unlocked psychic powers. Thanks to his Psychic-type Bias Hau could handle the weight of the new power his Pokemon had gained, but it was still heavy all the same. But... “Okay, you and Moon get going and I'll do what I can! Alright! I'm gonna do it! Let's go!”

The first of the few Grunts across the bridge scoffed and chose Pokemon – Rattata and Drowzee and Zubat and Gastly, not to mention their evolved forms as well – to bar the way. Hau took a step
forward, the evolved Mouse Pokemon beside him. Okay, here they go...

Here they go!

“Alright Raichu use Thunder!”

With a massive crackling boom the electrical crash fell from the half-clouded night sky, called down by the power of the Alolan Raichu. Immediately it set the tone, the Grunts who'd cockily thought they could get in the way beginning to pull back. Gladion set off running as the Raichu zoomed about, surfing on the thunderbolt tail it rode, knocking over and aside every Pokemon that rose against it. Moon followed after.

Guzma, watching his entire pack of Grunts being bowled over by one little brat, just shook his head. Whatever.

It wouldn't make a difference.

“Here we go again it's the hated boss who beats you down and beats you down and never lets up... Yeah. Big bad Guzma is here!”

With a slam of his fists against his chest Guzma lashed out with a Pokeball, Moon and Gladion on approach doing the same. Golisopod, Armor Scale Pokemon and strongest partner of the Team Skull Boss, manifested before him. In opposition, Type: Null, partner of Gladion, and Bisharp, newest partner of Moon. Guzma laughed.

“I gotta say the two of you really impress: rampaging all the way here! I kinda liked you, kid,” he tilted a hand to Gladion, “ditching your home and being all about getting stronger and stronger. And going so far as to come right to us, you've got real guts! I can't deny being impressed by someone who'd reject his own mother.”

Moon spent only a short glance at Gladion. His eyes were focused forward. She did the same, ignoring Guzma's words.

“And you!” Pointing with force, Guzma stared Moon down. “You've been tearing across Alola and making a mess of everything you get involved with! Doing that to Team Skull sure got me good, but thinking on it I gotta give you props too. Not anyone can just crush and crush and crush without stopping. I'll respect that, I will!”

Striking a fist into an open palm, Guzma's grin darkened. “But here's where it stops for real: no more calling it short or having anyone else get in the way. The two of you little misfits running us ragged, getting all up in my grill like a cloud of smoke I can't brush away, this time I'm putting out that fire at the source! And that's that. Get ready: I'm gonna crush you!”

And in tune with its partner's words, the massive hulking Golisopod surged forward to its foes.

A fast starter, the distance between the three closed in a moment, the Hard Scale Pokemon swinging a heavy claw around into Moon's Bisharp. The Sword Blade Pokemon raised both hands to block, unable to dodge at that speed, yet proved unable to stop the incredible power the Golisopod exerted, being thrown backwards so hard the Bisharp dented one of the trees lining the walkway's sides. Type: Null, who'd lunged at the Golisopod's back in the same moment, was shocked to find the Pokemon easily react to it, shifting to grasp the Synthetic Pokemon in a headlock before swinging its other fist into the metallic mask that Null wore. Bisharp's retaliation, closing the gap between them to slash at the Golisopod, failed as the Pokemon simply leaped upwards, then slammed Null down upon it. Guzma's laughter continued as his Pokemon pushed Gladion's further down upon Moon's,
pining them both. Gladion grit his teeth.

Moon closed her eyes.

Her Bond with Bisharp was only a few hours old. She may have performed a Z-Move for the Pokemon, but even then the connection between them was not yet strong. It needed to grow: a thing only time could help. Mostly.

But here in this quiet moment she constructed for herself, blocking out the noises around her, she focused on the feeling of connection to the Pokemon. Something that would grow in leaps and bounds as the days and months passed by. Right now though, it could only take so little from her. So little strength to augment its own.

She focused, and focused, and focused again on that feeling. If she could give more, if the Pokemon could take more then it... it...

Gladion's noise of surprise and Guzma's strangled cry opened Moon's eyes to the sight of her newest partner standing once more, lifting Type: Null above its head, pushing the Golisopod's massive arm up. Intensity burned in the eyes of the Sword Blade Pokemon.

Gladion didn't let the opportunity pass.

“Aerial Ace!”

The fastest technique of Type: Null pulled it out of the wedged position between the two Pokemon, the quadruped hitting the ground on all fours before whirling around and diving right back at the Golisopod as Bisharp ducked down and set a rapid series of blows into the armoured Pokemon's torso. The combination of attacks pushed it back a step, both Pokemon circling in opposite directions, one striking while the other drew the silver-scaled Pokemon's ire.

Guzma's lips twitched into a nasty scowl. No way no way no way. Not to two brats not this time! Not when he was here and things were finally about to go right!

No. WAY!

With both arms raised over its head Golisopod slammed them down, the concrete walkway connecting the Aether Paradise to the mansion at its back groaning as the crater left by the strike spider-webbed cracks from side to side.

Moon held up a hand before her, the palm facing inwards, showing Gladion the black Z-Crystal she held ready. Right. He nodded. “Got it.” Then focused on the battle again.

He needed to create an opening to finish this.

“Null, go.” With intense power the Synthetic Pokemon charged again, slamming its massive iron-coated head against the swinging claws of the similarly huge Golisopod, a series of blows between the two ringing out louder and louder with the sound of metal being struck. Bisharp set a foot on Null's back, leaping over the fray to strike at Golisopod's face, an arm from it raising to fend off the metallic blade of that Pokemon as well. Even with two against one, both Pokemon of incredible power, the match was held even against the Pokemon of Guzma. These brats had picked up some real monsters on their way, but he was still the biggest monster of them all! With his grin returning Guzma's confidence settled in place again. He was going to crush them.

Gladion saw his moment to strike.
“Go!”

The moment of being lifted into the air by a massive rising strike from Guzma's Pokemon Null turned into strength, surging downwards with power cascading around it, angled such that it would hit the ground just before the Golisopod's feet.

Where the pathway was cracked.

The explosion of concrete and plume of dust, as with loud tearing sounds the walkway began to break apart, pieces now sinking into the ocean below, Gladion enhanced even further by stepping forward in front of Moon. Blocked by his taller form, she was completely out of Guzma's sight.

Performed the Dark-type Z-Pose without him ever seeing it coming.

Unbalanced by the walkway's destruction the Golisopod lost its footing, beginning to float in the air even despite its massive bulk as a red and black spiralling orb took shape overhead. Guzma, eyes wide, stared up at it as it pulled in loose rubble, leaves ripped from trees, and even spirals of water reaching up from the ocean's surface. What the hell was that?

Type: Null, with Bisharp standing on its back, leaped backwards closer to Gladion and Moon. The group together all watched as Golisopod sunk a claw into the walkway below, digging in against the force pulling it upwards. But the damage done meant no part of the walkway, with the extra weight of Golisopod affecting it, could hold on. Another piece of the rock broke and floated upwards into the orb, Golisopod going with it. Such was the power of the Z-Move Black Hole Eclipse. An orb of gravitational energy that pulled in everything around it.

Then released a wave of energy with overwhelming force.

The explosion smashed the Golisopod into the ground below, rock cracking and sliding into the sea. With a yell Guzma held out a Pokeball, calling the Pokemon back even as it began to return to its feet. He didn't want it sinking into the ocean after taking that. The fading moment of intensity, the stares of Gladion, Moon, Type: Null, and Bisharp – with Poipole staying by Moon's side as she'd requested – was underscored by another loud crack of lightning behind them, Hau continuing to occupy the Team Skull mass.

A vein bulged in Guzma's forehead.

“GUZMA!” Louder than even the lightning and the Z-Move was Guzma's voice as he clutched at his head, more and more pressure the only thing that kept him in the moment. “What is WRONG with you?” Lashing his arms around Guzma chose two more Pokemon, Rotom-dex with Moon identifying them as Masquerain, Bug and Flying-type Eyeball Pokemon, and Pinsir, Bug-type Stag Beetle Pokemon. Heaving breaths, Guzma stared down the two across the broken walkway between them.

“I ain't going down!”

A current of wind whipped up by the Masquerain, the Pokemon a small and blue creature with red eye-like wings, lifted and brought the Pinsir, brown beetle Pokemon with two massive horns emerging from its head, over the gap, the two now standing guard before it. Gladion looked over to Moon's partner Bisharp, who had dismounted from his partner's back. It was standing strong but...

“It used a Z-Move, is it okay?”

Moon nodded, aware of her partner's strength. Z-Moves may be new to it, but on its own it was still an amazing Pokemon. So they'd continue further still. Through Guzma was Lillie, Moon was sure of
So she wasn't stopping here.

The speed of Guzma's partner Pokemon quickly differentiated them, the smaller size of each compared to Golisopod making for an immensely different battle. Masquerain harried Type: Null, flitting around the Synthetic Pokemon and scattering spores that only proved partially effective thanks to the great iron mask Null wore. Pinsir's powerful claws proved an equal match to the blades of Bisharp, the two engaging in a dangerous exchange of blows.

Guzma, seeing this match-up, continued to focus as best he could upon it. But things were distracting his own thoughts now. Voices in his head reminding him that he was once again on the verge of failing. That the direction Kukui had chosen and the path he'd set others on made for strength that stood against him. And the way that brat girl had spoken before, sounding just like Holei. She almost had the exact same intonation. It was messing him up.

But he pushed past that. Because he had somewhere better to be now. Behind him in that mansion was a new way forward. So forget everything and everyone that came before! He didn't need it! He was big bad Guzma and that was that! The return of focus had Guzma's Pokemon accelerate, both now pushing down the two of those brats. There, that was better.

That was how it should be.

Racing with speed that could only belong to lightning itself, a bolt of electricity blew overhead and struck the Masquerain while it focused on Null, stunning the Pokemon more than enough for Null to finally slam down a heavy claw upon it, pinning the Eyeball Pokemon to the ground. Guzma, distracted by this, lost his focus on Pinsir long enough for the Pokemon to stop in mid-air, suspended by powerful psychic energy. With a great slash Bisharp struck the held Pokemon directly. The kind of hit that no matter how strong you were, taking would still end the battle.

Hau and Raichu, stepping forward to stand between Gladion and Moon, breathed out at seeing the two Pokemon of Guzma now beaten as well. A choked sound was all that managed to come out of Guzma's mouth seeing these three children – children! – arrayed against him. What... was this? Was he... losing? Two of his partners out and one hurt bad, and they... hadn't lost one?

What was this? What was going on? His mind was spiralling out of control. What...

Guzma turned and booked it into the mansion behind him. He didn't even call the two beaten Pokemon back.

"Are you two okay?" Hau's question had Moon and Gladion both nod affirmative, the first calling her partner Bisharp back – the Pokemon now truly exhausted after the adrenaline of battle had faded – the second moving with Null to drag each of Guzma's Pokemon away from the broken part of the path, placing them under trees in the garden lining the walkway's side. They were hurt but would recover, especially here in the Aether Paradise. He had to focus forward.

"Come on, let's go."

Moon looked back, the few Team Skull Grunts she could see all a lot further away. Hau really had gone through them all, hadn't he? She turned to him. Riley or Plumeria?

"I didn't see either," Hau shook his head, before Gladion called louder still. Both walked over to him and Null, Gladion hopping onto the Pokemon's back.

"Get on, Null will get us over the gap."
A moment later the Synthetic Pokemon, easily bearing the three children's weight, soared over the broken part of the walkway that had once connected the floating base and mansion together. Poipole and Hau's Raichu, chattering as they went, just floated across.

Among the family of Aether President Madam Lusamine, only she herself was a publicly known figure. While her children and husband had lived with her in this mansion, the children had stayed within its grounds in their raising, and her husband, Head Professor of the Aether Foundation, had avoided a public persona. Lusamine had taken sole responsibility for such.

The result of this was that few indeed knew the specific relationships the President held, and so only a rare Aether Foundation employee possessed the ability to recognise either son or daughter.

One such who could opened the mansion doors as the three children approached.

“Young master Gladion,” bowing her head Wicke, Assistant Branch Chief to the Aether Foundation, greeted the trio. “And Hau and Moon as well, I am thankful to see you safe after... everything that has happened.”

“Wicke,” Gladion once more ignored Hau's interjecting question of 'what do you mean young master?'. “Where is Lillie?”

“She is in her room,” Wicke turned and pointed to a staircase, Moon quickly heading for it. “Please, if the three of you can take her and leave, it would be for the best.”

Gladion’s “What about Cosmog?” echoed behind Moon as she ascended the stairs and called out Lillie's name.

A moment of long silence.

Then the crack of a door being opened.

“Moon?”

The expression on Lillie was best described as 'distressed', deep stress and concern having multiplied in the hours that had passed since leaving the Aether House with Plumeria. Moon was immediately at the door, pushing it open so she could see Lillie was alright. Was she? Lillie, slowly, nodded back.

“I- I don't know how you knew to come here but-” answering that it had been Gladion to Lillie quickly earned a more understanding nod from the blonde-haired girl. Moon reached down and took her by the wrist. They had to leave.

“I!” Holding back against Moon's pull, Lillie stood firm, “I have to save Nebby! My- my mother wouldn't even see me when I was brought back... but I still intend to try! I will find her and convince her to let Nebby go free! So... please help me do this! Please stand by me and help me save Nebby!”

Moon nodded without question. She would. The smile in response, relief coursing across Lillie's face, Moon smiled back at. They'd get Nebby and go back and Moon, Lillie, Hau, and Nebby would continue on together. Poipole, always floating nearby to Moon, gave a loud squeal requesting it be included as well. Moon turned her head and reassured the Ultra Beast that she wouldn't let go of it either. Lillie smiled at that display, reassured.

Okay.
“Then let us go.”

“Miss Lillie!” Wicke's call drew all eyes – first Gladion and Hau in the foyer of the mansion with her looking up the stairs, second Moon and Lillie descending down them nodding back. Gladion breathed out, feeling some of the tension in his shoulders release. But not all. Not until they had Cosmog too. He turned back to Wicke.

“Wicke, where is Cosmog?” Asked a second time after attempting to deflect before, especially with Moon and Lillie now staring at her too, Wicke's facade cracked a little. She shook her head.

“All of you, you really should go back. The Madam President... isn't willing to see you at this point. It would be better not to.”

“Wicke!” Gladion put his foot down. “If she uses Cosmog to open an Ultra Wormhole are you going to take responsibility for that? Because that's what we're trying to stop now! This isn't about the two of us and her! It's about keeping Alola safe! Where. Is. She?”

Wicke struggled. These were children before her, she had to keep reminding herself: they were children! Whether or not they'd come this far, pushing past all of Team Skull. Whether or not Gladion had Null, and Moon had her many incredible Pokemon. Wicke couldn't just... push the duty of safeguarding Alola on them. If the Madam President really was going to cause a disaster then...

Looking up with determined eyes, Wicke stood firm. “Then I will go and speak with the Madam President myself.”

“And say what?” Gladion wasn't having it. “Can you convince her otherwise? Will she listen to you? Tell me that to my face right now and I'll let you be. Can you?”

Long moments ticked by as Wicke failed to find the will to lie to the children around her. Her shoulders slumped as quickly as she'd steeled herself. There wasn't... anything she could do.

Lillie, who'd descended the staircase with Moon a step behind, placed a hand upon the arm of the woman who'd cared for her over the past years in her mother's place. In opposition to her mother, truly. Wicke looked down at Lillie and couldn't find it in her heart to say no to her, even now. Not to those eyes full of intent.

“Wicke, please.”

With a deep sigh Wicke turned to the door at the back of the foyer. And held out a hand. “There is a transporter to the Madam President's private room: that is where she has been since Cosmog was retrieved.” Before she could say another word Gladion had crossed the room, Lillie only a step behind. Hau pulled up the rear alongside Moon. Raised a hand to whisper to her.

“Hey Moon?” She looked at him as he asked, “Did you get any of that? I don't really get at all what's going on: so many things happened at once it's like my head's so full of stuff I don't have any room to put it together. What am I missing?”

In the next room Gladion and Lillie were standing before a mirror at its opposing side, a yellow arrow button on either side of its frame drawing attention. Looking to one another, each nodded and raised a hand. Pressed forward. And in the pressing of those two buttons the mirror's surface shimmered and disappeared. A circular pad just within the alcove it had been covering revealed.

Lillie stepped forward before Gladion could, onto the pad, and vanished. Gladion a moment after. Moon raced across the room to be third, with Hau last to head through behind her.
They'd find out in just a moment.

Beneath the mansion of Aether President Madam Lusamine there was a structure, set just atop the ocean's waves. An open platform, ringed by storage units so cold to the touch as to burn. There was a deep chill in the air, the breath of each of the child to enter visible before them. Two figures stood across the platform. The Team Skull Boss Guzma.

And the Aether President Madam Lusamine herself.

“Mother!” Lillie's loud cry seemed sharper than ever in the cold air of the room, “Please listen to me! You cannot use Cosmog to do this! It will die!”

Moments of silence passed, as the group of four children standing in the room's entrance were stared at coolly by the woman across from them. Lusamine clicked her tongue.

“What nonsense have you come into my private collection to spout? 'Mother'? Who are you addressing? My children betrayed and abandoned me. I have no more words for them.”

“This isn't about us!” Gladion, beside Lillie, added his voice as Hau with wide-eyes behind the group finally put the pieces together, Moon feeling only grim certainty at seeing Lusamine before the siblings Lillie and Gladion. The resemblance was... too much.

She should have realised so much sooner.

“Using Cosmog to open an Ultra Wormhole, you're going to bring disaster on Alola! Why did you spend so long building the Aether Foundation if you're just going to destroy everything for... what? An Ultra Beast? That can't be worth it!”

“Oh, Gladion,” Lusamine shook her head, “such a mess you have made. Look at yourself, torn clothing barely stitched back together. To steal Type: Null from me, abandon me, then return only to try and command me, it pains me to see that despite all of my love and care you ended up this way. You are a disappointment. The both of you are.”

Lusamine raised a hand. A small box, black edges and electric blue lines, shook in her grip. She squeezed its sides and the air quaked. Nebby within screamed.

“Nebby!” Lillie raced forward, Moon following after. In a flash of red a Pokemon from Lusamine barred the way, the large pink Fairy Pokemon Clefable often a welcome sight to so many children of the world. Not to Lillie. Her steps quickly came to a halt.

Moon moved to stand before her, Poipole floating beside. Lusamine's eyes flicked to the purple Poison Pin Pokemon.

“My disappointment in those betrayer children aside,” the cold stare of Lusamine's eyes upon her Moon answered back with her own, feeling sparks of anger beginning to catch within her heart. There were ways Lillie was that this, that Lusamine, explained. And each realisation only upset Moon further. Lusamine shook her head. “To keep such poor company when you are such a gifted child: look, even an Ultra Beast has acknowledged you. Even the one to appear when you visited before. Certainly, it is... frustrating for me, that I have spent so long searching for those Pokemon only for you to draw the attention of two in so little time. I suppose I sympathise, in a way, with all those Captains and Trainers who you outpace so readily. They must resent you. You deny everything they worked so hard to achieve.”

“Leave Moon out of this!” Lillie took a step forward only for Moon's outstretched arm to bar her, not wanting Lillie to move closer to the Pokemon of Lusamine standing between them. Poipole copied
Moon's motion, holding out its much smaller arm as well. Lillie spoke past them. “She has cared for me and helped me grow stronger over these past months, and I will not let you insult her!”

“You cannot stop me from doing anything!” Lusamine's snap, the spark of volume, made Lillie flinch. Hau, standing behind the group, saw Gladion do the same. The Aether President's raised voice had that effect on them. There was a sick feeling in the air. He looked around.

“What is this place, anyway?”

“Ahh,” breathing out, Lusamine looked right past Moon, Lillie, and Gladion. “Sweet Hau, you followed these foolish children too? Look around you, this is my private collection. The place my most beloved are kept safe, away from all harm for eternity. Do you not see?”

Moon looked. Some of the shelves weren't recessed. Those extended, they had blocks of ice mounted upon them. Her vision clarified. One by one each of the four realised.

Horror coursed through their veins.

“They're... Pokemon...” Hau was the one to say it, seeing the countless Pokemon frozen in the collection of the Aether President. If each of those shelves was one Pokemon, then the number surrounding him was... he lost count too quickly. It had to be in the hundreds. He clutched his stomach, nausea hitting him hardest. Lillie too was staring with pained shock, this sight too horrifying to comprehend. Moon and Gladion stayed focused. Lusamine squeeemed the cube she held again. Another scream.

“For all the work I have done, keeping so many Pokemon safe, the Ultra Beasts still lay beyond my reach. Out there, unsafe, in danger. Each that falls through the Ultra Wormhole so at risk! The only way, the only way to keep them safe is for me to call them myself. And so for that purpose I have come this far. Had the Ultra Dimensional Divider completed and Cosmog retrieved for its true purpose. I will not stop now. None of you will stop me.”

“You can't do this!” Lillie refused to accept her mother's determination. “Every time Cosmog uses its power it becomes weaker! Opening the Ultra Wormhole, it will kill it!”

“Most likely.” The cold answer Lusamine gave plunged the room's chill even further. “But that is no concern of mine. If you had truly wished for me to listen to you... then perhaps the two of you should not have turned your backs upon me. For a beloved daughter... perhaps I would have listened. But such a girl does not exist. Now watch, all of you, as I open the Ultra Wormhole! As I call the Ultra Beasts to Alola!”

The cube raised over her head, Lusamine applied more pressure still. Waves of glowing energy began to emerge from it, each pulse in time with the heightening scream of the Pokemon within. Moon quickly pulled Pokeball after Pokeball from her bag.

She wasn’t going to let this come to pass.

The array of her six Pokemon – Milotic the only member of her team unable to take part in this battle – was quickly joined by Gladion's Type: Null and Hau's Brionne, those two unable to support multiple Pokemon at once the way Moon could. Eight Pokemon bore down upon the Clefable Lusamine had chosen to block the way.

With a wave of its finger the Fairy Pokemon erected a barrier each opposing Pokemon slammed into. Lusamine nodded to the man standing at her side.

“Guzma, quiet those children while I finish this. Do not let them pass.”
“Got it, ma'am,” the Team Skull Boss stepped forward, rolling his shoulders as he pulled out a Net Ball. The next of his partners, Vikavolt, Bug and Electric-type Stag Beetle Pokemon, hovered ominously in the air over Lusamine's Clefable. Electricity crackled along its giant jaws.

Then fired as a massive bolt raining down upon the Pokemon grouped together.

Moon performed a Z-Move, Gladion and Hau covering once more, a massive ball of fire from Shelgon shooting up into the sky, aimed for the flying foe. But the Clefable below waved a finger again, the blast losing enough mass from the barrier manifesting within it for the Vikavolt to shoot directly into it and have the attack explode before reaching its target. Lusamine, clutching the cube containing Cosmog in one hand, chose another Ultra Ball and added a second Pokemon to join her first. The sight of a Milotic opposing her, instead of on her side, distressed Moon immediately.

Lusamine's Clefable burst through the mass of Pokemon arrayed against it, a protective coating applied by the Clefable guarding its battling partner, allowing Milotic to shrug off hits as it wrapped around Type: Null and pull it off of the platform into the water below. Vikavolt fired another blast of electricity that struck amongst the gathered Pokemon, each direct hit weakening greatly, each missed still releasing enough power to rattle those gathered. Hau had already called back Brionne for Espeon. Moon had retrieved both Shelgon and Larvesta. This was falling apart.

Moon moved to perform another Z-Pose, a Sinister Arrow Raid from Decidueye to burst through the Clefable in her way, their shared intent strong enough to support the second Z-Move from that Pokemon this day. Yet her forward focus missed Milotic in the water firing a beam of ice, the attack striking her partner Pokemon and freezing it solid before the Z-Move could take place. Null, held beneath the water in the Tender Pokemon's moniker-betraying grasp, still struggled against it.

Nebby's loud cries went silent.

The silence of the room broke under the choked gasp and beginning of heaving sobs from Lillie – Moon, Hau, and Gladion all staring forward at Lusamine in horror as she lowered her arm. Considered the box in her grasp. Then turned to look behind her, the air now glowing with waves of rainbow colour.

“They're calling me.”

The Ultra Wormhole now manifesting in the room Lusamine stretched out a hand to, her visage flickering and becoming double as the portal's warping properties wrapped around her. Like a warm lover's embrace. She smiled.

“And so I will go to those awaiting me. Guzma, with me.”

“Got it!” Using the Net Ball his partner Vikavolt resided in, Guzma called it back to him, taking a step back to stand beside Lusamine. His form was flickering too now, both grasped by the dimensional rift. Lusamine called her Pokemon back as well, Null bursting out from beneath the water's surface gasping for air, the last members of Moon, Hau, and Gladion's teams unable to do a thing. Lillie raced past them all.
“Mother!” Yelling at the woman already beginning to fade from sight, Lillie fought through the tears on her face. “Don't do this!” A snarl twisted its way across the Aether President's face.

“Even still, you try to order me. A child, telling their parent what to do, it is clear that you are no daughter of mine. No daughter would disrespect me so. Lillie, you are weak. You have achieved nothing on your own. And let down everyone who relied upon you. So foul a creature. I am thankful, in the end, that you turned your back on me. You were never fit to be at my side to begin with.”

Lusamine outstretched her arm, the one grasping the cube containing Cosmog. “For your failures, I will keep your precious Cosmog. Even if it still lives, you will never have it again. Consider this the last punishment your mother hands you for your disobedience. Let it be a lesson well learn-”

With a piercing yell a blur of purple slammed into Lusamine, the woman stepping back with a winded gasp as Poipole grabbed hold of the box in her hand, pulling it free and into its own grasp. Raced back towards Lillie.

Then disappeared in a flash of red light as a thrown sphere bounced off of its back, the box falling to the ground below.

“Fine,” the spat word from the mass of light, a hand outstretched catching the strange spherical ball marked with four ridges around it, lanced through the air. “Then I will take this one instead, as fine a test for the Aether Foundation's Beast Balls as any. A punishment two-fold for you and your dear friend. See what you've done to her as well.”

Moon, charging forward, was grabbed hold of by Gladion as the air split further, rainbow light washing across the room. Lusamine and Guzma were beyond sight now. The Beast Ball, uncaring of the Bond connecting Poipole to another, remained sealed tight. It was not designed to be resisted, or escaped.

The only way Lusamine's collection could contain such powerful Beasts.

Moon yelled. Lillie yelled. Gladion and Hau yelled out. But as the light pulsed brightly once more, when it faded there were no figures left in its grasp. No Lusamine. No Guzma.

No Poipole.

The Ultra Wormhole gone and only silence to remain.

Silence soon broken by the cries of those left in its wake.

Chapter End Notes

I am posting this at 8:30PM, the 31st of December 2018, and in doing so ending this year and this arc together. Goodbye 2018, you were miserable in so many ways, but I did start and complete the first three arcs of Eldritch within you, and for that I am thankful.

Here's to what comes next.

Beginning in 2019 will be the Poni Arc of Eldritch! I cannot put into words how excited I am to finally be here, writing the scenes I've been thinking about since this story
began. We've taken a great journey to get here, but you've all stuck it out with me and I'm very thankful for that. Thanks for seeing me here.

A lot went down in this chapter to be sure, but I don't have much to say about it in the notes so I'll just leave it to you all to say what you're thinking in the comments! I hope the new year treats you all well, and that you are excited as I am for what's coming up. I've been waiting for this for a long time.

That's it for today, thanks for reading, and I'll see you next time as we begin the Poni Island Arc of Eldritch! We're three out of five arcs done, folks!
A patchwork sky of clouds and stars painted Alola blue with stripes of moonlight, its vibrant green forests by day becoming oceans of roiling indigo at this late hour. Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island, walking beneath the shaded overhangs of foliage lining Mahalo Trail, stopped again as another crashing noise echoed in the woods surrounding Iki Town.

Something was not right.

The sounds had started not long ago, a great disturbance in these woods. In response Hala, in his role as Kahuna, had ascended the path of Mahalo Trail, seeking the cause. What was before him right now was just a symptom.

“Well now,” past his surprise at this strange creature's appearance Hala maintained his calm, studying its structure and movements as he reached for a Pokeball to unleash, “here's a rare visitor. If you're after a challenge, you've found it in the Kahuna of Melemele, so why don't we-”

The booming crash of thunder and flash of electric yellow before Hala resolved into the shape of Tapu Koko, Guardian Deity of Melemele. Stretching forth one of its massive clawed hands, a half of the Pokemon’s yellow shell extending from that arm, its echoing cry resounded over the treetops. Hala stopped reaching for a Pokeball.

“To have drawn out our guardian, you must be quite the competitor.” The smile from the Kahuna held up even as the dormant connection between Kahuna and Tapu flared into life at the deity's command. Once more the two went into battle together.

“Well now,” past his surprise at this strange creature's appearance Hala maintained his calm, studying its structure and movements as he reached for a Pokeball to unleash, “here's a rare visitor. If you're after a challenge, you've found it in the Kahuna of Melemele, so why don't we-”

The booming crash of thunder and flash of electric yellow before Hala resolved into the shape of Tapu Koko, Guardian Deity of Melemele. Stretching forth one of its massive clawed hands, a half of the Pokemon's yellow shell extending from that arm, its echoing cry resounded over the treetops. Hala stopped reaching for a Pokeball.

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“Moon, are you awake?”

The voice of Wicke the next morning accompanying the knock on Moon's door stirred her, her room still dark, heavy blinds drawn across the windows blocking all incoming light. She didn't even know what time it was, had just collapsed in the wake of the last night's – last entire day's – overwhelming events and slept. Poorly, a pounding pain in her heart at what had taken place, but slept all the same. Blearily Moon lifted her head from her pillow, making some attempt at a noise of reply. There was a long enough pause that she prepared to try louder for Wicke's sake before the woman answered over her second call.

“I understand, I will prepare a breakfast for you if you wish.”

Another beat of Moon's slow thoughts before she gave an affirmative, heard Wicke's acknowledgement, then let her head fall back onto the pillow beneath her.

Here's to the next day of her Pokemon journey.

A combination of opening the blinds to the morning's light, eating breakfast, and dressing herself helped Moon recover enough to be ready to leave the room she'd been given the last night. Wicke had brought Moon's Pokemon with her too – each requiring care after the past day's heavy battles thus needing to be left at a private Aether Paradise Pokemon Center overnight. The first touch of the Pokeball holding her partner Decidueye... Moon lingered on. A Pokeball sealing the Pokemon within, that was what was happening to Poipole right now. But Poipole couldn't get out. Poipole couldn't come back. Moon's fingers scrambled against the spherical object, as if trying to pull it open and have the Pokemon that wasn't the one in this one come out. Decidueye manifested, their Bond strong enough for the Arrow Quill Pokemon to feel her partner's distress. Heavy wings wrapped around Moon and held her against the Pokemon's chest.

Sheltered from the outside world she cried her frustration out. Held a hand against her partner, feeling the beating of the Pokemon's heart. And finally nodded, focusing once more. She'd find a way to get Poipole back. And help Nebby too. She would. She promised. Decidueye pushed her Pokeball into Moon's hand. A moment's reluctance before Moon activated it and called her partner back to her. Returned each to her bag and stood to leave the Aether Paradise dorm.

It was time to go on once again.

In the moments following Lusamine's disappearance through the Ultra Wormhole, taking with her the Team Skull Boss Guzma and imprisoned in a Beast Ball Poipole, not one of the four left behind had been able to handle this terrible defeat. All too soon Wicke was there to help, calling other members of the Aether Foundation to provide care, ensuring the device holding Nebby, the Ultra Dimensional Divider, was opened as soon as possible. It was.

But was that truly Nebby within?

Poipole gone. And Nebby transfigured into an unmoving form, an even smaller creature of blue ringed in gold, not unlike a Beast Ball in shape itself – enough to make Moon's breath hitch as Lillie first lifted the Pokemon from the box. A single touch was enough to shift it, but on its own it did not move, simply remained floating in place. Lillie had taken the creature that was Nebby(?) into her arms and been escorted by Wicke to her room to rest. Gladion to his own. Moon and Hau were both brought to dorms in the Aether Paradise proper. Unfortunately, Wicke had said, Lusamine had converted all spare rooms in the mansion for use as research studies on the Ultra Beasts. It had only been Wicke's intervention that kept Lillie and Gladion's own.

Moon had, as soon as she was in her room, collapsed into bed, cried, then fallen asleep. And now it
was tomorrow.

Now it was the next day they had to face together.

Wicke greeted Moon as she exited the room she'd been given. “Miss Lillie is downstairs in the garden, I will go and check on Hau now as well.”

Moon nodded back to the now caretaker of the Aether Foundation and descended below. Down through the Aether Paradise building, the buzz of activity within not mattering to her in the least. To the doorway that she, Gladion, and Hau had forced their way through the night before, now opened wide. To the pathway lined with gardens stretching to the manor at its far end, the damage done last night hastily repaired enough for it to be walked.

To the girl standing with head held high in the breeze blowing off of the sea and rushing over her face.

“Oh, Moon... how do I look?”

Unrecognisable, at first.

Lillie's full body dress was now a short-sleeved shirt with hood and skirt, still both white, but something that radiated liveliness that mixed with the smile she wore in a way Moon had never seen before. Her eyes were still the same, that stunning green like a forest in the summer, and her hair still the blonde like gold in sunlight, but little else was unchanged. Lillie smiled wide, hair tied back in a ponytail that hung longer than Moon's ever had, and raised her arms.

The awkward Z-Pose she performed broke Moon's silence as she couldn't help but giggle loudly at the display.

Lillie laughed as well.

“I,” as Lillie stepped forward Moon found her focus splitting, trying to take in everything about the way the girl before her had changed. She had a new bag, a pink backpack as opposed to her larger duffle bag of before, and was wearing a far more travel-ready pair of shoes. She looked like a Pokemon Trainer going out on a journey. Moon's vision finally focused on Lillie's face as she spoke again, “I'm going to save them. Nebby. Poipole. And... my mother too. I'm going to make things right. To do that I... I've decided to give it my all! Every day! I'll do my best and give it everything I've got! That's... that's what I learned from watching you, Moon! That's why this is my Z-Powered form!”

The smile Moon felt stretched far beyond her face. Throughout her body a warmth of happiness spread at the sight of Lillie before her. She nodded. She'd be there for her every step of the way. Lillie smiled brighter still to hear that.

They'd make it through this together. That was their promise.

Their will to go on.

“Huh? Is that you Lillie?”

Hau, appearing now from the Aether Paradise building as well, kinda just stood there staring. Lillie smiled at him too.

“Yes, Hau, it's me. I'm going to be going full force to set things right, so make sure you watch out for my Z-Powered form!” She did the pose again, just as inelegantly as before. Hau clapped eagerly.
“Nice! You look fantastic, I'm sure you're going to do great!”

Moon agreed with that readily, the two bouncing compliments for Lillie between them quickly driving her to a fluster as Moon remarked she looked more like a 'hero princess' instead of just regular princess now. Into the laughter of these three one more arrived.

“Alright,” Gladion, with bags under his eyes showing the least amount of sleep of the four, held something out in his hand to his sister, “here. Like we talked about last night.”

“Gladion!” Lillie, ignoring the proffered item, fixed her brother with a concerned look, “did you sleep at all last night?”

“It's fine,” Gladion waved his other hand, a very loud unspoken 'no' in the answer. “I found everything we needed to know. About the Legendary Pokemon and how to call them. It seems our mother took an interest in those Pokemon's ability to open Ultra Wormholes as well.”

“Their what?” Hau skipped over Lillie's attempt to judge her brother for his sleepless night, too caught up in the topic. “What about the Legendary Pokemon?”

“Alola's Legendary Pokemon,” Gladion addressed Hau and Moon specifically, “are believed capable of opening Ultra Wormholes. All of the ancient stories about them speak of them coming 'from the heavens' through 'a hole of light'. Considering Ultra Wormholes as a phenomenon are almost entirely unique to Alola, it's a good guess that they're related. Since the Pokemon Cosmog is tied to them somehow, and is meant to be able to call them, and it can open Ultra Wormholes as well, I'd say we should bet on it.”

“If we can make contact with the Legendary Pokemon Solgaleo and Lunala,” Lillie nodded her head, continuing the topic she and her brother had discussed the night before, neither too willing to be alone in that manor again, “we might be able to find help for Nebby! And also a way to chase after my mother – to bring her, and Poipole, back.”

“The Aether Foundation's research,” Gladion summed up what he'd put together over the course of the last night, brief sleep taken at tables instead of a bed, “is that those Pokemon can be summoned by bringing two items together. The Sun Flute, and the Moon Flute. Here's the Sun Flute, Lillie.”

Gladion held out a metal pipe of burnished red and gold, holes along its length for playing, an emblem of the sun affixed to its side. Lillie took the item, feeling its weight in her hands. Then pulled open her bag, placing it within. Moon looked over her shoulder to see the golden ridged peak of the transfigured Nebby within. And to hear Lillie's whisper to the one she carried with her.

“Nebby, I'll save you. I promise.”

“The other flute is on Exeggutor Island,” Gladion continued, Lillie, Moon, and Hau all snapping to attention at the mention of the location. Each remembered Samson Oak's discussion of Alolan Exeggutor. Hau tilted his head.

“Isn't Exeggutor Island off-limits while Poni Island has no Kahuna?”

“Exactly,” Gladion nodded. “It seems that was even enough to stop my mother from seeking out the Moon Flute, though I can't imagine why since she took this one so readily. Either way, once you have both flutes, it should be possible to call the Legendary Pokemon. That's the best we've got to go on, Lillie. I'm sorry I couldn't find anything more.”

“No,” Lillie shook her head, “this is more than enough. Thank you so much, Gladion.”
“Right,” Gladion's focus shifted back to Moon. He held out another item. “I found this too. Take it with you, just in case.”

In Gladion's hand was an orb, a Pokeball, bottom half white as almost all were, top half purple with a pink circle on each side. An engraved 'M' hovered just above the middle button. Hau and Moon's eyes both widened. Hau leaned in.

“Is that...?”

“A Master Ball, yes,” Gladion nodded. “It seems my mother had one waiting to use should she have encountered one of the Legendary Pokemon. At the very least in your hands I can trust it more than-”

No.

Gladion paused as Moon stretched out a hand, pushing his holding the Master Ball back towards his chest. She wasn't... she didn't want to hold a Pokeball that couldn't be resisted. That denied the choice. She wasn't comfortable with it. He should keep it. A long moment passed before Gladion nodded and lowered the hand holding the item to keep it with him instead.

“Very well.”

“Miss Lillie? Master Gladion? Moon? Hau?” The voice of Wicke joined the four, the woman herself standing just down the path on the way to the Aether Paradise. “Would the four of you be willing to join me? There are some people I would like you to talk to.”

As Hau loudly agreed, Lillie nodding and Gladion less agreeing and more not disagreeing, Moon felt her heart sink. This was definitely absolutely at least Kahili, if not Kukui or her mother. Moon had... gone into a lot of trouble yesterday, and even if it was to try and help she still knew she had to have worried people immensely. All the way to the meeting room Wicke was guiding the four to Moon’s head was filled with thoughts of dread, of the possibility of being denied the chance to keep going with Lillie after putting herself in so much danger.

To her surprise, the two figures in the room, its main feature a circular meeting table for discussions amongst Aether Employees, were not any Moon could recognise. Wicke guided the four inside. Then made introductions of the two within.

“This is Chief Anabel and Mr. Looker, they've come to Alola to assist in the Ultra Beast disaster relief.”

The first of these two was a woman, introduced as 'Chief Anabel'. Dressed in a full suit, black pants, jacket, gloves and tie with a white shirt beneath, she gave a strong immediate impression of authority, her lavender hair curling around her face and then tied into a long ponytail behind her neck. The man standing nearby, looking over various documents and devices spread across the table, wore a suit too but it was mostly obscured by the heavy brown coat he wore over it, something strange for the local Alolan environment. At least the Aether Paradise was kept well cool. A neat cut head of brown hair showed professionalism to his appearance as well. Both seemed curious at the appearance of the four Wicke had brought to see them.

“With all due respect, Ms. Wicke,” the man began, “bringing children-”

“Looker,” Anabel raised a hand, cutting off her subordinate's questioning. “Wicke, who are they?”

Nodding, Wicke turned to introduce the four. “These are Master Gladion and Miss Lillie, the heirs to the Aether Founda-”
“I’m the partner of Type: Null,” Gladion spoke over Wicke’s attempted introduction, “a Pokemon created specifically to fight Ultra Beasts.”

“And I’m the pa—” catching herself, Lillie shook her head, “the caretaker of Nebby- Cosmog, the Pokemon that... caused this situation to occur.”

Situation? Moon glanced at Hau, who shrugged back at her. Wicke moved to indicate Hau, slightly shakier in her introduction after having Gladion and Lillie cut her off. “This is Hau, grandson to Kahuna Hala, of Melemele Island, and—”

“Moon,” Anabel said the name, her purple eyes locked on Moon’s brown own. “Have you heard?”

She clearly hadn't heard anything. Moon shook her head. Anabel sighed. “You had a significant battle yesterday afternoon. The Ula'ula Island Kahuna, Nanu, on the docks of Mahihiunu.” Silence settled, Moon's skin prickling with distress over the news she felt incoming. Anabel nodded. “You likely didn't notice at the time, but the battle was observed by residents of the area. And recorded. Seven Bonds. It is significant.”

“Oh Moon,” Lillie turned to Moon, who was staring forward coldly, fingers digging into her palms. Again. Would she have to put up with this again? Anabel shook her head.

“Last night Ultra Wormholes began opening across Alola at a previously unprecedented rate. Because of this, Ultra Beasts have also begun to appear across Alola at a far faster rate than ever before. My subordinate Looker and I,” Looker gave a nod as Anabel indicated him, “are members of a task force specifically for resolving Ultra Beast incidents. While the Ultra Wormhole opens most commonly by far in Alola, it is still known to manifest in other parts of the world, and Ultra Beasts are still known to, rarely, appear elsewhere. As such we are involved with preventing them from causing significant damage to places, people, and Pokemon.”

“Currently,” Looker added in, Anabel allowing him to continue the explanation, “we have task force members stationed across Alola working to mitigate the ongoing disaster. Unfortunately the number and aggressiveness of the Ultra Beasts appearing is beyond anything we’ve had to deal with before. Our fellows and the Trainers of Alola, including the Captains, Kahuna, and even Tapu, are doing their best to resolve the situation, but it is proving quite difficult. We are stationed here at the Aether Paradise to both provide tactical support across the Alola Region—”

“And to identify and resolve the cause,” Anabel concluded, picking up from Looker as he spoke. Anabel focused on Lillie. “You said you had it with you?”

“I—” taken aback by the details of the situation, Lillie focused and nodded, opening her bag and lifting Nebby out from within it. In her hands the Pokemon now rested, floating under its own power but moving only by that of others acting upon it, a tiny elliptical creature with a blue star-filled body like that of its prior form Cosmog, now encased in a glass-like material and wrapped in a golden shell. Lillie stepped back, leaving the Pokemon floating in the air.

“Nebby- Cosmog, I was caring for it. But it was taken and... used to open the Ultra Wormholes. Afterwards it turned into... this. It hasn't moved since.”

Anabel leaned in, raising a hand to rest a finger against the Pokemon. It slowly lowered in the air as she gently pushed down upon it. “Hmm, do you have any Pokedex recordings of this Pokemon?” Quickly Moon and Hau both offered their own. Moon's buzzed to life.

“Zzt, Rotom-dex at your service!”
With a salute the inhabited Pokedex delightedly took in the crowd, Anabel's mouth forming a slight 'o' at the sight of it, Looker appearing extremely intrigued. The chief smiled a moment later. “A Rotom-inhabited Pokedex, yes? How fascinating. Rotom-dex, what can you tell me about the Pokemon Cosmog?”

Immediately Rotom-dex launched into a spiel, first physical observations, personality displayed, then a number of conclusions and assumptions based on available data cross-referenced with other Pokemon it believed similar. Looker went from interested to impressed. Whoever made that Pokedex was a real genius, creating a device that allowed an inhabiting Rotom to think on a high enough level to act as such. Those Pokemon were mostly instinctual and seekers of habitat. This one had curiosity, intelligence, and outstanding personality. Incredible. He'd have to make mentions to the International Police, of which he and Anabel were part, about getting hold of the creator and encouraging their work.

Talent like that should be given every opportunity to flower.

“At a guess...” Anabel took what Rotom-dex had provided and compared it to Nebby's new found appearance, “I would say the Pokemon Cosmog has evolved.” The statement, stark and factual, drew a pause from the children before them. Lillie blinked slowly.

“Nebby... evolved?”

“Evolution is a mysterious topic,” Anabel nodded, “however there have been observations of Pokemon forcing their own evolution to overcome life-threatening situations. Rarely are they left healthy after such an exertion however.”

Lillie's face fell. “Oh...” Then she nodded and returned her smile. “But we'll still find a way to help Nebby! We have a plan!”

“To restore it?” Anabel had now taken hold of the Rotom-dex, navigating its menus as the Pokedex chattered animatedly. How many Pokemon had Moon caught and raised already? This was ridiculous. Moving past that, she set to logging this new Pokemon as an evolution of Cosmog. “What will you do?”

“We are going to call the Legendary Pokemon of Alola!” Lillie announced, Wicke, Looker, and Anabel all pausing to focus fully on her. She stared back resolute. “Solgaleo and Lunala can open Ultra Wormholes, they'll be able to help fix this!”

“Is that so?” Looker glanced at Anabel. “Should we-”

“We need to focus on what we can do right now,” Anabel shook her head. “If we give up resources to chasing a Legendary Pokemon those are resources not protecting people in need. I'm sorry,” she turned back to Lillie, “but that mission isn't something I can help you with.”

“That's okay,” Lillie shook her head, “we'll find a way!”

Look at this young one, Anabel considered, such a light within her. She wanted to believe this Lillie would find a way. Would fix this. But she had to focus on what she could do right now. Manage her subordinates in the International Police. Work with the people of Alola. And keep the Ultra Beasts from causing any more harm than they already were. She released the floating Pokedex to return to Moon.

“Cosmoem.” All eyes were on her as she said it. “That sleeping Pokemon, Cosmoem. I think that's a fitting name.”
“Cosmoem...” Lillie breathed, reaching out her hands to lift it in her grasp. Nebby, Cosmog, had evolved. And was sleeping. If the Legendary Pokemon could wake it... no, they would wake it. She believed. Returned the Pokemon to her bag and focused on Moon, Hau, and Gladion by her side.

They'd find the way.

“I connected your Rotom-dex to the archives of Ultra Beast information we’ve made available here,” Anabel addressed Moon. “This will allow you to use the information we’ve gathered over the years of Ultra Beast activity to identify any you should encounter. As a general rule you should never engage an Ultra Beast directly – even you – but use this information to make specific judgement calls about how to act around them. Stay safe.”

Moon nodded. She would. Turned and nodded to Lillie as well. She’d stay with her to the end. Lillie smiled back to her. They were ready.

“I'm staying to help.” Now everyone's attention went to Gladion, who made his declaration simply. “Null is designed to fight Ultra Beasts, it needs to be out there doing what it can to keep Alola safe. Please,” he addressed Anabel, meeting her eyes, “make use of us to the fullest of our ability. We can make a difference, I promise.”

Determination. An intensity and belief as strong as his sister's. Anabel, slowly, nodded. “Very well Gladion, you will be under my direct command in the defense of Alola. That means following my orders to the letter, do you understand?” Gladion nodded. He did.

Hau shuffled on his feet for a moment more before sticking up his hand for all to see. “I want to help too!”

Most shocked of all were Moon and Lillie. Hau turned to them with an apologetic expression. “I know we've gotta help save Nebby, and Poipole, and your mom, Lillie,” despite his expression he was still holding firm. “But I... I wanna help keep Alola safe! I know the two of you, if you're working together, you can do this! And while you're out there finding the Legendary Pokemon and fixing things, I'm gonna keep things from breaking all the way! I'll work hard to keep Alola safe cause... that's what someone who's gonna be Kahuna needs to do!”

The declaration was strong, Hau's intent real. Moon found herself surprised beyond measure, but for a different reason to all the others. Hau wanted to be a Kahuna? She knew he was the grandson of one, but he'd never really mentioned being interested in the role. Moon's own thoughts, of the Kahuna being figures she respected – besides Nanu who she still couldn't rectify the thought of being one in her head – conflicted with what she'd seen from Holei. And the Tapu. Would Hau becoming Kahuna mean he was bound to Tapu Koko?

She didn't know if she liked that.

“Hau,” Lillie was speaking even as Moon thought deeply, “if you think this is best, we'll support you. But we will miss you while we're apart.”

“Hey now Lillie we won't be apart,” Hau smiled gently. “Cause we're all best friends and that means even when we're not in the same place we're still together, ya? So as long as you two think about me and I think about you we won't be anywhere but right beside each other, okay?”

Hau's words, for Moon and Lillie it set their resolve. They nodded and knew the three of them would still go on together, even heading to different places. Gladion felt something hearing it, perhaps a feeling like longing he was denying so hard he couldn't even identify it. He hadn't ever had
something like that. And now wasn't the time to want for what was beyond him.

Of the adults, each found themselves struck by the purity of Hau's words. And the absolute belief he spoke them with. That ability to touch the heart, if his goal was to become a Kahuna, a leader for an entire island of Alola, well, no-one would believe it impossible. Not for him.

Hau turned to Anabel and gave a salute. “I'm at your command!” Anabel smiled at this precocious child who'd impressed her so.

“I'm going to work you hard so make sure you're ready for it.”

Hau grinned even wider. “Got it!”

Wicke, who'd brought these four children before the agents from the International Police, found herself wondering whether she'd made the right choice. She hadn't known what the result would be. Just that she'd wanted to introduce them to those working to protect Alola. Now Master Gladion and Hau were going to do the same. And Miss Lillie and Moon... just looking at Lillie's determined expression Wicke knew she couldn't reject her will. She nodded.

“Miss Lillie, I will prepare a boat to take you and Moon to Poni Island.” With thanks Lillie nodded to her, before turning to Gladion and Hau.

“When we meet again I'll have brought everyone back.”

Gladion and Hau nodded back to her. Turning, Lillie walked beside Moon and the two exited the room. Behind them Anabel took command.

“The first of the current Ultra Beast situations is...”

The ocean waves of Alola, shifting those boats crossing the vibrant blue expanse of water between its islands, no longer affected Lillie. She stood tall on the small cruiser carrying her and Moon to Poni Island, feeling the wind and sea-spray blowing against her face. She'd go forward. She wouldn't stop, just like Moon.

And together they'd find the way.

The night before, as Moon and Hau were led away, Gladion had sought Lillie out. Found her in her room, a place full of so many memories mixed together Lillie didn't know how to feel within it. But when he asked her how she was, despite knowing full well, at last she'd finally lost herself completely.

Said all the things she'd thought and buried in the two years that had passed.

Him leaving like that, taking a Pokemon and running, abandoning her behind in their mother's clutches, it had been the worst years of her life. Lusamine had grown paranoid of betrayal, seeking to control Lillie even further, to keep her close and measured and aware that she should not seek to copy her foolish brother's actions. Playing the part, hiding how the way her mother acted made her fear, Lillie had grown quieter and quieter, guarded, entombed in these walls and her own heart. Wicke's attempts to care for her had only barely helped.

She still had nightmares of that time.
Gladion had taken Lillie's words, accepted them as she decried him for leaving her, and bowed his head. Today was another line in a long list of ways he'd let his sister down. There was no apology he could truly make. No way that saying he was sorry could ever undo the hurt Lillie had suffered. So he didn't say he was sorry. What he said was this:

“I'll fix this.”

The two spoke further, Lillie quick to tell her brother that if he tried to shoulder everything and leave her again she would never consider forgiving him. If they were going to make things right, they were going to do it together! Gladion couldn't help but smile even as he was told off like that. His sister was far stronger than he was now. Moon and Hau had really helped her rise above the pain their mother had inflicted upon them. More than anything else, the sight of Lillie with determination outlining her plan made Gladion feel thankful towards those two. They'd saved her. Maybe him too.

Honestly, it was really frustrating what good people they were.

The two talked more. Set out ideas for reaching out to the Legendary Pokemon of Alola. And then Gladion had bid his sister goodnight and instead of going to sleep gone to study. To find ways their plan could come true. A method to restore Cosmog – Nebby – recover Moon's Pokemon Poipole and... retrieve their mother. Even after everything she'd done... that was still who she was to them. Gladion didn't want to leave her like this. Neither did Lillie.

So now their plan was in motion.

And now Poni Island was in sight.

From the southern point of Poni Island, one of the few places its high-rising cliff walls reached down to touch sand instead of sea, a dock stretched out into the waters. Moored to it were boats by the dozen, floating platforms linked between them creating a web of pathways between the homes – houseboats all styled after various Pokemon of the sea. And one or two enigmatic members of the land. This was Seafolk Village, home base for the nomadic seafolk, wanderers of the seas across the globe. Even as the Aether cruiser carrying Lillie and Moon docked, each watched as another boat – a large and finely shaped Gyarados structure – pulled away from the docks and began heading out into the ocean. The two disembarked to a quiet town.

Maybe too quiet.

“Uhm,” looking around, Lillie turned to Moon, “Do you see anyone?” Moon shook her head. She didn't. Step by step they continued into the township, at its centre a great tree growing from a garden built atop the wooden platforms connecting the village together. There was no-one around.

That was worrying.

“You two! What are you doing out and about around here?”

The loud voice jolted the two, Moon quickly stepping before Lillie as a strongly built man with a head and well-trimmed beard of dark blue hair approached, dressed in a grey jacket and black shirt highlighted with cobalt blue, contrasted by a pair of lighter grey pants rolled up to the knee. A set of Ultra Balls hung from his waist.

“Everyone's staying out of the way while those monsters are causing a racket, haven't you heard?”

“Excuse me, sir,” Lillie stepped past Moon, addressing the man before them, “but we need to go to Exeggutor Island. Can you show us how to get there?”
“Exeggutor Island?” The older man tilted his head, “Why would you be going there? Well, whatever the reason, it's not an option. Exeggutor Island is both a sacred and dangerous site in Alola: only the Kahuna's permission will get someone there. And Poni doesn't have a Kahuna. Sorry, but you should try and head back home, before one of those big monsters comes through. You can see people have already started leaving Seafolk Village to avoid them.”

“That's...” Lillie paused for a moment, before powering through, “that's not an option! The two of us have to go to Exeggutor Island, please show us the way!”

The man was similarly determined. “That's not happening,” he shook his head. “Exeggutor Island has rapid and extreme weather changes that are dangerous to just about anyone, there's no way I'm taking two kids there even if—” for a moment his eyes lingered on Moon, who stared back resolutely. So what if he knew? She wasn't hiding. He shook his head. “Doesn't matter, it's not safe and without the direct order of our Kahuna it's not happening, or I'm not the chief of the seafolk here myself.”

“But we have to go!” Lillie stomped down, staring up at the man blocking the way. “It's the only way to make things right! Please!”

A shake of a head covered in dark blue hair. “I'm not about to send two kids into danger no matter what. If there's something I can help you with let me know, but right now my duty is to keep Seafolk Village safe until the last members of this place have taken their leave. We're just lucky none of those creatures have come here yet.”

“But!” Lillie shook her head, “we need to go – we need to get the Moon Flute so we can call the Legendary Pokemon to fix this!” A wide-eyed stare answered her declaration.

“The Moon Flute? The Legendary Pokemon?” The chief of the Seafolk paused for a moment, then shook his head. “Those are legends that say that will work, not facts. I'm not taking two kids into danger to chase fairytales. You two go back to that boat you came here on and get somewhere safe. Exeggutor Island isn't for you.”

“I won't!” The loud yell from Lillie surprised Moon, who stepped back as Lillie pushed forward to stand right before the man. “I need to go to Exeggutor Island to fix this! You can't tell us we can't go! You can't!”

“I am.” The man remained resolute. “You're not going. That's that.” The intense frustration on the face of the girl before him said she wasn't about to accept this. But she also didn't have a choice. He turned and took a step away.

Lillie's hand grabbed hold of the back of his jacket.

“Don't.” She said the single word, staring down at her hand clenching the fabric. “Don't walk away from us.”

A deep sigh from the older man manifested. “This isn't happening.” He said to the sky, back still to the girl demanding of him. “If all you're doing is chasing a legend then I've no reason to throw you into a dangerous place like that, especially when I've got my hands full managing Seafolk Village's disbandment. You can't expect me to help you when that's all you've given me, can you?”

Lillie shook her head, grip tightening on the fabric in her grasp. “I—”

“Moon? And is that... Lillie?”

All three turned to the newest figure to join them, a short-statured girl dressed in tan with a purple bonnet failing to contain the mass of bushy black hair tied into two long tails emerging from it, a
huge four-legged Pokemon of equine form, brown body with deep black hair and red colourations on snout, feet, tail and hairtips following behind. Lillie gasped.

“Hapu?”

“Hapu,” the chief of the seafolk addressed the young girl, “would you-” with a wave of his hand he indicated Lillie and Moon. Hapu nodded.

“Of course, I'll take them with me. Thank you for caring for them, chief.”

He nodded back and set off to check in with another building and its residents on their progress to departure. Hapu took charge of managing the two girls before her.

“Lillie,” addressing the one whose loud voice had drawn her attention to begin with, Hapu hoped to help, “you've changed. I can see you're determined to do something. What is it?”

“Oh Hapu,” Lillie shook her head, “so much has happened.”

As Lillie and Moon recounted the events of the previous day Hapu set a direction, leading them further through Seafolk Village, towards where the docks joined the shore. The expression of the young girl grew more grave by the minute.

“I see.” Was all she said at first as Mudsdale took the first step off of the wooden platforms of Seafolk Village and onto the sandy shore of Poni Island. “Hearing of the creatures – Ultra Beasts I suppose – I decided to return home to Poni Island ahead of schedule. To do my part to help. Me and Mudsdale here, of course.” The Draft Horse Pokemon made a deep noise that ended in a heavy exhalation of breath as Hapu smiled at it. Then turned back to Lillie and Moon with a more tense expression.

“The Kahuna... Poni Island might not have one, but there may be a way for you to get to Exeggutor Island all the same. You'll need to meet with Tapu Fini first however. It is likely at the Ruins of Hope, which is close enough to the farming community my family lives within. That's where I'm heading now. I can take the two of you as well.”

“Oh!” Surprised by the offer of help in a form she hadn't expected, Lillie spent a moment processing before smiling and nodding. “Thank you Hapu!” A short nod from Hapu was acknowledgement of that, Moon joining Lillie in appreciating her. Moon was genuinely thankful for Hapu's appearance.

She'd been beginning to worry as Lillie argued more and more with the seafolk's chief.

“Well then,” Hapu hauled herself up by the stirrups onto her partner Mudsdale's back, “we may only have the one Pokemon but she's more than capable of carrying all three of us. It might be a little tight and a little slower though.”

“That's okay,” Lillie reached up a hand to accept Hapu's, settling behind her on the Mudsdale before Moon took the rear, “I really can't thank you enough, Hapu. I wouldn't have known what to do if you hadn't appeared!”

“Well,” Hapu kept her eyes forward, setting Mudsdale to begin the upwards path back home, “we'll see how this goes.”

Poni Island, the Wild Garden of Alola, was the least inhabited of the four Alolan Islands by far.
Composed of dense forests of vibrant foliage and rising peaks and plateaus of rock, little of it could be described as easily lived within. The most populous settlement was not even built upon the island, instead being the floating Seafolk Village, while most of those who did live on Poni were found in a farming community an intense uphill journey to the east. No Ride Pokemon stations existed on the island, and so travel was mostly done by one's own Pokemon. Thus it remained sparsely populated, and took the least overseeing of all of Alola.

And had the least able to respond to disasters of this magnitude.

The air split as a white being carved through it leaving a trail of wind whipping razor sharp cuts along the ground its tall and lithe shape doing little to suppress the clear power it exuded burning red aura wrapping around it as it skidded to a stop rushing wind whipping the veil-like covering of diaphanous shell stretching from head to golden heel long antenna hanging at similar length its body segmented into ringed sections expanding from one after the other its shape so resembling some form of feminine being as deep blue and purple eyes studied the one floating before it.

The only one that could stand against it.

Tapu Fini, Guardian Deity of Poni Island, raised a hand, a ring of water circling around it before racing forward to strike at the Ultra Beast that opposed it, a creature of such intense speed that it passed through the storm of water without a single droplet touching its immaculately white form. The Island Deity shifted its hands, more water pouring out from the purple shell its black body rested within, the other half of that shell stretching over its blue-haired head ending with a jagged blade pointing forward. The Tapu continued to direct the streams of water it controlled, seeking to catch and stop its foe.

The Ultra Beast was not interested in that in the least.

One person observed, standing behind the battle held at the crossroads of Poni's south, watching with focus that her half-lidded grey eyes often failed to reveal. She was a figure of light skin and dusty blonde hair, streaks of paint smeared across not only that but her clothing too. No Pokemon of hers were manifested, none capable of standing up to this creature before her. Only a Tapu seemed able to oppose it.

Captain Mina of Poni Island drew in a long breath.

"Sorry Hapu," she said it to herself as much as to the one she was thinking of, “we're out of time.” Tapu Fini was losing. The Ultra Beasts that had struck Alola since the last night, the Guardian Deity had already spent so long fighting them. Was running out of energy, and this creature it faced seemed intent on bringing it down. There was only one option left. In her hand Mina held a Z-Crystal, bright yellow and marked with an Alolan seal. Against the shake of her own grip she moved it to the Z-Ring she wore. “Tapu Fini needs a Kahuna.”

A moment's pause before she committed the rest of her life in service.

... one more.

"Captain Mina!"

The loud call of Hapu's voice, echoing over the galloping hooves of her partner Mudsdale, was the best thing Mina had ever heard as she turned to greet the girl approaching. There were two more with the Draft Horse Pokemon, dismounting far slower than Hapu who'd leapt free and run towards the Captain, Mina catching the gaze of the young girl lingering on Tapu Fini and the Ultra Beast in battle. But then turning back to her.
Mina held out her hand.

“Are you ready?”

Hapu grasped it, fingers curling around the Z-Crystal in her palm.

“I am.”

And with Tapunium-Z in hand Hapu of Poni Island stepped forward, her other hand drawing forth the Z-Ring she'd carried all this time. The Z-Ring of her late grandfather himself.

“I am Hapu, granddaughter to the former Kahuna Koa,” with clear voice she announced herself, setting the Z-Ring around her wrist, placing the Z-Crystal within it, “and the next Kahuna of Poni Island. I have travelled across Alola, been tested by the Totems, visited by the Tapu, and grown to stand before you now. Tapu Fini!” The Tapu, pulling back from its clash, raised a wall of water. Turned to face the girl behind it. “I am here. As promised.”

A long moment hung in the air as Tapu Fini stared at Hapu with aqua blue eyes that showed no expression at all. Then it turned back to the wall of water split by a single arcing kick from the Ultra Beast before it. Hapu nodded, acknowledged. And raised her arms. Performed the ancient pose of the Tapunium-Z, one every Kahuna of Alola knew. A heart formed with her hands outstretched. Then arms held at her side and her balance upon a single leg.

Lillie, watching with Moon from a step back, paused.

“Uhmm-”

In a violent surge light erupted around Hapu, a towering pillar of Z-Aura so intensely bright the newly-made Kahuna of Poni could not be seen within. It flickered and flared as a bonfire visible from even distant Seafolk Village, the chieftain's eyes widening at the sight of a Kahuna's coronation. Either Mina had felt the need or... Hapu had done it. He hoped for both their sakes it was the second.

From Hapu this power flowed, through the Bond Tapu Fini had created in its moment of acknowledgement. Glowing brighter and brighter still the Tapu wrapped its arms around itself, bending down as the two halves of its purple shell met. Its body could no longer be seen, contained as it was within its protective casing. The Ultra Beast – Rotom-dex announcing its name as 'Pheromosa' – with speed that couldn't be beat appeared overhead the Tapu, swinging a leg down upon its withdrawn foe. To end this.

This was indeed the end.

From beneath the ground a massive glowing fist of gold erupted and seized hold the Beast in its grasp. A second burst free, slamming down upon the ground, pushing with great might and hauling a form, a body, out of the heaving earth. Peaked by the enshelled Tapu Fini acting as its head a grand being of golden energy forged into a humanoid shape emerged, standing stories tall, towering over the Ultra Beast caught within its grip. The being, so massive it was hard to even believe, raised that hand high, higher, higher still as its arm stretched beyond its shape, extending up into the sky, the Ultra Beast struggling against its captor.

And then it swung that arm down.

The echoing crash washed over the forests of Poni, the force of the strike sending a gout of earth into the air just as high. Rapidly retracting its arm the Guardian of Alola dragged the Ultra Beast back to
it, its other hand swinging down to intercept the Beast and smash it into the ground again, a palm print embedding the Pheromosa into the earth. Linking both hands together, fingers intertwining, the being of golden light raised both arms high, a moment away from bringing them crashing down.

Then it vanished, all but the head that was Tapu Fini gone from sight. Hapu, not moved an inch from where she had begun, swayed and fell. Mina caught her before she hit the ground.

“There you go,” the Captain smiled at the unconscious girl in her arms, “you did it, just like you said you would. Congrats, Kahuna Hapu. We’re all proud of you. Your grandda would be too.”

Sounds of shifting earth accompanied water pulsing through it and undoing the damage done by the Z-Move of Kahuna and Tapu, Tapu Fini paying special care to bury the now unconscious Ultra Beast up to its head. Stored where it could do no more harm for now. Then turned and extended its arms to Mina. Standing again the Captain held out the girl to its partner. Tapu Fini accepted Hapu from her hold.

Then rose into the air and flew south, taking its Kahuna to the altar they would now share.

Mina, watching the purple-shelled Tapu depart, spent a moment snapping a picture of the buried Pheromosa to send – first to the Ultra Beast Taskforce in Alola so they could come get it, second to the Captain’s Group Chat to show she’d definitely seen the coolest thing today – before turning to the two other young girls standing with the Mudsdale left behind.

Gave an awkward alolan wave.

“Hallo hallo, alola, alola, I'm Mina nice to meet you!” The volume of her voice altered quickly, going from high to low, energy behind it seeming to fade in and out by the moment. Dropping her arms the older girl paused for a moment, before hurrying forward to the three. She seemed to move at a pace all of her own. Coming to a stop before the two girls and one Pokemon, she nodded at the Draft Horse who acknowledged her by butting its head against her. Moon caught sight of a piece of jewellery on the older girl's finger, a four petalled flower shape with one of those petals being pink. A Captain’s symbol.

So this was Captain Mina?

“Moon, right?” Mina gave an easy-going smile as she looked at the young girl who asked of her, before tilting her head over to Lillie. “And...?”

“Oh, hello, my name is Lillie-” that was enough introduction apparently, the Captain nodding and running both her hands over the Mudsdale's snout.

“Okay, let's go see Kahuna Hapu then, alright?”

Kahuna Hapu... Moon considered that. So that was what Hapu's goal had been? To become Kahuna? She'd said she was the granddaughter of Kahuna Koa just now. And when they'd been together before she'd said she wanted to follow in her grandfather's footsteps. So that was what she'd meant...

Moon wondered if Hau knew about Hapu's intent.

“Come on!” Mina called, already heading down the path, “it's not that far!” Taking that as cue, the Mudsdale partner of Hapu pushed forward, almost knocking Moon over as it set off to follow the Captain. Moon met Lillie's eyes, each still surprised by what had happened. But...

“Moon,” Lillie turned as well, “let's go and see the Kahuna.”
Moon nodded and followed behind.

The Ruins of Hope, constructed at the south-eastern point of Poni Island, were buried within grand caverns of black stone hollowed out by rushing liquid, geysers all around erupting into a rain of pure water. Even just the feeling of it falling upon her skin Moon felt re-energise her. Like she was more awake than ever. Such was the territory and power of Tapu Fini of Poni Island.

Mina gave them the grand tour.

“I like sitting there, it's the one good place where the water doesn't fall so I can set up my canvas and paint.” The Captain turned and pointed elsewhere. “But even though I get wet if I sit there it's a much better angle of the ocean so I like doing that too. I try to use paint that doesn't run when I'm here is all.”

“R-right,” Lillie, unprepared for a discussion on ideal painting spots, tried to steer the conversation. “Uhm, Captain Mina, will Hap- will Kahuna Hapu be able to help us get to Exeggutor Island?”

“Exeggutor Island?” Mina looked up at the sky, a geyser in the distance making a great centrepiece of the view, “I haven't been there in ages, I should go back to paint sometime. Did you say you wanted to go there?”

“Yes!” Lillie nodded. The Captain finally looked at her.

“Why?”

Questioned once already Lillie held back a moment. Moon filled in for her. Mina's attention switched to her.

“You want the Moon Flute? I guess... we keep it there as part of ceremony so if the Kahuna says you can take it you can. Are you trying to call the Legendary Pokemon or something?”

The plain looks from both Lillie and Moon answered Mina's question loud and clear. The Captain came to a stop.

“Whoa.”

“Please, Captain Mina,” Lillie clasped her hands, “if we can call the Legendary Pokemon we can set everything right. I'm sure of it. We need to find them. If you can help us at all it-”

“Not a lot I can do,” the Captain was quick to shrug, “but hey we have a Kahuna now! And I'm sure little Hapu will help you out, we just need to go get her. She's gonna be napping right now after that big show for sure.”

The way to the Ruins of Hope was a spiralling path, carving down around the inside of a massive cavern system. Mina led the way with Moon, Lillie, and Mudsdale following behind. The Captain remained talkative.

“I like to hear the echoes of the water here, so I'll sit and just zone out. But I can't do that for too long or the Tapu come to see me – they're real needy for attention you know?”

Lillie didn't. Moon absolutely did. Mina smiled at her agreement.

“So Hapu came and asked Tapu Fini just after her grandda passed to not make me Kahuna, to wait
because she was going to become the Kahuna herself. I think Tapu Fini agreed just because it liked Kahuna Koa so much, but here little Hapu actually went and did it! That's really impressive, you know? Holding a Bond with a Tapu isn't easy – or so I heard at least."

“A Bond?” Lillie asked this while Moon thought on the relationship of Tapu and Kahuna. “Do Kahuna and Tapu have a Trainer's Bond together?”

“Yep,” Mina answered simply as the group descended. “It's not like, a permanent thing, cause that'd burn anyone out. The Tapu can turn their Bond on and off like a light switch, and if it's off it doesn't even stop a Kahuna from having six Pokemon! That's the thing with Legendary Pokemon, they all do weird things with Bonds. You know that's one of the ways to identify what is and isn't Legendary, right? If it can manipulate a Bond it's one.”

Moon shook her head. She'd never learned that. Legendary Pokemon, like the Tapu, could control a Trainer's Bond connecting them to another? That was... it was fascinating, but in a confusing way where she couldn't make use of knowing it yet. Not with so many other things on her mind. With everything Moon felt to the Kahuna – respect and good-will – and everything she felt of the Tapu – caution and doubt – it was strange to know the two were connected together so closely. She didn't know if she felt okay about it. Didn't know if this was really what should have happened.

Didn't know if Hapu had made the right choice.

Mina clicked her fingers and drew Moon's attention back to her.

“I didn't really want to be Kahuna anyway,” the Captain smiled, a twitch of her nose crinkling the streak of pink paint across her face. “But let's not worry about that sort of thing right now. Hapu made her own choice out of her own will and desire. Let's respect that, alright?”

Moon stared, cheeks warming at the realisation Mina had so clearly identified what she was feeling. The Captain sat down on a pile of rocks, pulled open her bag, and retrieved a sketchbook and pencils.

“Anyway until our new Kahuna comes back out we're just waiting, so I'm gonna make some sketches. You two stay right there okay?”

“Pardon?” Lillie shook her head. “Captain Mina, we need to hurry!”

“No can do,” the Captain raised both hands, forming a square of her fingers to focus in on Lillie and Moon, “nothing's happening til the Kahuna's back on her feet. Should only take a few hours.”

“Hour-” Lillie's cry of shock Moon interrupted, resting a hand on the girl's shoulder. They should wait for Hapu. They should rest for a moment. Lillie shook her head. “Moon, we can't wai-” They had to. Moon's strong response stopped Lillie's complaint. Right now they should wait.

Moments passed before Lillie finally nodded. Looked down. But accepted. “Okay, Moon. We'll wait.” Moon smiled at her.

Mina set to work on the first lines of her next sketch.

She'd title it: Standing Together.
Mina drew they went to and from the Ruins of Hope, bringing back berries gathered from across the area before heading out for more. Mina snacked readily, instructing Moon and Lillie to do the same. Neither had eaten properly since this morning.

Taking the time to rest and eat did them well.

Moon spent it looking up what details Rotom-dex knew of the Ultra Beast that Tapu Fini had fought. Pheromosa, the Lissome Pokemon, suggested typing: Bug and Fighting. Possessing speed and acceleration beyond belief, it focused primarily on devastating kicks delivered by its gold chitin-covered feet. From there Moon flicked through the other recorded Ultra Beasts Anabel and Looker had provided knowledge of. The red and hulking muscle-bound Buzzwole. The swaying mass of black cables that made up the Glowing Pokemon Xurkitree. Nihilego, the true name of UB-01, Symbiont, the jellyfish-like creature that had appeared at Aether Paradise almost six weeks ago.

There was no record of Poipole, the Poison Pin Pokemon first seen through the Aether Foundation's own scans. First encountered by Moon. Named by her. She wondered if Anabel had taken that data and added it to her group's own. Whether Moon's name for the purple Pokemon would be known around the world.

She... missed it. No day had been as lonely as this, always turning to expect the floating Pokemon to be by her side, smiling whenever she made eye contact with it, spiralling through the air with pure excitement to be here. Every time Moon caught herself looking for Poipole she... her heart hurt.

She was going to find it and bring it back.

Lillie paced the ruins.

She was unable to remain calm, even as Captain Mina spoke to her, pointing out parts of the cave system she'd painted for the Tapu. Tapu Fini seemed to delight in having the Ruins of Hope decorated in comparison to the more deteriorated homes of the other Tapu, and often nudged Mina to do more. The Captain made a joke about wishing the Tapu would at least tip her for her work. Lillie didn't give it much mind.

She didn't want to be waiting.

The hours were slow to pass, Mina making sure to keep watch over the two girls even while continuing her sketch, until eventually with much stumbling to her walk Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island emerged from the entrance to the Ruins of Hope proper. Lillie was the first to reach her, Moon and Mina a step behind.

“Well,” the Kahuna gave a grin at the three gathered before her, “I couldn't pick better guests for my coronation party.” Before anyone could reply a snorting equine head shoved its way past them, right into Hapu's face. She laughed and grabbed hold of her Mudsaddle partner, placing her forehead against its own. Still connected. Shouldering the weight of Tapu Fini hadn't taken this from her. The clearest sign she was ready. Hapu, eyes closed, let a thankful smile wash over her face, the feeling of gratitude coursing to every corner of her body. She'd done it. She'd really done it. Taken on her grandfather's mantle, become the Kahuna she had wished to be. Opening her eyes again she looked at the four around her, her partner Mudsaddle, the amazing Moon, the beautiful Lillie, and the Captain who'd supported her most ridiculous wish.

Hapu smiled wide.

“Thank you. All of you.”
Mina nodded. Moon, unsure of the reason for the thanks being given to her, still smiled.

Lillie spoke up.

“Kahuna Hapu, Moon and I need to travel to Exeggutor Island to find the Moon Flute. So that we can play it with the Sun Flute I have with me and summon the Legendary Pokemon back to Alola.”

“Right,” Hapu nodded, smile fading to seriousness, remembering what Lillie had told her when they’d met earlier that day. “As Kahuna of Poni Island, I give the two of you my permission to go to Exeggutor Island and claim the Moon Flute. Take it, with the Sun Flute, to the Altar of the Dawne beyond the Vast Poni Canyon, the place the light of Alola first touches. If from anywhere the Legendary Pokemon will hear your call it will be there.”

The smile on Lillie’s face was both radiant and relieved. The way forward was cleared. She nodded. Hapu took a step forward. “And of course I will escort you myself.” and immediately wavered, going from a steady step to falling through the air. Mina caught and steadied her.

“I don’t think you’re up for adventuring just yet, Kahuna.”

“Well,” Hapu attempted to stand again and failed to do so, relenting to go slack in Mina's grasp as the Captain lifted the girl up onto her partner Mudsdale's back. She didn't find any more words to say.

“I’ll take them back to Seafolk Village,” Mina patted the Mudsdale as it turned and began to walk, carrying its partner on the way back home, “and see them off myself. Though while the Kahuna is resting, it'll be on me to keep watch over Poni. Sorry but I won't be able to go with you.”

Lillie shook her head. “That's okay, thank you so much for all the help you've given us, Captain Mina, Kahuna Hapu.” A little chuckle came from the young girl atop the Draft Horse Pokemon's back.

“Please, Lillie, you can still call me Hapu. We're friends, remember?”

“I-” pausing for a moment while she wrestled with propriety, Lillie found her way to a smile and a nod. “Of course, Hapu! Thank you so much.” Hapu smiled again and worked her way up to mouthing the word 'friends'. Then was quickly lulled off to sleep again by the steady pace of the partner she’d ridden across Alola without end.

“We'll take her back home,” Mina spoke as she followed behind the Mudsdale with Moon and Lillie. “Just up the road from where we met is the farming community Hapu's family is part of. Her grandma will be so happy to see her.”

“I’m sure she'll be proud,” Lillie mused, the group ascending the spiralling pathway from the Ruins of Hope to the geyser filled Poni Breaker Coast. “To become a Kahuna so young, Hapu... she's amazing.”

“She is,” Mina nodded. “No-one else on Poni could make as good a Kahuna as her.”

Steadily the group moved on.

By the time the three, Mina, Moon, and Lillie, descended down to Seafolk Village, the sun was approaching the horizon, afternoon shifting to evening as the first flecks of purple bit at the orange
coloured sky from the east. They'd gone to the home of Hapu, handing her over to her grandmother, the woman overjoyed to tears to see her granddaughter had done as she'd desired. Had taken on the mantle of Koa, Hapu's grandfather and the woman's husband. He would be so, so proud.

The place Pheromosa had been buried was already cleared, Mina reporting that the task force helping around Alola were quick to collect pacified Ultra Beasts and take them into custody. Moon questioned that, feeling concern at the need to imprison the creatures, but the reminder that Pokeballs didn't appear to work, and that the Ultra Beasts attacked at full-force everything around them, stifled her complaint. They'd be taken from Alola to an isolated location where they could be kept apart from the world's populations. The only thing that could be done. For now.

Moon resolved to find a way to help all the Ultra Beasts once she had Poipole back.

From there it was back the way they had come, this time the trek downhill something able to be done on foot. Moon considered the Pokemon she had captured so far, those at the Poke Pelago. She might seek one out that would help her and Lillie traverse Poni Island better.

Once they were done with Exeggutor Island that might just be what she'd do.

Mina led them all the way down to Seafolk Village, out onto the wooden platforms strung between houseboats moored in place. It felt like there were even less here than there had been just earlier today. The chief, spotting the girls walking about again, approached quickly.

Then stopped as he saw Mina standing beside them.

“Mina,” he nodded to her, “that light before-”

“Our new Kahuna,” Mina gave a smile to the man, “Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island.”

For the first time Moon and Lillie saw a real smile on the face of the chief, who'd spent the past night and day deeply stressed as Seafolk Village began to break apart. Maybe... maybe having a Kahuna again would keep this place together. He clapped a hand on Mina's shoulder.

“You were right.”

Mina didn't go into the specifics of the reason she'd chosen to believe.

“Kahuna Hapu,” she shifted to indicate Moon and Lillie with her, “gave these two permission to go to Exeggutor Island. Chief, if I keep watch over Seafolk Village while you're out, would you...?”

“Well...” looking over the two girls the man shelved his doubts. To have the Captain vouch for them, and the Kahuna's permission... “Very well, I will take the two of you there. And bring you back to Seafolk Village when you are done. The S.S. Magikarp will depart shortly!”

Aboard the Magikarp-styled boat of red wood, Moon and Lillie waved to Mina standing on the docks they were leaving, the chief guiding the ship away from the village he loved. Mina would keep it safe. He'd be back soon. For now he set his eyes forward on the small island in the distance before him.

To Exeggutor Island they went.

Exeggutor Island is so named for its population: a colony of the Grass and Dragon-type Alolan
Exeggutor, the almost eleven meter tall Coconut Pokemon an iconic symbol of Alola. Yet a second colony dwelled on the island too, affecting it in equal and opposite measure to the more popular long-necked beings. Pelipper are a common sight around the world's coasts, alongside their pre-evolution Wingull, and so would never be considered too notable. Even in numbers like this.

Yet it is thanks to these numbers, alongside the number of Exeggutor, that the true danger of Exeggutor Island becomes real.

Vibrant light shines down upon Exeggutor Island, intensified by powers the Alolan Exeggutor command. Thanks to the intense light they grow at great pace, this location the first place the Alolan Variant was observed in all of Alola.

Fierce rainstorms lash Exeggutor Island, summoned by the Pelipper hordes calling together, shifting the weather to suit them best. Thanks to the heavy downpours Exeggutor Island is lush, its plant-life fed both light and water in enormous volume.

The problem, of course, is the moments these weather patterns cross over.

From rain to sun the water-soaked island becomes a bath of steam, visibility zero as the humidity sky-rockets to almost unbearable levels, any who stand upon the island immediately soaked in the sauna-like environment. From sun to rain the temperature plummets, chill water soaking you through, the sky growing black with storm-clouds overhead. After a while either weather balances, becoming tolerable, but the moment of change is so extreme as to pose a great danger to any caught within.

That was what the chief explained, again and again, to Moon and Lillie as he brought them across the waters to that island. Mind the weather. Don't be caught out by its changes. Seek shelter as soon as you sense something is wrong and never go too far from one shelter without identifying the next. The changes are unpredictable, the length of time each weather lasts variable to the extreme. There were some times the island remained baked by sun or pelted by rain for weeks.

There were others it could change back and forth by the minute for hours.

Much like Poni Island itself, Exeggutor Island had only one place a ship could dock, the rest of the island sheer cliff walls plummeting from plateau to sea. It was an immediate climb from the beach the S.S. Magikarp docked at, the Moon Flute kept within an altar protected from the weather's reach at the island's very peak.

The chief repeated himself once again. “I'll stay here but because of the weather changes, it's dangerous to remain docked. I'll keep the boat a ways out and watch for when you get back. Make sure to seek shelter as soon as you sense a change, and don't try to push through the weather thinking you can handle it. It's incredibly dangerous to be caught out in a change here. Promise me you'll be careful.”

Moon did, Lillie's focus on the island itself. Even at this late hour, the sun now mostly gone from sight, the island was still bright. Was this the power of the Alolan Exeggutor inhabiting it? It felt like a great wall of heat was before her. It was intimidating. But she'd push through. She'd promised that.

She'd promised she'd make this right.

Together she and Moon disembarked, watching as the chief pulled his ship away from the shore to keep it safely out in the waters beyond the island and its violent weather patterns. Now it was just the two of them.

Lillie began her climb upon the path before her.
Samson Oak would be pleased, Moon considered as the two made their way up the winding path to the plateau above. Now that Poni Island had a Kahuna again, he'd be able to come here and study the Exeggutor. They should watch out for the Exeggutor while they were here, to see if they could learn anything to tell him.

Lillie, who'd during the research expedition in the Ula'ula Rocklands shown the most interest of the three of them in Pokemon study, and had done her very best to impress Samson with her readings and deductions, didn't reply to Moon for so long Moon worried she hadn't heard her. When she tried to repeat herself Lillie spoke first.

“We need to focus on the Moon Flute.”

Lillie had been... focused, Moon noted. It wasn't that Moon wasn't; she very much wanted to find the way, to call the Legendary Pokemon, to get Poipole back. But even though she was giving it her best Lillie was... obsessed? She'd nearly lost it when the chief wouldn't let them cross to Exeggutor Island before. Was she... okay?

This time Lillie didn't reply even as Moon asked a second time.

“Alright,” she only spoke again once they were done with their climb, standing upon the lush verdant plains that stretched across Exeggutor Island plateau. Stars sparkled overhead, the night sky clear, the air cooling only slightly as the last of the sun's light vanished for the day. In the distance, towering over a forest of trees before them, another peak of the island rose higher still. That would be where the Moon Flute was. Lillie set off towards it.

Moon hurried after.

The next sign something was wrong was when Moon quickly pulled out a Pokeball, Shelgon manifesting from it and raising a barrier that pushed aside a giant foot nearly crashing down upon Lillie, the lumbering form of an Alolan Exeggutor – the first Moon had seen in person far less exciting for their situation than she'd have liked – pushing through the forest and nearly crushing an unnoticed Lillie underfoot. She'd been moving ahead without noticing, and frozen up as soon as she realised the danger she was in. Moon ran to her side and pulled her back, thanking and calling back her partner Shelgon as well.

Lillie was moving ahead too fast, it was dangerous. Lillie shook her head in response to Moon's complaint.

“Moon we need to hurry, we spent all of today just getting to Exeggutor Island, we need to get the Moon Flute so we can call the Legendary Pokemon.” Despite the clear adrenaline passing through her system Lillie dismissed the situation that had just occurred. “Let's go.”

She needed to wait! Moon grabbed and held onto Lillie's arm, stopping her from running off again. They needed to go slower so the Pokemon of the island wouldn’t just jump out at them! They couldn't just run ahead!

“We have to!” Lillie shook her head, pitch rising as Moon tried to stop her from setting things right. “We can do this, Moon. You and me, and your Pokemon, we'll push through!”

She wasn't just going to let Lillie put herself in danger to hurry this up!

Lillie pulled her arm free, turned, and marched ahead. The first drops from the clouds multiplying overhead splashed down upon the forest canopy unnoticed.

Lillie! Moon was chasing after her, Lillie breaking into a run through the forest of Exeggutor Island,
heading in the direction of the distant peak that held the solution to their problems. Droplets of rain were becoming rivulets, pouring down treetrunks and washing out across the ground, the canopy sagging under the water building up upon the leafy covering overhead. The air was quickly growing colder, Moon calling for Lillie louder. They needed to find shelter from the rain!

Lillie kept running. “We're fine under the trees!” She wasn't listening, too focused on moving ahead. They were approaching a sheer rock wall now, Lillie coming to a stop to look left and right, deciding on the way forward. Moon spotted an opening in the rock a little ways away.

Grabbed Lillie by the arm and dragged her towards it herself.

“Moon let go!” Despite struggling Lillie failed to free herself, Moon this time keeping her grip. The rain continued to fall, growing in strength moment by moment. Lillie still fought against Moon's hold. “Moon let me go! I need to go out there! I need to find the flute! I need to call the Legendary Pokemon! I need to fix this!” Moon kept hold of Lillie, keeping her inside the small cave they’d found. They'd wait out the rain. They'd stay safe here. That was what they'd do. Lillie shook her head. “We can't keep waiting!” She put her foot down, pulling her arm from Moon's grasp but not charging back out of the cave. “The longer we do the worse things will get! I need to hurry up and fix Nebby and bring Poipole back! I need to fix my mistakes!”

With a surging roar the rain outside intensified, its volume echoing over the island, the waves of water falling from the skies now beating down upon the land. Moon stared at Lillie, framed by the fading light coming in through the cave's entrance, the sky darkening to pitch-black in the rain-soaked night.

Lillie hadn't made any mistakes.

The plunging temperature failed to touch either as they stared at one another, the light so faint now they only existed in profile. A flash of lightning overhead, this storm one of intensity, illuminated both. Lillie's stare was wide. Moon's resolute.

She hadn't done anything wrong.

“I-” Lillie paused, struggling. She hadn't meant to say that. To express it. But... “Moon I- I'm the reason this-”

It wasn't her fault! Moon stomped down, the loud sound of her voice in the cave washing over Lillie. Lillie wasn't the one who did this! It wasn’t her who hurt Nebby! It wasn’t her who took Poipole! It wasn't her that called the Ultra Beasts! Why should she apologise for it? Why should she take responsibility? She was hurt too! So why did she have to suffer more?

Lillie grasped at her arms, skin cold. The warmth in the air was long gone. “Moon, I-” A hand settled on each of Lillie's shoulders. Moon was so close now, staring into her eyes even in this darkness. Another flash of lightning gave a moment's light to each. It wasn't her fault. Lillie shook. Fought, so hard, against the tears trying to well up.

But in the end gave in and let them flow as the rain fell behind them.

Moon stayed there, quietly, for her. Waiting, giving her this freedom to let her frustration flow free. From the moment it had happened Lillie had blamed herself. She hadn't kept proper care of Nebby. She hadn't convinced her mother. She hadn't stopped this from happening.

But it wasn't her fault.

When the tears stopped Lillie found herself shivering, the air so cold now as to be nothing like what
Exeggutor Island had been when they'd arrived. Moon took her by the hand, leading her further into the cave, both sitting down upon the dry earth within, side by side. Moon's shoulder and arm, pressed against hers, was cool too, but Lillie still felt warmth from it. Stayed silent as they remained there like that, for a moment longer.

They were still so cold.

With a flash of red in the darkness Decidueye emerged from Moon's bag, the Pokemon settling behind the two, wrapping its large wings around them, holding them tight together. In its feathered embrace they were warm. Lillie closed her eyes.

And spoke again.

“There was once...” as she spoke Moon beside her remained silent, letting Lillie express the feelings swirling within her, “that my mother danced with me. I was much younger then and it... it was raining, I'd gone out into it to... dance. Like in a movie we'd watched together. She came outside when she saw me and she... she smiled. And danced with me. The two of us in the rain like that. We were so cold when we came back inside but so happy as well. I slept by her side that night, and... remembered it every day since. She... she loved me, and my brother, I know she did. But then she changed. She became cruel, and twisted. And I don't think she ever loved again. I just... I wanted to believe there was some way we could go back, back to that time when things were better. When we were all together. But maybe... maybe that can't happen anymore. Maybe I... have to accept that time is over for good.”

In silence the two, wrapped in warm wings, stayed there for a moment longer.

Then Moon spoke too.

Her hat, the red one she loved to wear, had been bought for her in Johto. She'd visited the region with her parents, her mother and father together, and picked up the hat while they were shopping. They'd both laughed at her when she'd worn it, but she'd liked it. Liked the sound of them laughing together.

That was the last time she'd heard that sound.

Her mother had told her what had happened. Said that she and her husband had lost their love for one another, were going their separate ways. But it didn't make sense! Moon's father, he... she thought he loved her! But he never even said goodbye. Just one day didn't come back. Moon didn't understand. Her mother had told her, time and time again, that it wasn't because of Moon. It wasn't her fault. It still felt like it though. She hated that feeling.

Never wanted another to feel it.

Lillie was silent.

In the end, Moon raised her head, looking upwards into pitch darkness, the rainclouds so thick no light was left, the storm so heavy barely any sound could stand it, she couldn't go back. Not to how things were. But at least... coming to Alola she'd found a new place to be happy. New people she cared for.

New laughter she wanted to hear again and again.

Lillie stayed silent. The rain so loud but this moment so quiet. Wrapped in the warm wings of Decidueye, pressed up against Moon's side, she focused on what Moon had said. They couldn't go back.
But they could go forward together.

Time passed in darkness and silence, their only awareness the feeling of one another side by side. The smallest movements standing out, the faintest breaths heard clearly. So close.

A twitch of a hand. A moment's contact, fingers brushing together before pulling apart. Then stretching out again. Pressing against one another, slipping between one another, tightening their grip, holding on together.

Together as the night fell around them, and all was silent but for the sound of the pouring rain.

Chapter End Notes

"Taurus Drake Versant, did you write three hundred thousand words of Pokemon fanfic because you were THAT mad at how dirty USUM did Lillie's character arc?"

I mean... it wasn't the ONLY reason.

But no for real, the Sun/Moon Exeggutor Island scene is my favourite scene from that game and probably the entire pokemon series as a whole, so ultra sun/ultra moon straight up barring Lillie from Exeggutor Island, in addition to the huge nerfs it made to Lusamine's attitude while still keeping all the same damage she did, really rubbed me the wrong way. But that's okay because I'm in control now. Welcome to the Poni Island Arc, folks.

We're just getting started.

That said, I won't deny that ending scene has been something I've been wanting to get to since this fic first began.

As of the conclusion of the Ula'ula arc, I've stepped up advertising of this fic to try and bring more people towards it, and that's something I could really use all of your help with too! For anyone with a twitter or a tumblr, please consider sharing the two following posts:

https://twitter.com/TaurusVersant/status/999637533209321472
https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628/eldritch-a-pokemon-sunmoon-fanfic-by

I'll be extremely thankful for your assistance in helping Eldritch reach an even wider audience. Outside of that, if you have any friends you'd think would enjoy it, please consider recommending! I'd say that's another way to earn my undying appreciation, but honestly I feel that already for you all just because you're here and reading! You've all taken this journey with me to get to this point, and the wildest stuff is still ahead. An amount of what I'm doing can be guessed from the games.

Some of the stuff I have planned you won't believe.

That's it for this chapter, please consider leaving a comment with your thoughts! I will be back with the big four oh soon enough and folks

FOLKS
we're really here.
Shifting movement at her side stirred Moon from her sleep, hazy half-remembered dreams fading as her eyes opened to the light pouring in through the cave's entrance, the cave she and Lillie had spent the night wrapped in the wings of Moon's partner Decidueye. With a soft hoot and ruffling of her feathers the Arrow Quill Pokemon moved back, running a beak through wings and down to set right its appearance once more. Moon's vision focused on the sight of Lillie's back as the girl stepped out of the cave.

Moon rose to her feet and followed after.

"Moon, look."

The evening to night before had been cloaked in darkness, thick storm-clouds overhead casting shadows so deep and pressure so forceful it reminded Moon clearly of the Ultra Wormholes she'd witnessed, light vanishing from the world in those moments. In the night before the two had retreated to this cave to escape the pouring rain, been embraced by warm wings otherwise the chill might have done them real harm. That was the last thing Moon had seen before this moment.

That made the contrast so much more.

A clear blue sky above them, white clouds spread across the horizon, the ocean of Alola glittering under the sun's light. Small pools of water dotted the landscape of Exeggutor Island, but already they were fading as the heat of the day set in, quickly rising more and more liquid vapour into the sky. And from that vapour creating the sight the two stared at, side-by-side. The rainbow, stretching from horizon to horizon, of vibrant and intense colour. Moon stared at it in silence, thinking how she'd never before seen one as beautiful as this. Lillie, by her side, stared into it as well.

Then announced her intent.

"I've decided." She moved forward, turning as she did to stand before Moon, the rainbow overhead now framing her to Moon's sight. There was focus and determination to the blonde girl's face and Moon stared openly at the expression so much stronger than any Lillie had shown before. Her Z-Powered Form on full display.

"This isn't about me trying to take responsibility, or feel guilty. I'm not doing this because I feel that I have to. It's because it's what I want to do." She nodded her head, more to reassure herself than communicate anything through the act. "We'll save Nebby. We'll save Poipole. And I'm going to stop my mother from hurting anyone else. Herself included."

Moon took a step forward and offered Lillie her hand. If that was what she wanted to do, then she'd have Moon every step of the way. Together they'd make it happen. Because that was Alola, right? They'd look out for one another, no matter what.

Lillie giggled and put her hand in Moon's own.

"And we'll always extend a hand to those in need, right?"

Moon smiled back. Exactly.
Though the sun's light bore down heavy overhead, beneath the shaded coverings of its forest Exeggutor Island remained cool, the water turned to mist caught beneath the canopy above insulating the wooded paths. As Moon and Lillie walked together Decidueye flitted from branch to branch, plucking ripe fruits and berries from bountiful trees before delivering them to the two girls on the ground below. Soon enough this drew attention, the fruit they had smelling strongly enough for a tree to shift and bend, its massive three-headed peak topped by a wreath of green leaves peeking down at Moon and Lillie. Decidueye landed nearby and held out an arrow, a deep series of hoots a warning to do no harm.

Moon, with one of the Alolan Exeggutor's faces right up in her own, ran a hand along its cheek as she placed a fruit into its open maw, the Coconut Pokemon delightedly swallowing the gifted treat as Lillie, following Moon's example, offered a stem of berries Decidueye had brought her to the left-most head. Fed on two sides the exceptionally long-necked Pokemon made a pleased noise and rose back up, swaying its tall collection of heads from side to side as its main body happily stomped its feet on the ground.

Moon asked the Pokemon if it would help take her and Lillie to the island's peak.

Step by heavy step the Alolan Exeggutor followed the forest path, Moon and Lillie hanging on to its neck and laughing as Decidueye sat happily upon the Pokemon's head, watching the surroundings from this peak that rivalled the treetops. Compared to their own pace this was so much the faster even with the Pokemon's meandering, thanks to its large size and persistent movement. As they held on, delighted by the up-close experience with the iconic Alolan Pokemon, Lillie looked at Moon's wide smile and smiled at that too. Moon caught her looking and grinned wider, surprising Lillie with the strong expression. She slid halfway around the Exeggutor's neck, face momentarily out of Moon's sight.

It was easier to ask this way.

"Moon, I- even though I said that, are you okay with it? I know you... have no reason to care for my mother. It's hard to say I should myself, even though I still do. Saying I want to save her as well, that doesn't... upset you, does it?"

It didn't, Moon answered simply, remaining opposite Lillie so neither could see the other's face, but moving her hands along the Pokemon's neck to rest pressed against Lillie's own all the same. She definitely didn't like Lusamine, at all, but it was no choice between a happier Lillie and a worse-off Lusamine. If saving that person would make Lillie happy... Moon would do so without question.

For all the heat and humidity of this morning, Lillie still felt her face flush even harder to hear that from Moon. To know she cared so much was... overwhelming. Distracted as she was by that, she didn't notice the Exeggutor they were riding bending over until her legs left its side, suddenly hanging only by her grip on its neck as it stuck its heads into a deep pool of water. Moon, similarly caught off-guard by the sudden movement, began to slip down the creature's neck before her hands caught on Lillie's own, both holding on tight and yelling at the long-necked Pokemon to rise back up.

It didn't before they lost their grip and fell, one after the other, into the pool beneath.

When Moon broke the surface it took a moment to hear anything, between the rushing water around her thrashing form, the heartbeat in her ears, and her own complaining noises at the Pokemon that had forgotten she and Lillie were there. Aside from Lillie surfacing as well, what stood out most was a series of deep and very frustrated hoots from Decidueye, the Arrow Quill Pokemon jumping up
and down on the oblivious Alolan Exeggutor's head. The sight of Moon's partner throwing an absolute fit that the Coconut Pokemon was so thoroughly ignoring, combined with the ridiculousness of having just been unceremoniously dumped into this pool, set Moon off, Lillie looking at her in surprise as the girl struggled with a fit of hysterics in the water.

This was so silly!

Laughter being an infectious thing, soon Lillie was similarly clutching at her stomach and kicking against the water to get to the shore. Decidueye, the type to fuss about dishevelled appearances, descended from the Exeggutor to wave its wings over Moon and Lillie, doing little to offset the thorough soaking each had suffered. Another set of three heads, another Alolan Exeggutor having emerged from the forest to drink, hung over them, glowing warmly, Moon and Lillie greedily reaching up to the waves of heat radiating from the Pokemon, the ability that persisted in the native Exeggutor species of this island that allowed them to intensify the day's light so. Decidueye doubtfully eyed off this Exeggutor as well after the mess the last one had made.

In the end this particular Pokemon proved more responsible than the last, and after Moon and Lillie asked set a more focused path to the island's peak than the prior's half-aimless wandering. When its heads broke the canopy, beginning an upwards climb along the ascent to the highest plateau, Moon, Lillie, and Decidueye rose up with it, each gazing out over the lush island that surrounded them. Waves of green treetops, the ocean sparkling far beyond. It was a sight that could rival any of Alola's best, and one Moon and Lillie took happily as their own. This was a moment they were sharing, here on their journey together.

Each only wore smiles as their view expanded and the Exeggutor climbed higher still.

The highest point of Exeggutor Island was a flat peak, a smaller plateau with light foliage lacking tree coverage atop it. The most notable feature of all was a large cairn of stones, built overlooking the island's northern side. With a thrumming sound from each of its mouths the Exeggutor bent its neck down, Moon and Lillie this time prepared to let go. Each landed squarely on the ground, Decidueye dismounting the Pokemon's head with an elegant leap. Turning, Moon and Lillie moved forward, towards the stone structure, a framed opening built into it and something blue glinting just within. Lillie stopped beside it.

Moon reached forward and grabbed the metal instrument inside.

The Moon Flute was similar to the Sun Flute, blue instead of orange, a moon design attached to it instead of a sun. In overall shape however it was almost identical, immediately obvious as part of a pair with the flute in Lillie's bag. Moon ran a fistful of her shawl over the flute's mouthpiece before raising it to her lips, attempting to form a sound. A noise that was mostly just blown air emerged, Moon looking at the flute with a look of almost offence. Lillie giggled, drawing a swift look from Moon that crumpled under the girl's smile. Lillie patted her arm.

“We'll figure it out.”

Nodding, Moon placed the flute she'd gained into her own bag, its contents thankfully dry as any good Trainer going out into the world took a fully waterproofed pack. Now then...

“Yes,” Lillie nodded, “as Kahun- as Hapu said, we should take these flutes to the Altar of the Dawne. I have a rough idea of the way there, so first we should head back to Seafolk Village.” A moment's pause before Lillie raised a hand to her mouth. “Oh no! The seafolk village chief must be worried sick!”

Moon had forgotten he was waiting. It was the next morning, was he even still going to be there? To
that question Lillie shook her head, not knowing the answer, each racing to flag down the Alolan Exeggutor pacing around the island's peak. They needed to get to the southern point pronto!

They'd retrieved what they'd come here for.

The S.S. Magikarp bobbed in the waves just off the shore of Exeggutor Island, the solidly built and navy blue haired man that was chief of the seafolk immediately spinning the wheel of his ship to get it to land as he watched a giant Exeggutor descending the path, two young girls clinging on to its iconically long neck. What a way to travel! It wasn't like he hadn't had some doubts, even with the Kahuna's given permission. These were still two very young girls, and Exeggutor Island wasn't an easy terrain to handle. When the storm whipped up last night, one of the more intense the island endured, he'd outright panicked. But there was no way to get his boat to the shore in this weather, and no way to find wherever the girls might be on the island should he. He'd pulled back to Seafolk Village to wait out the night, then returned as soon as first light began the next morning.

He'd been just about ready to land anyway and go on foot, boat risk be darned, before the sight of the two girls riding the Alolan Exeggutor calmed his beating heart.

Maybe the one known as Moon really was all that and more.

"The two of you..." he bowed his head as they dismounted from the Exeggutor to approach the boat, Moon thanking the Pokemon for carrying her and Lillie, calling Decidueye back to its Pokeball, “I'm sorry. When the storm came up last night there was... nothing I could do. Seeing you're here and alright, I can't describe how thankful I am. I'm sorry, I really am.”

“It's alright,” Lillie shook her head, dismissing the man's worries. “Moon and I, we came here to do something and we did it. Thanks to your help we were able to. Thank you, chief. Thank you.”

Moon's thanks joining Lillie's own was a little too much for the chief, who found himself overwhelmed by the appreciation after feeling guilt, worry, and fear all the last night. He coughed and looked aside, shifting back to the wheel of his ship.

“Well then, hop aboard and let's head back! The S.S. Magikarp sails again!”

Once back on the wooden platforms of Seafolk Village, the first thing Moon and Lillie did was make their way to the Seafolk Village Pokemon Center, one of the closest to shore buildings of the community, built atop many platforms and poles extending down to the sea floor. Between the heat and humidity of Exeggutor Island, spending the night in the same clothes as the day, being dumped into a pool of water, and the exertion of wandering, the two were both very determined to clean and change, then get some proper food. The fruits gathered helped, but they hadn't eaten the night before and hadn't had a proper meal since yesterday morning. Each was ravenous, and fully intended to do something about it.

Thankfully a Pokemon Center was always able to provide.

Places for cleaning selves and clothes, places for changing, facilities for travellers to stop at and refresh. Once feeling clean again Lillie and Moon ordered food from the Pokemon Center Cafe, sharing the breakfast that would carry them on for the day. Lillie stocked up on some travelling food for their journey through the Vast Poni Canyon, while Moon took a moment with the Pokemon
Storage System. Without any Ride Pokemon on Poni Island, Moon and Lillie would need to find their own way. She scrolled through Rotom-dex, considering the Pokemon she'd captured. Trading out one of her active team members, who held strength far above most staying at the Poke Pelago, was concerning, but going on foot would do nothing for them and none of Moon's active team were fit for long distance travel carrying the two.

Eventually she settled on retrieving a Tauros, caught under Captain Mallow's watchful eye during Moon's journey from Paniola Town, the Pokemon's species a tried and tested journeyer of Alola. Moon didn't have ride equipment for it, but even without it would be fine, right? Moon added the Great Ball to her bag and silently apologised to the one sent back for the twofold reason she'd done so. Firstly because Moon had needed a space to add Tauros to her team. Secondly because, after facing Lusamine, it felt off to use a Milotic in Lillie's presence.

“Moon, are you ready to go?”

Moon nodded in response to Lillie's question, setting to follow after her out of the sparsely populated Pokemon Center. With Seafolk Village beginning to drift apart under the Ultra Beast threat, even less boats here today than the night before, the Pokemon Center was almost completely empty. As Moon moved to exit an older man seated near a window, one of the few still inside, waved her down.

“Ah young miss, before you go!” He had a smile that crinkled the lines of age across his face, creating a deeply pronounced expression. “While you're here, would you be interested in hearing a tale? It's of the legendary technique Dragon Ascent, an ability that can only be used by the most powerful of Dragons!”

Moon paused for a moment, the concept of the tale intriguing, before glancing back to Lillie by the door. She shook her head, apologising. She had somewhere she needed to go. With a sigh the man sat back down in his seat, watching the two girls leave. Ah young ones, always in such a hurry these days.

At least that nice young man in the red had been willing to hear him out.

Riding atop the Tauros of Moon was far slower than a Ride Tauros, the combination of the Pokemon not being used to carrying people and the lack of a harness making for a much less comfortable ride. Nevertheless the Wild Bull Pokemon took on the weight of Moon and Lillie without complaint, and with steady steps made the ascent from Seafolk Village to the higher reaches they'd travelled the day before. All the way to the crossroads where Tapu Fini and the Ultra Beast had fought, where Hapu had been made Kahuna by taking on the weight of the Island Deity's power. Where the southern path would lead to the Poni Breaker Coast and the Ruins of Hope, the eastern through the Poni Grove to wide open plains, the western back down to Seafolk Village, and the northern...

The northern path past the farming community Hapu was part of and into the Vast Poni Canyon, beyond which the Altar of the Dawne lay waiting. The place Lillie and Moon, believing fully it would be so, would call the Legendary Pokemon back to Alola to heal Nebby of its current state, pursue Lusamine through the Ultra Wormhole, retrieve her along with Poipole, and then expel the Ultra Beasts from Alola.

Turning the Tauros Moon guided the Pokemon northwards, Lillie behind her holding on to Moon's waist. Moon had kept the Pokemon's pace slow and steady, both for a less bumpy ride and due to the lack of safety equipment they had. Somewhere along the way Lillie had wondered whether they
could have asked at the Pokemon Center or one of the houseboats of Seafolk Village if they had any gear, a question Moon realised she'd never considered and hung her head in shame for not having done so. Lillie did her best to reassure Moon that it wasn't her fault, but the longer travel time still weighed heavy on Moon's mind.

Given the steep path upwards though, harnesses and helmets wouldn't have made that much of a difference in speed. A steady ascent was best for this journey.

By the time they reached the farming community the Tauros was panting heavily enough for Moon to announce she was going to check in with the buildings there for water. Luckily an open trough set by the side of the road, which a Mudbray was presently sipping from, drew Moon's eyes and she guided her Pokemon towards it, the smaller Donkey Pokemon shifting aside to allow the Tauros room to drink but not shying away from it at all. Moon smiled as she dismounted from her Pokemon, running a hand along its side and thanking it for helping her and Lillie get this far. The skin beneath its light brown fur was very warm, no doubt helped by the beaming sun over Poni Island that day. Moon called the Pokemon back when it was done drinking.

They'd go on foot for the moment.

“It's quiet here too.” Looking around, Lillie made the observation. There were a few buildings along the path, with small gardens winding between them, but no-one outside today. Yesterday they'd come here with Mina and Hapu, delivering the newly-made Kahuna to her grandmother's house, but when Lillie approached and knocked on that door there was no response, the windows closed and blinds drawn behind them. Maybe Hapu had pushed her grandmother to leave the area for the moment? The way Seafolk Village was disbanding, the way this community was empty now, it felt surreal in a scary way.

Like it was the end of the world.

“Moon,” Lillie received a nod from Moon in answer, the girl moving to stand by her as soon as she said her name, “let's keep moving on.” With all Moon's Pokemon stored away she and Lillie continued on foot along the path, great stone walls rising before them, an opening hewn through the rock waiting to welcome all travellers to the Vast Poni Canyon's embrace.

But first someone was in the way.

“Hey!” A teen girl dressed in Team Skull regalia, black tank-top, cut-off white shorts, black wristbands and socks, with a bandanna over her mouth, white skull-design beanie on her head, and silver Team Skull pendant around her neck, pointed viciously at Moon and Lillie's approach, tilting her pink-haired head slightly. “They're here!” This announcement drew other Team Skull members out from the surroundings, a total of five more appearing to form a line across the road.

Lillie huffed.

“You Team Skull, what are you doing here?”

Moon stepped past Lillie and told Riley to get out of the way.

“Nuh-uh no way!” Riley held up her arms forming a cross, rejecting the idea. “Not until you tell us what you did with the boss! You lot all ran off after him at Aether then he's gone and monsters are coming out of the sky, what's the deal with that huh?”

Guzma disappearing was his own fault for throwing in with the Aether President came Moon's sharp reply, staring Riley down coldly. It didn't have anything to do with Moon or Lillie. Back off.
“Yeah?” Riley seemed unimpressed by Moon's cool tone. “Then what's the two of you doing here? Seems like you've got something in mind, yeah? If the Aether President's gone you'd be looking for her right?” Riley's glance past Moon, aimed at Lillie, received an obvious answer by Lillie's lack of objection. The Team Skull Grunt's eyes flicked back to Moon. “You're gonna tell us how you're going after the prez so we can go get our boss back, aight?”

Moon didn't owe Riley anything. After she lied and tricked her at Po Town, used her to lure Kahili and Acerola, let Lillie and Nebby be kidnapped, this entire mess started with Riley. If anyone was to blame for Guzma being gone, it was her.

Riley didn't like hearing that one bit.

“Aight okay that's it!” Pulling a Nest Ball from a pocket she held it out before her. “If you're serving attitude I'm serving a beating, you're getting it and telling me where the boss is at yo!”

Moon outright laughed. Was Riley serious? She wasn't going to win. This fight would just be a waste of time and Moon was in a hurry. She'd say it again. Move. Riley activated the green-topped Nest Ball and unleashed a Pinsir of her own to face Moon down.

“Yo shelve the attitude!” She put her foot down as her Stag Beetle Pokemon menaced forward. “Just cause you've got it all don't mean you gotta look down on us! I'm standing up for what I've gotta do and I ain't taking no disrespect, got it?”

A flash of red manifested into Moon's Larvesta, the white and red Premier Ball matching the Pokemon's white furred covering and red horns. All Riley was taking right now was time. Moon and Lillie had somewhere to be. A snarl that couldn't be seen but clearly felt worked its way across Riley's face.

“Yo I'm seriously going all out!”

The other Team Skull members behind her, Moon recognising one as the larger brown-haired boy who'd been with Riley at Brooklet Hill, set to cheering for her, their classic Team Skull dance supporting their strongest buddy's fight. Riley snapped her fingers and pointed forward again.

“Alright Pinsir show her what we've got!”

From the bright flare of flames around Larvesta the opposing Pinsir did not shy, diving in and around the first forward surge Moon commanded, a heavy kick from the Stag Beetle Pokemon lifting Larvesta for a moment before a downwards chop pinned it to the ground. Moon focused on a swirl of fire around Larvesta, the Pinsir diving back from it, and unsubtly set her Firium-Z into her Z-Ring. Riley, watching her do so, scoffed and kept up the pressure, her Pokemon far faster than Moon's, pursuing even as Larvesta used bursts of fire to jet around the path they fought on.

Somewhere along the line, Moon waiting for a point to use a Z-Move and end this, she realised Riley was keeping the pressure so intently she didn't have the chance. The Pinsir was scoring hits, and while the licking flames from Larvesta were touching it, the Pokemon always pulled back before a stronger wave could reach it. It was... actually a pretty impressive Pokemon, and the battle far more even than Moon had expected.

The Fourth Precept again. She was considering herself above others. Moon shook her head, frustrated by herself. Looked up with clear eyes at Riley.

Apologised for thinking she'd be an easy fight.

“I- wha-,” Riley stumbled on her words, surprised by the genuine expression Moon had just made.
“What's with you we're in a fight right now! Don't just go complimenting the enemy! I'm really trying my best to beat you so act like it!”

She was, Moon smiled, ordering Larvesta to shoot flames beneath it, rocketing into the air in a jet of fire. This was a good battle and Riley a good opponent. Moon might still be mad at her for before, but that and this were different things. She'd still respect her.

Riley struggled entirely with what the heck Moon was trying to say.

“Hey don't think you're gonna distract me! Pinsir gettem!”

Brighter flames wreathed around Larvesta, the Pokemon charging up a great downwards surge of power. Pinsir, launching up at it, clenched its fists intending to pummel through.

A blur of purple slammed down past Larvesta, and Pinsir, sending both Pokemon toppling back to the ground below. Moon's eyes widened in shock, trying to catch a look at the Pokemon racing past her, turning with it to see the two figures standing down the path. One was Hapu before her Mudsdale, staring with hands on her hips at the pack of Team Skull thugs harassing her friends before her.

The other, striding forward with a displeased expression, the Crobat she'd unleashed slowing down as it reached her side, clicked her tongue.

“Knock it off already,” Plumeria, Big Sis and Admin of Team Skull, frowned at the pack before her. “You're not helping.”

“B- Big Sis!” Riley was immediately at attention as the older woman, sharing Riley's shade of pink hair though two of the four tails she'd styled from her own were coloured yellow, paced towards her. “T- these two know where the boss is! How to find him! They've gotta tell us, yo!”

“Yeah I've heard,” Plumeria didn't raise her voice or look away from Riley even as she passed Moon and Lillie by. “But what they're doing's not something we can. All this is you dummies getting in the way. What are you even doing out here? You know Alola's falling to pieces right now right? You're gonna let the place get so wrecked while the boss is out there's nothing left for him to come back and smash? Seriously, cut this out. We've got better places to be.”

“I-” Riley let the protest hang, limply calling her Pinsir back. Moon used Larvesta's Premier Ball to retrieve the Torch Pokemon herself, the battle not yet having become intense enough for either Pokemon to be truly hurt by it. “What do we do?”

“Head back to the crossroads, I'll meet you there,” Plumeria stepped to the side, waving an arm for the pack of six Team Skull members to head in the direction she'd indicated. “And stop running off on your own, the Kahuna had to call me out here to come pick you guys up.” Moon turned and looked back at Hapu, who was staying where she was, watching the Team Skull members making their way past her with cool eyes. Her dumb little siblings dispatched, Plumeria turned to Moon and Lillie.

“Alright,” she shook her head, “I've got some things to say so hear me out. I know you don't owe me anything, but I'd really appreciate it if you listened, okay?”

Slowly Moon and Lillie nodded, each somewhat unnerved by Plumeria due to their past experiences with her. As if sensing that, Plumeria sighed.

“Look, I've done the both of you wrong before. You've got no reason to forgive me so I'm not gonna hold my breath for that. But... if you are going to go get the president, could you... bring back
Guzma too? He means a lot to us. I don't wanna see him gone out there.

Moon's eyes lingered on the Crobat flapping around Plumeria, the speedy purple Pokemon one she'd briefly mistaken for another. She knew a bit about it: it was a Pokemon that only evolved with great care and affection from its partner. It said a lot that Plumeria had one with her. When she looked back at Plumeria the Team Skull Admin's yellow eyes were staring at Moon's face.

Then she sighed again.

“Listen, I know we've done you dirty, and Riley... what happened at Po Town was me and Guzma's idea, not hers. She was just doing what we told her to. I know I was too when it came to taking Lillie here to Aether but... go easy on Riley. She's been through a lot. It's our responsibility, not hers.”

Moon said nothing in response. Lillie spoke next. “You're... asking us to bring back Guzma from the Ultra Wormhole?”

There was a moment of silence before Plumeria nodded. “…yeah. Guzma, he... the president's the first adult to reach out and help him since... in a long time. It meant a lot to him, more than you can understand. He said he'd follow her all the way. But this is... it was a mistake. He didn't want to leave Alola, not like that. And we still need him. He's... he's important. To a lot of people.”

Lillie shook her head. “My mother... she doesn't know how to care about people anymore. She just uses everyone around her to try and achieve her goals. Mr. Guzma... he's just a tool to her too.”

A long moment lingered as Plumeria processed the sort of feelings someone's daughter had to have to say that about their own mother. She breathed out deeply after. “Yeah, well, we're not the same girl I met on Akala. You've changed so fast it's... well, you remind me of someone else now. It's honestly hard to deal with.” She looked away. “But thank you. And here. It's not a full apology but... take it and go get that little purple friend of yours back. Use this to reach out to them. It'll help you go even further together, without a doubt.”

In Plumeria's hand was a crystal, a rhombus-shaped purple gem marked with a black circle and cross. Moon looked up at Plumeria as the older woman pushed the Z-Crystal towards her.

“Take it. It's a Poisonium-Z. You can feel Z-Poses in the moment, right? I'm not gonna do the pose for you, you'll figure it out.”

Slowly Moon placed her hand upon Plumeria's own, fingers curling around the Z-Crystal and lifting it from her grasp. Plumeria lowered her arm after Moon stepped back.

“Alright, I'm going to go get to corralling my cute and dumb little siblings. They may not be as
strong as you Island Challenge Trainers, but they can still lend a hand and we can hold back the tide. So get going, and bring back the boss, alright? We're counting on you.”

“We will,” Lillie nodded, joining Moon's determination. “We're going to set things right! Please believe in us!”

Plumeria laughed. These were two kids, but the way they were going, she knew they'd be doing something no-one else could. So all she could do was trust in them. Every time she couldn't make things better someone else took the lead. First Guzma after Tapu Village. Then these two after all of this. But whatever, she knew what she had to do. She had to be part of those keeping Alola together until things were set right.

Even after everything that had happened, a Kahuna's daughter still had to do that much, right?

As Plumeria departed Hapu moved forward, approaching Moon and Lillie with Mudsdale following behind. Compared to yesterday when they'd parted ways, now the Kahuna was alert and focused. Hapu gave a nod to the two girls before her.

“I heard some of Team Skull were running around Poni – so called up Plumeria to come fetch them. It was Captain Acerola who told me I could do that, but I have to admit I'm still surprised she came through.”

“Maybe,” Lillie watched Plumeria's departure, going to rally the rest of Team Skull in Alola's defense, “Team Skull aren't all as bad as we were led to believe.” Moon and Hapu turned to watch down the path as well. Hapu made a thoughtful noise.

“Maybe so.”

Then turned to face Moon and Lillie properly.

“Moon, Lillie, you have the Moon Flute now?” Lillie nodded, Moon opening her bag to reveal it, Lillie quickly retrieving the Sun Flute to show the pair side by side. Hapu stared at the two artefacts of Alola gathered together. A sight rarely seen indeed. She nodded. “Very well, the next thing to do is to take them to the Altar of the Dawne, at the far end of the Vast Poni Canyon. In truth I'd love nothing more than to escort you all the way there myself, but I need to remain close to the settlements of Poni Island so that Tapu Fini and I might defend them against any Ultra Beasts that appear.”

“We understand,” Lillie returned the Sun Flute to her bag, Moon doing the same with the Moon Flute she carried. “You've already helped us so much, Hapu. Thank you so much.”

“That's friendship, Lillie,” Hapu smiled, “and it's Alola too. We're all doing our part, so don't worry about saying thank you – we'll be there for one another either way, alright?”

Lillie nodded emphatically. “Right!”

“Alright then,” Hapu turned and began to walk the path north, Mudsdale with her, the Kahuna waving a hand for Moon and Lillie to follow behind, “I can at least see you to the entrance. And prepare you for what's ahead. The Vast Poni Canyon is one of the most challenging locations of Alola to traverse – even for you, Moon: it's not going to be easy. But the way the Ultra Beasts have been affecting Alola, maybe now's the best chance you'll have. A lot of local Pokemon have gone into hiding. It might be that even those of the canyon are keeping out of the way.”

Moon raised her head as the group passed under the arch of stone that marked the entrance to the Vast Poni Canyon. A distant sound she wasn't even sure she heard rang through to her ears. What was that? Hapu sighed. “That's the other part of the problem. Even if most wild Pokemon have gone
to ground, the Totem of Vast Poni Canyon is still going to be there.”

Another sound, clearer this time. A loud and ringing clang, like a bell being struck with great force, echoed through the rock structures of the canyon.

“Yes,” Hapu nodded, “a Totem lives within the canyon. It is not bound to any Trial or Captain, instead an ancient Pokemon that lives by its own law alone. It is... incredibly strong, likely the most powerful Pokemon in Alola after the Tapu themselves. Perhaps a few of our greatest Trainer’s strongest Pokemon are equal to it, but hardly many. It does not permit anyone to pass through the canyon without its express approval.”

Would it... challenge them? Moon listened to the echoing clanging sounds. It was evoking a memory, a battle she’d had only a week before. It felt like so much longer. Calling on Rotom-dex, Moon asked the question. What was the evolution of the Dragon Pokemon Ryuki had fought her with called again? The living Pokedex surged to life.

“Kommo-o, zzt, evolution of Hakamo-o! The Scaly Pokemon, Dragon and Fighting type! A Pokemon known for using its large scales for both offence, defense, and intimidation, zzt!”

“Yes,” Hapu nodded, surprised by the speed at which Moon had identified the Pokemon ahead, “it is a Totem Kommo-o that lurks within the Vast Poni Canyon. Moon, you will likely need to prove yourself to it to pass. However if you do not approach the Z-Crystal it guards within the canyon, it will not demand as much of you. If you are lucky, it may even be engaged with an Ultra Beast,” another ringing clanging noise, “as it sounds like now. For the moment, while Kahuna and Tapu keep the settlements of Alola safe, we are leaving the wilderness to the Pokemon living within. Of anywhere in Alola, the Vast Poni Canyon is perhaps the safest place to be from the Ultra Beasts. The Totem will never permit them to run wild. I hope you are able to make it through as easily as can be.”

Moon nodded. She understood. Thanked Hapu as well, for telling them this, for coming this far with them. But now she needed to go back and keep Seafolk Village safe. Hapu smiled at that. Moon’s care for Alola was as pure and genuine as it came. The small Kahuna nodded.

“Very well, I will see the two of you again soon enough. The Altar of the Dawne awaits you. I can only hope to hear the sound of the Sun and Moon Flutes on the wind.”

Waving Hapu off, Lillie and Moon turned back to the path ahead, Moon activating a Great Ball to unleash Tauros once more. The Wild Bull Pokemon snorted and stamped at the ground, but seemed willing to bear Moon and Lillie on. Forward then, into the Vast Poni Canyon's embrace.

Following the path to the altar's await.

A twisting maze of passages hewn through solid stone, stretching out over chasms as bridges of rock here and wood there, the Vast Poni Canyon was an environment where every step forward was one earned. Wild Pokemon challenged travellers readily, the landscape required keen observance of the best way to progress, and the song of Alola was as loud as could be. Lillie tilted her head, as the Tauros she and Moon rode reliably continued on, studying a stone statue erected along the path. The symbol on it, it reminded her of the one she'd seen at the Lake of the Duske. Similar but different.

The symbol of the Dawne.

The Lake of the Duske... Nebby had tried to tell Lillie something then. Struggled against her grip,
cried out for understanding, used power that had left it sleeping for the rest of the day. If that had not been, if it had not exhausted itself doing so... would the Nebby of now be better? Would her mother's actions have pushed it so far that it turned into this silent inanimate form she carried in her bag? Was her failure then the reason for Nebby's situation now?

Lillie and Moon jolted, the Tauros they were riding pulling back from a sheet of uneven rock ahead. Moon pointed out another path with smoother ground, the Pokemon they were riding heading that way as Moon looked back to Lillie. Was she alright?

Lillie nodded. Yes. Because Moon had told her this wasn't her fault. Whatever had happened, it was her mother's actions and decisions that had caused this all to occur. She wouldn't beat herself up for things beyond her control any further.

But she did wish she could have understood Nebby better than she had.

Wild Pokemon lurked about the Vast Poni Canyon – Rotom-dex floating alongside the Tauros pointing out circling Skarmory overhead when the sky was visible, or flocks of Zubat and Golbat nesting within the caves. Resting Roggenrola and Boldore, fleeing Carbink with Sableye in pursuit, Lycanroc staring down from tall hills and Machop and Machoke pummelling boulders to hone their own strength, this place was alive in the way Moon had seen so many times travelling Alola. From the western side of Melemele, the path from Hau'oli to Verdant Cavern. From the woods of Akala, Brooklet Hill, Wela Volcano, and Lush Jungle. The slopes of Hokulani and Rocklands of Ula'ula. And so many more places beside. All of Alola was alive with life and Moon found herself thrilled every time to behold it. She resolved to return to the Vast Poni Canyon, with Hau and Lillie both, when this was done so they could enjoy it properly together. Yes, that would be good.

She'd enjoy that very much indeed.

Jace had taken her Ride Pager. Said it was designed to track Moon, an unwanted addition from the Aether Branch Chief Faba. Moon had only ever used the device to access the Ride Charizard it was tied to, to travel to and from the Poke Pelago. It had been a while now since she'd last been back, and she found herself wondering how Mohn and her Pokemon were doing. Hoped that the Ultra Beasts emerging across Alola would not appear there.

She kept her eyes forward as Tauros continued on.

None of Moon's Pokemon were grown enough to carry her, let alone her and Lillie, on their backs in flight. While those staying at the Poke Pelago did continue to grow, it wasn't comparable to the way those with her had. Moon wondered whether she could have convinced the Ride Charizard to carry her somewhere else, whether with it she and Lillie could have flown over the Vast Poni Canyon to the waiting Altar of the Dawne. It would have made things so much easier.

But that wasn't something she could do anything about right now. She and Lillie would just continue on, and they'd make it to the Altar of the Dawne as they'd intended. Play the flutes and call the Legendary Pokemon. From there... everything would work out. She was sure of it.

Moon directed the Tauros on as it ascended a curving path along a stone wall, higher and higher. Around the path they went, distant clanging noises sounding again and again. The Totem must be busy. Moon hoped she would not have to battle it.

She felt that it would be more than she was ready to face.

“Moon!”
Lillie’s cry shifted Moon’s attention down, into the wide stone basin they were circling around. At its centre a pool of water glowed with rainbow light, aurora dancing over it. It was a beautiful sight, but Moon felt a tug on her mind, a pressure she’d grown to recognise, that told her what it really was.

Told her an Ultra Wormhole was opening before them.

Flashes of light grew brighter and brighter in the basin far below them, Moon instructing Tauros to speed up and carry them further up the winding pathway that would take them beyond this place. Whatever was coming through, she didn’t want to deal with it, placing a hand over Lillie’s wrapped around her waist to make sure they both held on. While Moon focused forward, Lillie turned and looked back at the being that manifested behind them.

A new Ultra Beast come to Alola.

It was huge towering a wide green base wrapped in elegant designed metal-like sheets tapering upwards to a single silver point an almost shroud of the same material hanging from just below its peak to wide base two great towers that reminded Lillie of cut bamboo beside the creature implanted in the ground its entire form resting silently in the basin behind them not moving at all.

Completely still and silent.

Lillie called for Rotom-dex, who was keeping pace with the hastily trotting Tauros, to identify it while Moon kept her eyes and focus forward. The floating Pokedex faced the Ultra Beast behind them, flicks of red aura beginning to emerge from its green metal body, and scanned the archives that Chief Anabel and Looker had provided.

“Zzt, Ultra Beast unknown! Beginning recording of information for the UB Catalogue!”

Unknown... Moon frowned while not looking back, guiding Tauros further onward, through a cave opening on the path ahead. Ultra Beasts that the Aether Foundation had never detected, and Anabel and Looker’s team had never seen, how many could be appearing in Alola right now? Slowing the pace of Tauros down, she reached up and called Rotom-dex back to her. Flicked through the few pictures it had taken, Lillie still watching back through the entrance of the cave.

It had been so silent...

In a flash of light burning white filled the basin behind them, a wave of roaring hot wind rushing in through the cave entrance causing the Tauros to rear up at the sudden heat and force, Moon and Lillie both pushing themselves down upon the Pokémon’s back to escape the heat, sound, wind and light that washed over them. Rotom-dex, clutched in Moon’s hand, turned its camera to face the exit and record what it could of the intensity outside.

Of the actions of this Ultra Beast.

It was over so quickly, the air cooling, the wind stopping, the sound and light fading away, but the signs of its effects were everywhere. Steam filled the basin behind them, a shimmer of heat haze over it all. Tauros pawed the ground unsettled, its nerves shot after the sudden assault. Lillie, fumbling with her bag, pulled out her sunblock and quickly began applying it to her face, calling for Moon to turn to her so she might see to her as well.

That much heat... her sunblock had moisturiser. They needed to treat themselves to prevent burns. Moon stayed silent as Lillie ran her hands over her face, working the cream into her skin. When Lillie turned to their arms, Moon asked Rotom-dex what it had seen. The Rotom-inhabited device saluted and replayed the video it had taken frame-by-frame.
“Zzt! The unknown Ultra Beast ascended using rocket propulsion! It likely contains some form of fuel whether liquid or gas that it burns for flight, zzt!”

“A rocket...” Lillie mused, rubbing her hands up and down Moon’s arms to spread the moisturising cream further, “if we had been any closer...”

Moon raised a hand, running her thumb over Lillie's forehead, rubbing some more of the sunblock in. They were okay. They'd gotten away, and Lillie was making sure they weren't hurt. Teamwork. Lillie nodded, though still struggled with the thought of the incredible danger the creature had posed. Was... was the place her mother had gone filled with creatures like that? Was it even possible her mother was still...

The feeling of Moon's hand squeezing her own brought Lillie back, her eyes meeting Moon's, the two face to face. Moon squeezed her hand tighter. They'd be okay. This time when Lillie nodded she kept her focus. Shifted so Moon could turn back forwards on the Tauros, to keep them heading further through the tunnels and pathways of the Vast Poni Canyon. They'd be okay, they just needed to keep moving forward.

The Altar of the Dawne lay not far ahead.

The clanging sounds of the Totem Pokemon of the Vast Poni Canyon continued even past this moment, growing louder and louder the further into the canyon Moon and Lillie went. Shattered rock, impacts in cave walls, torn trees and carved earth, signs of a struggle were all about them. Since the Ultra Beast's appearance they had not seen another wild Pokemon, but the echoing sound of the Totem remained always with them. Whatever it had found to fight, it was a challenge indeed.

But then, it was clearly not being beaten either.

The travel through the canyon had taken hours, the sounds of the Totem their only companion beside one another. Lillie checked her and Moon's skin often, ensuring the hot wind from the Ultra Beast's ascent had not burned them, and sighed relief each time she did. They'd gotten far enough away, and she'd treated herself and Moon properly fast enough, to avoid being truly hurt. She was thankful for that, deeply.

Overcoming such a trial, going forwards despite it, it was more than she'd ever believed she could do. But even now her eyes were set further forward. There was somewhere she needed to go.

And the challenges along the way she, and Moon, wouldn't let stop them.

Such was their power together.

Moon pulled Tauros to a halt.

Trial Gates before her, the wooden structures she'd seen so many times. Framing Verdant Cavern's entrance. The same of Brooklet Hill and Lush Jungle. High atop Wela Volcano. Deep within the Hokulani Observatory. And bordering the path of Tapu Village you walked to announce yourself to those within. There was one more Trial of her Island Challenge to take, and Moon wondered now whether in the future this would be it. She didn't know what Captain Mina intended to task her with, but if these gates were here, then here was a Trial, wasn't there?

Dismounting from Tauros, helping Lillie down, Moon called the Pokemon back to her. It seemed happy for the break. From here... they should go on foot, that was what Moon felt was best. Lillie,
trusting in her, nodded.

“Lead the way, Moon.”

Just stepping through the gates there was a feeling, an intensity to the air that was unlike the sense of forming Ultra Wormholes. Fighting spirit, raw combativeness, the feeling Moon had only experienced deep in the greatest of the Pokemon battles she'd fought. Feeling it outside of that was... strange. It was overwhelming. She wondered if this was what Lillie had felt when watching her battle Kahuna Olivia before.

Slowly the two moved forward.

“Hapu said there was a Totem Pokemon.” Lillie was looking about, the path they were on leading between high rising rock walls. The clanging was close by, loud enough that each time it sounded out Moon paused. She really didn't want to meet the Totem here. Neither did Lillie.

Still the two went on.

She'd only seen one such as this before. Hala, Olivia, and Nanu had given her Z-Crystals directly. As had Lana, Kiawe, and Mallow. Sophocles, Molayne, and Holei as well. Kahili had retrieved one from a pedestal beyond Moon's sight, and the one Hau had found a Psychium-Z atop had been half-buried in sand. The Bug and Poison Z-Crystals Moon had taken and been given respectively.

Only in Verdant Cavern had Moon seen a pedestal holding a Z-Crystal, the Normalium-Z guarded by a Totem Gumshoos, that battle never taking place. Tapu Koko had interfered for its own amusement.

But still Moon recognised it in a glance. Still she knew, looking at the pillar of stone before her, seeing a deep blue-green crystal glinting within, that this was the Z-Crystal the Totem Kommo-o was guarding. The Totem was part Dragon-type.

That was the Dragonium-Z.

Pitaya had shown her it. Taught Moon the Z-Move, its pose and use. Devastating Drake, that was the name the Guildmaster had used. What she'd said then, it was that on Moon's journey she would eventually be tested for her worthiness to use that Z-Move. That the time would come to her when it was deemed necessary. To claim that crystal she...

Moon shook her head. If she touched it the Totem would demand she prove herself, and the strength she would need to give would exhaust her team. If the Legendary Pokemon were going to show Moon and Lillie the way through the Ultra Wormhole, Moon needed her partners for that moment. Not for this. She glanced away from the crystal, motioning for Lillie to follow her forward as she stepped around the pillar entirely.

It was silent, all sound gone from the air.

Then there was a roar of noise, a voice echoing over shattering stone and a storm of dust washing into the valley through which Moon walked, the girl raising her red dragon shawl to cover her mouth and eyes, Lillie clutching on behind her keeping her face buried against Moon's back. Framed by the clouds of dust a red eye glowed from within, a giant draconian form illuminated by its own Z-Aura. The Totem Kommo-o, a truly gigantic bipedal dragon of grey leather skin, red and gold scales covering head, neck, and tail, chains of the same scales hanging over its arms and waist, stood over Moon, staring her down.

None crossed the valley without its judgement falling upon them. It stood there, an ominous force
menacing over its next challenger.

Then was forced to defend itself against its first.

Swirling through the dust a whirling storm of blades chased after the Kommo-o, emerging from the cracked rock walls to strike against its heavy scales, again, again, again, each hit causing the clanging noise Moon and Lillie had been hearing since their journey into the Vast Poni Canyon began. The Pokemon battling the Totem fell back to the ground, crescent-tail slapping the earth behind it, blue scaled body accented by red along mouth, chest, and the blades forming its arms, white spikes lining its body. It roared up at the far taller Totem, their battle not yet done, and launched itself upwards again.

Rainbow Key Stone in his grip shining brightly, Ryuki Oda emerged from the dust as well, focusing on the fight before him. Sending his partner all the strength that he could.

The sight of Moon and Lillie standing there still caught him quite by surprise.

“Okay,” his wide-eyed expression was the first time Moon had ever seen him truly shocked, “I didn't see that coming, you got me.”

With a mighty roar the Totem Kommo-o sent the dust filling the canyon racing down along it, Ryuki raising an arm to block it from his face. Honestly, rude.

“I'm saying hello to someone, have some manners!” He called out to the massive dragon opposing him. “Lilith,” Ryuki's focus slid to the Mega Evolved Garchomp he'd manifested, “push it back.”

With a surge of spinning blades and furious slashes the Garchomp launched into the Totem, each blow against the Kommo-o’s heavy scales ringing out loud again, landing upon solid armour every time. But the strikes were still powerful and the Totem stepped back each time. Ryuki tilted his head to Moon and Lillie with a playful grin.

“It's so rude,” he pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the massive Totem, “I hope Kannonade isn't that ill-mannered when he evolves!”

Moon stared blankly, Lillie stepping out from behind her to speak for the pair. “Mr. Ryuki, what are you doing here?”

“Well,” Ryuki turned his attention back to the battle, his Mega Garchomp Lilith standing up to but not overcoming the Totem Kommo-o, “I wanted to meet that big one back there, since they're meant to be one of the strongest in Alola. Turns out that's pretty accurate, can't say I've had this hard a time in a long while.”

Moon struggled to express herself. She and Lillie had been hearing the sounds of the Totem for hours, had Ryuki been fighting all this time?

“It's...” Ryuki paused for a moment as he focused on his partner Lilith, the Mega Evolved Garchomp slicing upwards with powerful blades, pushing the Totem back another step, “it's been a bit.”

Did... he need help?

Ryuki turned back to Moon and smiled. “Come on I'm not that far out of my league, I've still got this.” Lilith leapt from wall to wall of the narrow valley, driving the Kommo-o to strike the canyon-side once more, sending a rain of stone cascading from higher up. “And what about you two? You're a long way off the beaten track out here.”
“We...” Lillie shook her head, “we're trying to help with the Ultra Beast situation!”

“The what?” Ryuki was focusing on the fight still, keeping in front of the two girls he'd somehow run into yet again. “Don't know about that.”

There was a real moment of genuine confusion from Lillie and Moon.

“The Ultra Beasts?” Lillie repeated herself. “Incredibly strong Pokemon appearing from Ultra Wormholes across Alola? Fighting the Tapu and attacking everything they see?”

“Nah I don't watch the news.” Ryuki gave a shrug of his red leather-clad shoulders. “Is it the glowy ones like this guy? I just thought those happened around here.”

The stare at Ryuki's back from the two girls behind him was inexplicable. Somehow he felt it.

“Okay,” turning slightly to look back their way, Ryuki tilted his head down the path. “You need to get through though, right? I've got this big one booked for the day so I'll keep 'em busy. Head on through.” Lilith, spinning in a storm of blades, cut open a deep gouge through the rock the Totem had struck, then dashed around the Kommo-o and kicked it into the new opening in the stone. Ryuki waved a hand forward. “Do your thing.”

Lillie moved first, Moon lingering for a moment. Her eyes flicked to the pillar Ryuki was standing before. He caught her expression.

“This, right?” Picking out the deep blue-green Z-Crystal, Ryuki examined it. The loud roar of the Totem Kommo-o did nothing as Lilith continued to push it into the rock. “Doing the Z-Dragon Move would be cool and all,” Ryuki mimed the pose Pitaya had taught Moon, “but me and Lilith already do the Mega Evolution thing, we can't double up unfort. You want it?”

Moon jolted. She... she should be tested before...

“Nah it's mine to give,” Ryuki flicked a hand, sending the crystal flying into Moon's grasp. “You beat the Totem you get a crystal, so that one's mine. Cause I'm gonna win.” Moon held the Z-Crystal tight, doubting for one moment more.

But anything that would help her and Lillie go further...

“Go go,” Ryuki waved again, spurring Moon to begin moving, “I'll see you around, Moon. Keep at it. To the top of the world, right?” Moon nodded back, then accelerated to catch up with Lillie, the two racing by the Totem and Mega Evolved Pokemon's fight.

Then beyond it, beyond the canyon's end, and out onto the path that would take them to the awaiting Altar of the Dawne.

Behind the Totem roared louder still, a powerful strike imprinting Lilith into the stone opposite, the Mega Evolved form of the Garchomp fading back to its regular state. Ryuki called her back with the Quick Ball he'd caught her in so long ago, just a regular Gible met on the way. Dang this Totem was tough, even his second-strongest couldn't bring it down. Well, in that case...

Ryuki raised up a black and gold Pokeball with a grin.

“Keep this one secret yo.”
Beyond the Vast Poni Canyon's end an ancient ruin awaited. A series of stone staircases one after the other hewn into a mountain's side, leading higher and higher, some stairs cracked and broken, some parts all collapsed away, but still enough to climb. The shape was wrong for Moon's Tauros, and so she and Lillie with determination set their own feet upon it. The final ascent before them. They began their climb, even as the distant clanging sounds of the Totem behind them finally faded away.

Step by step. The breaks in each flight a moment to catch their breath before continuing up once more. Moon's legs were burning, and she was sure Lillie felt the same. Turned back to her with a smile and a word of encouragement, Lillie's own smile in answer enough to help Moon go on. They'd both make it to the Altar. They'd both play the flutes. They'd both call the Legendary Pokemon.

And they'd both set this right.

A great stone tower rose over the Altar of the Dawne, Moon and Lillie's footsteps finally bringing them to the ascension's peak. Each immediately collapsed to the ground, breathing heavily and massaging their legs. Opening her bag Lillie pulled out the food she'd gathered that morning, offering some to Moon which Moon gratefully accepted. With her bag open in her lap, Lillie looked down at Nebby within. Still silently floating there, only moved because of her bag pulling upon it. Soon, soon she'd have found help for it. Just a little longer.

Please be patient.

The decoration of the Altar was sparse, faded stone-works obscured by dust and weathering, loose plants growing up through cracks in the once tiling of this place. Two pools of water, each with steps leading through them to a square platform within, joined together into a single stream running beneath the central altar, the place where the symbol of the Dawne was marked. It was similar, in so many ways, to the Lake of the Duske. Lillie remarked on that to Moon.

Moon mentioned Lillie would have to take her there after all of this so she could see it for herself.

By the time the two stood once more the sun was beginning to cross the western horizon, the sky's light changing from afternoon red to evening purple. Pulling the Sun Flute from her bag, Lillie caught Nebby on it and lifted its silently floating form free as well, smiling for a moment as she raised a hand to brush her fingers against the sleeping Pokemon's face. “Do you want to hear me play, Nebby?”

Moving to the western pool, Lillie placed a foot into the water, sinking only slightly before settling on the steps leading to the platform in its midst. Stepping up she released Nebby from her hold, the Pokemon floating before her, and held out the Sun Flute. She was ready.

Moon, with Moon Flute in hand, took the eastern platform, stepping through the water and onto it, turning to face Lillie as Lillie faced her. Lillie nodded.

“Moon!” She raised the flute to her mouth, “let's call the Legendary Pokemon! Let's save Nebby, and Poipole, my mother, and Mr. Guzma too! Let's ask Solgaleo and Lunala to help protect Alola from the Ultra Beasts! Let's save everyone!”

Moon nodded. Raised the flute she held to her mouth as well. Her lips against it, fingers settling over the holes along its length. A moment's breath intaken.

She began to play.

The sound was there, more than it had been when she'd tried that morning. But it did not mix, Lillie's
own attempt, standing across from her, creating song as well but not the same song. The flutes remained apart. Their eyes, focusing on one another as they played, sought to communicate. They needed to play the same.

The song of Alola? Moon sought it, the rhythm and pace of Alola she'd been able to hear ever since her Pokemon at the Poke Pelago had showed her how. In the wind, the ripple of the dust, the Pokemon and land of Alola, it was there. She could feel it, the entire world around her, and channelled it into the flute as she played. A change of sound, Lillie seeking to match it. But while they sounded so much more similar now, the gap between them remained. They were playing separately.

They were not connected as one.

What had it been Hau had said the day before? That as long as they thought of one another they would never be apart? Moon wondered of him, whether he was okay, helping protect Alola from the Ultra Beasts. That rocket beast she'd seen before, she'd never want Hau to have to go near it. She worried for him. Needed to do this for his sake too. There were so many people she was doing this to save.

Two notes produced equal and the same.

Moon's eyes met Lillie's, their thoughts for a moment as one. Thinking of Alola beyond them, Hau who had told them the three would always be together. If they were then... to play together Moon would, Lillie would...

She'd met Lillie at Mahalo Trail, a path through the woods beyond Iki Town on Melemele. She'd met Moon when Nebby had been in danger, her own fear paralysing her from acting in its defense. Lillie had called out to her and asked her for help. She'd called out to Moon desperate for someone to reach out and save her. Lillie had called out to Moon desperate for someone to reach out and save her.

How they'd changed.

Lillie was so strong. So incredible. Even against everything she had gone through she still stood up. She still smiled. Her kindness, her presence beside Moon, it had helped Moon change. Had encouraged her to practise Alola and reach out to those around her. To see more of this world. To be there for those in need. And... to be there with those she cared for so deeply she never wanted to be apart.

Moon was so strong. So incredible. Even bearing the weight of the world's eyes looking upon her for her ability she still stood up. Continued on, braving every challenge without pause. Her drive and belief, again and again it had encouraged Lillie to go on. To push herself further beyond her fears, to become more and more of the person she wished to be. Having Moon with her... had changed her so much for the better.

As long as they were together there was nothing they could not do.

A single song woven from twin sounds played as one coursed through the air, fading light of the sun overwritten by rising glow of the moon. As if caught by the music that light built within the water beneath their feet, the pools they stood upon shining brighter and brighter, obscuring all vision until the only thing each could see was the other through the light.

Then with a great shaking the light surged through the streams of water, pillaring up the stone tower of the Dawne, filling out the circular shape at its peak into a disc of light shining as a beacon to all Alola and beyond. The song had been played. The Legends had been called.
And so there was answer.

A race of movement from Lillie’s side, flute lowering from her mouth as she turned in shock to see Nebby flying away, over to the raised platform marked by the symbol of the Dawne. It was shining brightly, so brightly, like a little star of its own. Calling the light.

Light fell upon it.

As a great beam from the tower overlooking them the light they had called fell down upon Nebby, wrapping around it, flowing within it, the Pokemon glowing brighter and brighter still, rising higher and higher still. A star brighter than the light, a glowing brilliance to which even the moon would pale.

Evolution.

Bursting from the light great wings took shape, two crescents of yellow framing their edge, blue skin forming the shape of wing and body, glowing lights dancing within the Pokemon's new form. Yellow armour tipped the lower points of its wings as stars, wrapped around its tail in another crescent, and formed one more around its head. Framing of white defined its body and the arms that held wings, the head and face the same as Nebby had always had, that glowing nebula of stars, but this time with two eyes of shimmering deep and vibrant pink amongst them. It was a Pokemon Moon and Lillie had only ever seen in depictions, ancient records rendered as text and image. They were the first in centuries to behold the real thing.

To witness Lunala, Moone Pokemon, Emissary of the Moon and Legendary Pokemon of Alola before them.

She’d wondered so many times. Imagined, in so many moments, how it would feel. Every story, every tale about a Trainer and a Pokemon described it. The connection, the link between them that allowed them to share their strength, their feelings, their thoughts, their will. She’d wondered so many times. What would it feel like? Was it obvious? Did she hold one already and simply not understand? Was she incapable of it? Never going to? Why had Nebby never connected with her? Why had she never been able? So many times.

But this? This was everything she'd believed in the deepest of fantasies and more. It was vibrant, and alive, a sensation beyond expectation. Was this what Trainers felt? This bond, this link that allowed her to feel the partner before her? The warmth, the life, the knowledge that they were there for one another? It was everything she had ever wanted. This feeling deep within, radiant and warm. A burning line of fire from her heart to Nebby's.

And from Nebby's to Moon's.

“...Moon?”

Moon’s eyes were wide, staring at Lillie as she stared at her. A feeling, a twinge in her mind, told her. Acknowledgement. The feeling of being seen. Moon was looking at her and she could feel it.

Because they were connected.

“I—” a rush of emotion that was not Lillie's own, of Moon's shock fading to a bright warmth washed over her. The knowledge of their connection, linked through the Legendary Pokemon they’d joined together to create, Moon's joy in it touched Lillie's heart. Just looking at Lillie Moon felt happiness. Care. A powerful emotion that Nebby magnified by feeling the same, floating over the two and looking down upon Lillie who had cared for it all of this time. These two, Moon and Nebby, they
both cared for her so much.

A feeling Lillie realised she hadn't received from her mother in years.

Tears welled in her eyes, overwhelmed by the emotions pouring upon her. Her own happiness Moon felt in return, failing to hold off a laugh, something deep and consuming, the girl clutching her stomach and unable to do anything but laugh with such joy in this moment. Laughter and tears, happiness mixed together and circling between them, and Nebby, Lunala, descending from the sky before them.

The child of the emissaries all grown up.

“Nebby- Lunala-,” Lillie gazed at the Moone Pokemon, feeling in return its acknowledgement of her. Its care. She closed her eyes and bowed her head. “Please. To go after my mother. To bring her and those she took back to Alola. We need you!” Opening her eyes Lillie stared resolute, focus in her heart that Moon and Lunala both felt. Moon smiled to feel Lillie's determination. She really was so amazing.

Even that reached Lillie's heart.

Lunala's cry echoed over the altar, over the stone reaches of the canyon and beyond. A trail of stars followed its flight as Nebby ascended, spiralling into the sky before diving down, arcing over the altar and the two girls below, grasping each in its hold as it passed them by. Spiralling again the Legendary Pokemon circled far beyond the altar, glowing brightly, a third deep pink eye manifesting within the nebula of its moon-cresent head.

Accelerating faster Nebby shot towards the stone tower still glowing with the mark of the Dawne. Light crackled around it, fracturing outwards, pouring rainbow colour through the air.

And through the hole of light the Emissary of the Moon flew, leaving the opened wormhole to flicker and fade away. Only the light of the moon left behind.

The altar silent as night set over Alola once more.

Chapter End Notes

_A burning line of fire from her heart to Nebby's._

_And from Nebby's to Moon's._

For months those lines have repeated inside of my head, concepted during the Melemele arc. In the weeks before this chapter I heard them daily, repeated in every quiet moment. In silence I carried that moment with me and finally, finally, it exists beyond me. This is Connection. Welcome to the moment to which Eldritch has been building thus far.

It's hard to describe how proud I am to have made it here. Oh there's more. There's a LOT more. There's other moments I've written the words of to haunt me and realise into this world. But this was the first one of such magnitude. It's an unbelievable relief to let it be free. I really did that. I really made it all the way here.

There's so much to this chapter I fell in love with as I wrote it. Of the closeness Moon and Lillie have found. Of Riley doing her best and standing up for herself, of Plumeria
reaching out for help. I'll fully admit I yelled at Ryuki at his "I don't watch the news", this guy. This freaking guy. And the entire final scene was... writing it means so much to me. Honestly, it really does.

Now I can focus forward on everything that comes after.

The Totem Kommo-o in Eldritch is incredibly souped up from the in-game one, which I one-shot. This one doesn't go down like a punk. This one only a handful of Trainers in Alola could hope to beat going all out. Unfortunately for it it seemed Ryuki was one. Celesteela in this setting hasn't been seen before. In the games it's a UB that the International Police have records of, but thanks to Pokemon saying there's multiple realities, simply in this one it isn't. That's authorial power, baby! I can do whatever I want!

And believe me I'm going to.

That's it for my notes on this chapter, thank you all so much for reading and making it to this point with me. If you enjoyed this chapter, leave a kudos if you've yet to, a comment if you'd like (I treasure all comments deeply) and consider sharing this fic on twitter or tumblr by using these links: https://twitter.com/TaurusVersant/status/999637533209321472 https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

I'm so happy to have made it here.

And so very happy to go into what comes next.
“The first of the current Ultra Beast situations is...”

As Moon and Lillie left the Aether Paradise meeting room commandeered by Chief Anabel and Mr. Looker, each member of the International Police – and more specifically the Ultra Beast Task Force within Alola – discussion continued for Gladion and Hau, outlining the situation into which they had nominated their aid. Each had their focus: for Gladion his desire for himself and Type: Null to reduce the damage his mother had done, for Hau the intent to keep Alola safe, to do what anyone with the desire to become a Kahuna would do. To keep this region he loved from harm.

“Melemele Island.” As Anabel said it Hau's eyes widened slightly, his home island the first of those in danger from the Ultra Beast threat. “At present only the Kahuna and Tapu working together can effectively dispatch Ultra Beasts with minimal damage to their surroundings. Key Trainers around Alola have proven able to battle the creatures to a stand-still, and working together have successfully exhausted and allowed the capture of a not-insignificant number, but the difference between them and the Guardian Deities of Alola is still vast.”

“Capture,” Looker traded off with Anabel, explaining what he could for these two children they'd somehow recruited, “is done via exhaustion of an Ultra Beast to immobility, often unconsciousness, and then restraint via special full-size capture devices. Pokeballs seem to be unable to handle the creatures, and fail to capture them even when they are at their most defeated, leaving us unable to do anything but restrain them in a manner they cannot escape, then transport them to a location they will do no harm.”

“Where do you take them?” Gladion's question prompted a pause, a quiet moment hanging in the air. Anabel sighed and shook her head.

“That's classified information. Rest assured, it is an environment safe for the Ultra Beasts, separated from all regular people and Pokemon. Without native species around they appear to regress to less destructive ways of acting.”

“You said these ones were more aggressive than any before though,” Gladion pressed the point, mind sharp, intent razor-focused. “Have you taken any there yet? Did they calm down?”

A more blatant pause as Looker and Anabel struggled with the directness of the young man before them. Gladion clicked his tongue, the lack of information a concern. What if they just made things worse...

“Hey wait,” Hau, who'd been wracking his thoughts since Anabel and Looker explained the situation, came upon a sticking point. “Didn't the President capture an Ultra Beast last night? Poipole was one, and she said she was using something new. 'Beast Ball', right Gladion?”

As Gladion nodded neither Anabel nor Looker appeared surprised, having already been briefed on such. Unfortunately...

“Only a small number of Beast Balls have so far been made.” Wicke's return to the meeting room came just in time to rejoin the conversation, informing Gladion and Hau of what she'd told Anabel and Looker just earlier that morning. “They were created under the direction of Branch Chief Faba,
and the Madam President took those completed with her. Furthermore we are presently unable to create any more, as not only have Faba and a number of the Foundation's best engineers and scientists disappeared, but all of our records of the Beast Ball Project have been deleted. The cause of that is presently... unknown.” Nothing in Wicke's voice hid the blatant suspicion that Faba's disappearance had everything to do with the missing data. Those who knew the Branch Chief agreed.

“Faba,” the disgust in Gladion's voice dripped from his words, “that's just like him.”

“Well,” Wicke, who had her own quietly held opinions regarding the Branch Chief, still found the sheer animosity from Gladion a surprise, “for the moment, while we attempt to collate what information we still have on the topic, there are no Beast Balls available for use.”

“If we could get our hands on them,” Looker, who'd thought and voiced this topic once already, spoke up, “adding Beast Balls to our capability would redefine the Ultra Beast Task Force entirely. Being able to capture Ultra Beasts without conflict, and to be able to store them safely, would be the biggest breakthrough in the entire history of our work.”

“Which we don't have the resources to pursue,” Anabel, who'd dismissed this idea once already, replied sharply. "The distribution of Task Force members across the region is currently spread thin enough already, even with the aid from the Kahuna, Tapu, and Trainers of Alola. If we pull even one person to go looking for this Faba character, who we don't even know the location of, and someone they would have been protecting were injured, that is not a responsibility I intend to take. We cannot go chasing magic solutions and leave Alola to burn while doing so.”

Another quiet moment, Anabel's intense words silencing the room. Looker nodded his head. “Right you are, Chief.”

Anabel turned her attention back to Gladion and Hau. “A large-scale capture operation is currently taking place on the west side of Melemele Island, leaving the east under-protected. I was preparing to head out there myself to lend my aid – will the two of you join me to do so?”

Both Gladion and Hau immediately nodded, without a second's pause or doubt. Anabel smiled at that. Such focus. She appreciated it. Wicke nodded her head. “I'll prepare another boat for the three of you.” And quickly left, Gladion and Hau following her out on Anabel's command.

For the moment, with just the two of them in the room, Looker raised the point he'd stayed silent on thus far.

“Chief, those children-”

“Would dive into danger either way,” Anabel, all too aware of what the topic would be, countered Looker before he could truly begin. “If they're going to put themselves at risk no matter what we say, then the best thing we can do is take them under our watch all the same. At least if they're following our orders, we can keep them out of danger better than if they were on their own.”

Another moment passed before Looker bowed his head.

“That's a fair point,” he conceded honestly, “and the best way to handle their clear intentions. My apologies, Chief.”

“We don't apologise for caring,” Anabel shook her head, “we'll do everything we can to keep Alola safe. I wouldn't be able to look such determined and bright children in the eyes if I weren't.”

Looker nodded, Anabel moving to the exit of the room. “Looker, I'm leaving you in charge of
overseeing missions while I'm out. I'll be back as soon as this is done.”

With a salute Looker saw Anabel off. “Roger that, Chief. Stay safe.” As soon as Anabel was out of sight the International Police member’s shoulders sagged, the man turning back to the monitoring devices they’d set up across the room.

“...I don't want to see you lost too.”

Mission 01: UB-Absorption – Last Thoughts Come Quickly

Pumping veins flexed red skin, swirling bubbling liquid beneath the surface pressurised and pushing outwards, each rounded container that made up the body of this Ultra Beast impossibly strong and growing stronger by the second. A red pointed leg pushed down upon the Pokemon beneath it, silver proboscis nearing the pinned foe.

Further food for strength.

“Flare Blitz!”

The call came from a woman standing before the Pokemon pair, one hand pushing down upon the cane she used, the other stretched forward, Z-Ring clipped around her wrist. The explosion of fire from her Pokemon, the Arcanine the Ultra Beast had stomped down upon, did more to lower the ground than raise the Beast's leg, but the difference was the same and the Arcanine slipped free, bounding back to Asuka’s side. The red and muscle-bound Ultra Beast lowered its leg nonplussed, facing towards the two but little about the direction of its gaze able to be told. Asuka moved her free hand to run through her partner's fur, the Pokemon breathing heavily.

This wasn't going well.

In the school behind her, this battle taking place on the roads of Melemele, people from across the outskirts were gathered. Throughout Alola that was how it was, people moving to gather in large groups, so that those Trainers who could stand up to the invading Ultra Beasts could keep them safe. Asuka had seen Kahuna Hala and Tapu Koko dispatch Ultra Beasts, and so this moment for her was humbling. The true difference between a Trainer, even one as experienced as her, and that union of an Island's leader and deity.

The Ultra Beast flexed, raising its arms in a mighty showing of its rippling muscular physique. Another sign of attack.

“Extreme Speed and dodge it!”

Only that ability, which exhausted her Pokemon too, was the means to evade the way the Ultra Beast shot forward to attack, a sudden burst of movement that unleashed a pressure of wind. Asuka fell back, step, cane, step, as her partner Arcanine dodged around the surging fists of the red foe it faced.

The Ultra Beast still wasn't tired.

They were teetering on the brink of disaster.

Inside of the school behind Asuka some acted to calm those within. The teachers, Emily amongst them, moved about speaking to others, reassuring them that the Ultra Beasts would be kept at bay. From the initial appearance the night before, the Beasts had appeared at random across Alola, and
each time immediately lashed out at their surroundings. Like they were furious.

Or afraid.

Jewellery sat quietly, running a hand through the Meowth on her lap's fur, listening to a group of the schoolchildren talking about how if an Ultra Beast broke in they'd work together to stop it. They had a funny little name for themselves, the school's own 'elite four'. It was a sweet thing, and quickly made Jewellery think of her daughter. She hadn't heard from Moon since her daughter's return to Ula'ula, and since this disaster began Kukui and Kahili had been unreachable. Asking Kahuna Hala and Kahuna Olivia Jewellery had found no answers, and Kahuna Nanu, who they'd directed her to, had never picked up. Had she the power she would have travelled to Mahihinu herself to find her daughter. But in this situation, this disaster, she didn't.

All she could do was hope, and pray, that her daughter and her incredible partners were strong enough to stay safe throughout this.

“Hey Miss?” Jewellery jolted from her thoughts to find one the four young ones had addressed her. When she focused on them, they smiled, a wide and pure expression. “Don't worry, we're gonna help keep everyone safe!” Jewellery's surprise quickly changed to a smile of her own, a nod given to not only this one but the three watching over them.

“I'll be counting on you.”

All four smiled that time. Jewellery's eyes drifted back to the window, Asuka's battle beyond out of sight. She'd believe. She'd hold hope. Things would work out.

She wouldn't doubt for a second.

With a powerful scooping thrust the red Ultra Beast lifted the Arcanine partner of Asuka into the air, then grabbed and slammed the Pokemon down with its other arm, no more resistance given by the orange, black, and beige-furred canine Pokemon. Quickly activating an Ultra Ball Asuka called her partner back, the Arcanine pulled from the grip of the red Ultra Beast she faced. Its attention followed the beam of red light to Asuka herself. She quickly moved to raise another Pokeball up.

The Ultra Beast launched itself at her at full speed.

Trainers always stood by their partners. Learned over their lifetime when to leave a fight that wouldn't end well. But this situation, this demand to stand no matter what, alongside Asuka's never-properly-healed injury that meant she couldn't flee even when the situation called for it, combined together as her heartbeat accelerated into this one single moment she was sure was it. Her movement was too slow.

Her last thoughts that she'd never see another graduating class from her school.

Then the Ultra Beast was slammed aside, hitting the ground and rolling, a snarling and furious Pokemon atop it, massive claws gouging as the new attacker rammed its iron-coated head into the Ultra Beast's own, again and again. A boy ran past Asuka, none too old, just the beginning of his teens at a glance, brilliant blonde hair falling across his face. He called out for his partner, providing strength and resilience both. 'Null', he said was its name.

The Beast Killer gone to work.

“Madam Asuka.” A woman Asuka did not know was striding towards her, smartly dressed in a black suit, purple tied hair hanging long behind her neck. Others were with her, a scattering of the Ultra Beast Task Force members operating across the city, and... was that Hau? Asuka stared as the
woman came to a stop before her, holding out a hand.

“My name is Anabel, Chief of the Ultra Beast Task Force here in Alola. My apologies for our late arrival, our forces have been spread far too thin.”

“No...” Asuka, after a moment accepting the shake of Anabel's hand, turned back to the Ultra Beast she'd been in conflict with, the creature being practically rag-dolled by that 'Null' Pokemon that faced it. The Beast had stood so strong against Asuka's own, but each strike Null dealt appeared to harm it deeply. What was that Pokemon?

She couldn't begin to imagine.

“I misjudged.” Anabel said this aloud, Hau and Asuka both turning their attention back to her, her eyes on Gladion and Null alone. “When Gladion said Type: Null was created to fight Ultra Beasts I doubted its effectiveness. I was, incredibly, incorrect.”

As Anabel spoke other members of the UB Task Force moved to surround the Ultra Beast, unleashing Pokemon best at pacification and restraint – Venomoth, Hypno, Machamp, and Alakazam some examples among them – to restrict and weaken the creature savaged by Type: Null. That Ultra Beast was Buzzwole, Anabel noted, a creature with explosive physical strength amplified by chemical reactions within the red liquid filling the sacs spread throughout its body. It had clearly reached a significant state of strength in the protracted battle with Principal Asuka of the Pokemon Schooling System, and yet Gladion's Type: Null had pounced upon and ravaged it. Soon enough the Ultra Beast was immobile, Task Force members moving to bind it with their Pokemon and transport it to a storage container. Anabel moved to Gladion's side.

“It is as you said,” she spoke to him, the blonde teen turning to look up at her. “I believe you and Type: Null will be pivotal to the protection of Alola.” A rarely seen smile from Gladion appeared in response. He nodded his head.

“We intend to.”

Hau stood there, silent. Gladion... he was really able to do it. Able to stand up to those Beasts, yeah? It wasn't like... Hau didn't understand. Compared to Moon and Gladion, he and his team... there was so much less they could do. But that still didn't excuse him from trying. Still didn't excuse him from doing everything he could all the same.

Looking up, he turned his attention to Anabel as she directed members of the Task Force to reposition around Hau'oli, to be better able to support Asuka should another Ultra Beast appear. No one should ever be facing one alone, and the fact Asuka had been was a blemish on their name. Never again. Quick salutes and responses of 'Yes Ma'am!' followed after, the Ultra Beast Task Force members moving to resume patrol of the city. Anabel breathed out, catching her attention on Hau's gaze. Turned to face him properly.

“Yes, Hau?”

“What can I do?”

Anabel's gaze moved to Gladion, who was patting his partner Null down, reassuring the Pokemon of its job well done. Then back to Hau himself.

“Well...”
Flashes of lightning beneath rumbling storm-clouds overwrote the mid-morning sun, a thick coating of electrical build-up covering the western sky of Melemele Island. Jerking, shambling forms shuffled through the forest north of Hau'oli City, ungainly swaying movements following after a target just ahead. Booms of sound accompanied surges of electrical bolts washing out from each beast, shattering trees and burning a path through the woods as they marched in step one after the other.

After the Totem dashing through the undergrowth before them.

High above this scene, looking out from the edge of a clifftop across the forest below, two figures kept watch over the events in motion.

Mostly.

“Alright a little left... little right, hold it... hold it... got it!”

With a flourish to the movement Dexio held out his hand, offering the phone of Captain Ilima back to its owner. Ilima surveyed the picture taken with a smile, before hitting send and putting his metaphorical hat into the ring. First blood, as it were.

“No but seriously,” Dexio moved to look over Ilima's shoulder, seeing only the picture he'd taken present on the screen, “make sure to send me the ones the others take, I wanna see those pics!”

“I'll remember,” Ilima nodded with a smile, attention turning back to the mass of Ultra Beasts below.

White star-like heads of sharp points supported by black tendrils woven together like cables bound into limbs tipped by orange claws and spikes forming legs arms and tail as electricity crackled across their forms before discharging either into the atmosphere above to darken the storm clouds further or to burst through the forest before them as these Beasts pursued their nimble Z-Aura'd foe a red glow of their own shining from each of the living electrical beacons marching one by one after the other. Just as had been planned.

“They are not particularly intelligent.” Ilima made the observation, watching over the group of Ultra Beasts – 'Xurkitree' the name provided by the UB Task Force – as they lumbered through the wooded paths of Melemele's west. “Though I suppose given their power it does not matter much to them.”

“I mean,” Dexio shrugged, similarly on lookout duty, “if it were anyone but the Tapu and Kahuna waiting for them that many would be unbeatable. Not to mention they blast off as soon as they see a target.”

“Yes.” Ilima nodded agreement, raising the binoculars he carried to make sure the Totem Gumschoos racing through the woods was remaining far enough ahead while still drawing the Ultra Beasts' focus. “Luring them from the city and through the forest to this point has been... harrowing.”

“You good?” Dexio took a step back, checking over the Captain beside him. They, Sina, the Totem Gumschoos, and a number of UB Task Force members, had spent the better part of the morning baiting and luring the Xurkitree spread throughout the western forest and southern city of Melemele together, forming a column of the shambling electrical creatures being led to the point Kahuna Hala and Tapu Koko were waiting. It had been stressful to say the least, each bolt from the Glowing Pokemon creating a massive detonation of electrical force. They were twitchy too, so required keeping out of sight of almost all the time. One errant bolt, considering the amount each electrical
blast unleashed, and...

“I've been better,” Ilima gave a thin smile, retrieving a pale-green device from a pocket. Activating it manifested a Pokemon, the long-necked and leaf-winged Tropius, equipped with Ride Pokemon gear. Ilima moved to mount up, Dexio following behind. It was time to head to the final point.

The Fruit Pokemon swept out into the air.

Some ways south, Sina was putting the finishing touches on the trap those on the western side of Melemele were orchestrating, her partner Pokemon applying a spread of ice here and there framing a single path to follow. Pleased with her work she stepped back, calling the Glaceon to her, only to turn in surprise as a gigantic Gumshoos, brown and yellow furred and running on all four legs, raced past her. It took a moment's pause before she clued in.

“Oh crap gotta move!"

Kahuna Hala stood at the far end of an enclosed area, a curved section of rising land forming a natural barrier around it. Only one entrance, into which a large pack of Xurkitree were marching at this very moment. The Kahuna breathed out slowly, exhaling tiredness and pulling in the fresh air of Alola instead. In the hours since his encounter with that first Buzzwole the night before, Hala had managed perhaps an hour's sleep at best. Tapu Koko, floating before him, the Melemele Kahuna could tell had also managed little rest. They were burning down.

The number of Ultra Beasts appearing across Alola seemed ridiculous. Each time Hala and Tapu Koko swept in and crushed one, reports of three more came to his ears. Even now his beloved Melemele had the creatures manifesting without pause. Even now Alola itself was in danger.

It was a disaster of the highest order.

“Hey they're coming!” The loud cry of Sina's voice as she raced into the area, the Totem just moments before diving into a burrow at the enclosure's back, brought Hala's focus forward, the Kahuna shifting the arm with Z-Ring clasped around his wrist, setting the bright Tapunium-Z within it. The efforts of everyone that morning, helping to gather these Ultra Beasts together, would not go unappreciated. The Kahuna set his determination. A Tropius flew down from overhead, a man on its back holding out an arm for Sina to grab hold of and be lifted into the air. Now it was just Hala, Tapu Koko, and the many shifting, shambling forms pushing through the treeline.

The Kahuna raised his arms.

From above the Guardian of Alola was no less impressive, Dexio, Sina, and Ilima all watching as a humanoid of massive golden form rose up, peaked by an enshelled Tapu – in this case the vibrant yellow-shelled and orange haired Tapu Koko. Each swing of its arm collected a Xurkitree, slamming the Ultra Beast through trees, into the cliff, before reaching for another. In moments the giant being had driven each of the Ultra Beasts to unconsciousness, its form fading as Ilima instructed the Tropius he rode to return to the ground below, UB Task Force members streaming from out of the woods to restrain and retrieve the bested Xurkitree horde.

Hala sat hard, breathing heavy. Tapu Koko remained on the ground with its shell closed tight around it. The exhaustion of that Z-Move, it was the only thing able to reduce Hala to a state where his body might accept sleep over the stress keeping him awake. He needed to recover, there was no use in him attempting to do any more without rest. But even still... his eyes drifted to the three Trainers approaching him, Captain Ilima and the two visitors from Kalos. Ilima was reaching down to help him up.
“Kahuna Hala, we'll use my Ride Tropius to return you to Iki Town for rest.”

Being helped to his feet, Hala passed his gaze over Tapu Koko, who would only rest well deep within the nature of Alola. It would be fine where it was. For him to recover however... “You,” Hala's eyes were bleary, but his focus went to the Psychic-type expert nearby. Dexio jolted at being addressed. “are you able to induce sleep?”

“Uhh,” a wide-eyed stare from the young man was all the answer Hala got until Sina elbowed her partner to get him to focus. Dexio went to a quick nod. “Yep, I can do that.”

“If you please,” Hala closed his eyes, shaking his head, “even as exhausted as I am, my concern for Alola keeps me awake. I will be no good to anyone without sleep. Can you ensure proper rest?”

A grasped Pokeball in Dexio's hand answered the question. The brown-haired man gave a nod. “Deep sleep and no dreams, no problem. My partner Slowking can easily handle that. Are we doing it here or...?”

That question Ilima took charge of answering, pushing Dexio towards the Ride Tropius. “Take Kahuna Hala back to Iki Town,” the Captain gave his instruction, “and ensure his recovery. We will continue on from here.”

“Yep yep!” Sina nodded, “no worries! Get going, Dexio, we'll catch up!”

Around them the area was already clearing, the UB Task Force having secured and retrieved the multitude of unconscious Xurkitree this trap had created. Seeing Dexio and the Kahuna off into the sky, Sina turned with a smile despite it all to the Captain. It had been her that said 'let's help!' as soon as news of the Ultra Beast disaster reached her and Dexio's ears, but that was only because Dexio said the same a second too slow himself. Even on holiday in a different region entirely, there was no time off for heroes like them!

“Ready to go, Captain?”

Lowering his phone, Ilima pocketed it and used his Ride Pager to manifest a Tauros instead. Back to Hau’oli, so they might stand up against the next of the Ultra Beasts to appear. While the Kahuna slept, they'd keep Melemele safe.

Such was a Captain's role.

“Let's keep at it.”

Ilima posted a message in ~Captain's Chat: Ultra Beast Selfie League~

Ilima attached image: []

Attached is a picture of a pack of Xurkitree travelling through the forest of western Melemele, taken from a high cliff overlooking the location. Ilima has positioned himself, with hands held out, such that he is holding one on either side of the group to create, in his own words:

Ilima: Xurkitree sandwich.
Mina: oh nice composition!
Acerola: that's a whole lot O_O
Lana: 3/10, watch this:
“Lana this is a bad idea.”

Despite Mallow's voiced concerns no pause came to the footsteps of the Captain of Lush Jungle, following the younger Captain of Brooklet Hill across the sloping hills of northern Akala. The entire northern region of the island remained abuzz with activity, even with so many of its residents gone to ground. Many of the smaller coastal settlements had taken boats to the larger towns around Akala's west, members of the Ultra Beast Task Force stationed there in defense of the more populous coast. Acting as a support network that helped push back and stunt the Ultra Beast incursions, they allowed the wild north to be handled by those who knew it best.

So Captain Lana, Captain Mallow, and the manifold Pokemon Rangers of Alola took to their task knowing the people they were doing this to protect would be kept safe in the meanwhile.

It all added up.

Buzzwole, massive and swollen red insectoid creatures that grew stronger and stronger the longer they fought. Xurkitree, black bundles of living cables emerging from a white star-like head, electricity discharging from their bodies seemingly without limit. Pheromosa, lithe speedsters in the way those white Lissome Beasts moved, yet possessing shocking power married to their speed, able to overpower and stomp underfoot any challengers that rose against them. Those three were the most common to find around Alola, and proved the most aggressive to any signs of civilisation they encountered. Not that the less outright vindictive ones were specifically better.

Honestly, Mallow thought they were worse. Hence why she was happier working out here while people like Kahuna Olivia handled the more difficult cases. The logic was simple out in the wilds. The Ultra Beasts jumped at anything that moved, and pursued viciously. But they didn't know the environment, not like those of Alola did, and couldn't keep up with someone riding a Pokemon and intent on not being caught outside of flat ground. In the hours since she'd first been called upon, Mallow had grown almost relaxed in the repetition, working with the Pokemon Rangers.

Lana's specific ideas threw a slight wrench into that though.

“Is there a better idea?” The smaller Captain was checking her phone, messages exchanged with Jackson, head of the Pokemon Rangers. By specifically moving to lure the Ultra Beasts, the Pokemon Rangers had successfully avoided protracted combat and begun gathering the invading creatures together, pulling them away from occupied places to points traps could be sprung. As soon as an Ultra Beast was slightly incapacitated the UB Task Force swept in, pacifying the creature and sealing it for transport. It had proven a shockingly effective tactic.

Except...

“We don't even know why they're acting so different!”

Except for this pack of Ultra Beasts that didn't give chase. That had hauled themselves back into the lower reaches of the Lush Jungle, forming a perimeter and chasing off all intruders. Compared to those lashing out, these ones seemed to be trying to settle in and stake a claim. They were proving... vastly more difficult to move.

“We still can't let them set up and just attack whoever they see.” Lana and Mallow easily walked the paths they knew, curving through thick jungle to the rear of the zone claimed by the Ultra Beast pack. The faintest falling leaf from above drew Mallow's eyes, watching as the Totem Lurantis of Lush Jungle perched atop a tree branch, scouting the area ahead. The Totems, and their Z-Aura, had
proven the most effective bait of all for Ultra Beasts, though reactions differed each time. Some attacked immediately. Others moved to flee. However it was, Ultra Beasts had a very strong and severe reaction to the sensation of Z-Aura.

The warnings had already crossed Alola not to use a Z-Move in their presence. Only the Kahuna should do so.

For the Guardians of Alola would not bow to any mere beast.

“Jackson and the Rangers are in position,” Lana lowered her voice, their approach now closing in on the pack of Ultra Beasts. The creatures appeared to get along; Buzzwole, Pheromosa, and Xurkitree all remaining within sight of one another yet not lashing out. Yet to any Pokemon or person of Alola, attack would be immediate. Their aggression, what prompted it so?

Fury? Or fear?

“By supporting the Totem we can push the Ultra Beasts out into the traps that scientist provided. Then the UB Task Force can take them down. It's simple.” Similar strategies had worked before. The Totems at Brooklet Hill had been invaluable in pushing the Ultra Beasts appearing on that side of Akala into traps prepared in conjunction with a local visiting scientist, and the sweep from west to east had been effective so far.

“Yeah, if everything goes right.” Mallow kept her voice low too, but the hiss of it was still sharp. “We're assuming they're going to either attack or run from the Totem, what if they do something else?”

“What else will they do?”

“I-”

Mallow closed her mouth, without a good answer. Scans of the area indicated a total of six Ultra Beasts of varying forms gathered around. They'd direct the Lurantis in on one, gauge its response, and then either flee to lure it, and the others, or chase it instead. Fight or flight, which would it be?

“There, look.” Shifting undergrowth rewarded the following of Lana's point, Mallow's eyes locking on to the place an Ultra Beast definitely was. “It's small, likely a Pheromosa.” 'Small' was a relative term. Even the shortest of the Ultra Beasts they'd encountered so far were close to six feet in height. The blue-haired Captain nodded to herself, before looking up at the Totem. “Mallow, are you ready?”

“No,” Mallow answered simply, turning her head as well. The Totems of Alola lived free, but there was a symbiosis and understanding they held with the Captains all the same. They might not share a Bond, but they were still able to rely upon and trust one another all the same. “If it attacks, head to the point,” the Captain gave her directions, “if it runs, herd it there instead. Are you okay?”

No real response from the Lurantis, but with another single falling leaf it was gone, the Pokemon's impressive weight somehow having no bearing upon its movements through the jungle unless it should wish. Mallow and Lana tried to follow it, but even with its bright pink form the Bloom Sickle Pokemon disappeared between the trees. The two, positioned upon the side of a hill leading down to the Ultra Beast collective, waited for the response to tell them what this would be.

A moment.

Another.
In silence.

A loud crack and boom echoed over the flash of light and rush of heat, an explosion blowing through wood and collapsing tree, burning away underbrush and clearing an entire field around it. Against the sound and noise the two Captains ducked down, Mallow pulling Lana towards her, the sudden burst something neither had been expecting to hear or see. Mallow had found some measure of calm in the repetition of the morning. Despite how scary the Ultra Beasts were, understanding them had allowed her to handle it all the same.

She didn't know what had just happened and she was afraid.

“Mallow,” the push against her of Lana pulling herself free opened Mallow's eyes, looking up from her crouch as her fellow Captain stood up. Lana surveyed the area below them. Like a crater, a clear zone where moments before it had been lush and vibrant jungle life. The Totem Lurantis was out of sight, either flung away by the explosion or having fled from its force.

One jerking form remained.

Humanoid in shape yet nothing but incomprehensible in nature the strange and twisting movements of the creature inspired nothing but an understanding of there being no understanding its form of brightly coloured blues pinks and yellows marked by cuffs of white around neck and wrists with hands and feet of the same colour a spinning ball of those same bright colours held atop a single raised hand and no head to speak of at all just empty space where a head should be.

But maybe those two last points were one and the same.

With a tip of its hand the creature let the ball it held fall, bouncing down upon the wide cuff surrounding its neck, settling into the position where a head could be presumed. A loud and oscillating cry washed out, other noises of other Ultra Beasts around answering in response. Mallow grabbed Lana's wrist and pulled.

“Lana let's go!”

Holding her phone out Lana sent her message, informing Jackson to sweep in now. Whatever that Ultra Beast was, and she didn't recognise it, it had riled up all the others.

So there was a wedge to break in and put this to rest.

“Cloyster.”

Choosing the floating Bivalve Pokemon, Lana directed it overhead, calling for a sudden downpour to mute the effects of any more explosions the creature below wished to unleash. She'd hold it back so the Pokemon Rangers and UB Task Force could clear up the others around. She and...

“Mallow, I need you.”

“Arghhhh!” Less enthused about the sudden offensive against the exploding Ultra Beast, Mallow nonetheless chose a Pokeball, the Pokemon she unleashed wrapping around Cloyster as it floated into the air. “Comfey support Cloyster!” Mallow's attention went back to the creature below, which was spinning the ball that was its head on a hand once again. Was it facing them? She could barely tell. The downpour from above was at least a start, Lana's Cloyster supported by her Comfey creating barriers around it as protection. She just hoped it would be enough.

With a spinning kick the Ultra Beast launched its ball head sky high, rising all the way up to where Cloyster and Comfey were. Mallow grabbed and pulled Lana back again, this time each closing their
eyes against the burst of light, the noise and heat still assaulting them all the same. That Ultra Beast... its destructive power was unreal. Each opened their eyes hoping for the best.

Not great, but not an immediate out either.

Cloyster and Comfey were falling, knocked clean out of the sky even despite the manifold protections Mallow's Posy Picker Pokemon had manifested. But though they fell each was still aware, and the glow from Comfey indicated it was performing healing already. From atop the neck of the Ultra Beast a new ball suddenly appeared, same vibrant blues, yellows, and pinks forming flowers – explosions, Lana considered – upon its white surface. It really had no limit then, huh?

Well...

“Hose it down!”

A surge of water washed over the Ultra Beast, targeting the head in the hope the dampening effect would add to the rain and reduce its effectiveness even further. Comfey, small of size, curled inside of the Cloyster's shell so that the Bivalve Pokemon could close tight as the next explosion went off.

Lana held a blue Z-Crystal in her hand.

“Lana no!” Grabbing her by the wrist again, Mallow shook her head. “If we use a Z-Move the Ultra Beast will see us for sure! We have to stay safe!”

“It'll see us as soon as we have to call our Pokemon back,” Lana stayed resolute, though proved unable to pull her arm from Mallow's grip. “Either Cloyster and Comfey stop it or we're in danger either way.”

That wasn't... specifically incorrect. Mallow paused, frustrated. But even if it was true, the two of them shouldn't be in a battle like this anyway. They didn't even know what this Ultra Beast was! Another bursting boom pulled both's eyes back, the blackened shell of Cloyster still floating but another spinning head formed atop the Ultra Beast already. Lana pulled her hand free and performed the Z-Pose for the Waterium-Z.

A surging torrent of water spiralled up around Cloyster, Comfey within its shell applying healing still, as the Bivalve Pokemon bore down the wave upon the Ultra Beast. The washing force caught it, pulling it from its feet, and Lana smiled to see their opponent carried by the wave further away from where they were. Then paused.

“Wait the Rangers and Task Force are that way!”

Jackson, Captain of the Pokemon Rangers in Alola, had known two things in trusting Lana to help protect this region from the Ultra Beasts. Firstly Lana was an incredibly strong young Trainer with great senses for battle. Secondly Lana was an incredibly over-confident Trainer regarding her own abilities. The line between those two points crossing over, that grey area of doubt, haunted him. But in a situation like this you didn't say no to those who could help, and so he'd given his trust to Lana and, more importantly, Mallow to stay by her friend and keep her in check.

The wave of surging water carrying an Ultra Beast all the way to his feet told Jackson that just one friend, even one as close as Mallow, wasn't enough to stop the young Captain of Brooklet Hill's intent.

“Water then? Crawdaunt!”

Each of Jackson's Pokemon were raised for assistance in environmental rescue and protection.
Crawdaunt were easily capable of lifting huge weights from the water, and its massive claws held no issue in crushing obstacles and detritus. Even then he’d learned not to try and go one-on-one with an Ultra Beast, his partner Machamp still recovering, but with other members of his Pokemon Rangers, and the UB Task Force, around, he could go all out.

The Ultra Beast, staggering to its feet after the Z-Powered Attack, fell again as a massive swinging claw from the Rogue Pokemon Crawdaunt smashed out its legs, before a pummelling series of blows pressed it into the soft dirt of the northern jungle. The Rangers and Task Force members around, those who hadn't given chase to the other Ultra Beasts' scattering after the wave of Z-Powered water rushed through, converged as Jackson maintained his focused assault. Those explosions they'd been hearing before...

He didn't want to hear one more.

Capture complete. Of the six Ultra Beasts that had been gathered together, two had been secured: a Buzzwole and this one unknown. The others had scattered further into the jungle, and would prove twitchy to apprehend going forward. Not a perfect result, but for a first encounter with an unknown Ultra Beast, the situation had ended with minimal harm. Jackson looked up as Lana and Mallow, harried but hale, emerged from the direction the torrent of water had come, Lana a little uneasy on her feet but smiling with bright eyes, Mallow still scolding her as they went.

The Captain of the Pokemon Rangers went to the two as those behind him began shifting the captured Ultra Beasts to the shore.

“You're going to be the end of me one day, Captain Lana.” The grin he got back from her was as unapologetic as could be. Mallow shook her head.

“You and me both, she's the worst!”

Lana, pulling free for a few steps, turned to face the both of them with a smile, the mysterious Ultra Beast being raised up behind her to be carried away. She lifted her phone.

“I'm the best.”

**Lana attached image: [ ]**

Attached is a picture of an unknown Ultra Beast, bound in the capture tools of the UB Task Force, Lana standing just before it raising her phone to get her smile and the captured Ultra Beast in a single shot.

**Lana:** no data no problems

**Mallow:** She's not cool she fell over as soon as she took that don't compliment her

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**Mission 04: UB-Symbiont and UB-Blade - Pursuit**

“Blacephalon, yes, I think that is an appropriate name for such a creature, don't you?”

The question received little more than a non-committal noise from Trial Captain Kiawe of Wela Volcano, the dark-skinned teen watching two Trainers disappear atop their flying Pokemon into the distance. Behind him members of the UB Task Force, Aether Foundation, and one visiting scientist, were putting the finishing touches on the sealing of the today-discovered Ultra Beast Blacephalon, a humanoid creature with a rapidly regenerating explosive head.
Really the last thing on Kiawe's mind right now was coming up with names.

“Do you think they'll catch it?”

“Oh likely not,” the tall blonde scientist Colress waved absently, typing notes on the observed Ultra Beast at mach speed into the panels mounted to his clothing's arms. “With the speed and direction that Ultra Beast was moving at, it won't stop until it reaches Heahea City for sure.”

That put Kiawe's mood a few notches worse. He and a number of others, the Totems of Wela Volcano, the UB Task Force, and a spread of members from the Aether Foundation, had successfully driven Ultra Beasts from across the eastern side of Akala to Wela Volcano, so that they might complete a capture operation here. Combined with the actions of his fellow Captains, and the UB Task Force's spread, the entire northern sphere of Akala was, relatively, safe. But further south it got bad. Heahea was a disaster site, and Konikoni was full to bursting with people seeking refuge. Should an Ultra Beast make it there... Kiawe didn't know how Mallow and Lana were able to cope while their homes were in such a perilous state.

He shook his head, focusing back on thoughts of the two who'd joined them for the mission and were now heading west. They'd help. He'd believe.

Turned his attention back to the scientist behind him.

“Mr. Colress, how soon until you can prepare more of those Ultra Beast traps?”

While those of Wela Volcano closed out their operation, two who had joined it were already moving to the next. Each riding Pokemon moving as fast as they could fly, the two maintained their focus forward as they pursued the one Ultra Beast to have escaped the grips of their ambush before.

“I can't see it!” Kukui's call from the back of his Braviary reached Kahili's ears even with the wind whipping between them, the Flying-type Expert not changing the direction of her stare for a moment.

“It's ahead,” she called back, her voice slightly harder to hear than Kukui's own but still being picked up. “But we won't catch it before the city.”

“Don't see why these Ultra Beasts have to all be so fast,” the Professor grumbled, this time his voice quiet enough Kahili couldn't hear it to reply. “Feels like cheating.”

With their fast flying Pokemon carrying them, Kukui and Kahili had become a strike-team across Alola, appearing here and there to help pacify and restrain Ultra Beasts before moving to the next location. They'd taken little rests often, up since the last night when Kahili had sought Kukui out atop Mount Lanakila to tell him about Moon's disappearance. Nanu had got hold of them soon enough to stop either from turning Alola upside-down, directing them to the Aether Paradise, only for the time it took the two to make it there resulting in all of Alola going to hell. All Kukui and Kahili had managed to get of Moon, and Lillie and Hau, was assurances from one of the Aether higher-ups, a Ms. Wicke, that the children were well. Kahili had apparently checked in on a sleeping Moon and confirmed she was fine, but Kukui had already been dispatched to lend a hand back at Ula'ula.

Even overnight the Ultra Beasts showed no pause.

“It's ahead!” Kahili's louder voice this time drew Kukui's eyes to glittering Heahea, almost the picture of its true self from this high up. But one thing was missing. The people.

The city already falling apart.

UB-Symbiont, true name Nihilego. A parasitic Pokemon, the jellyfish-like creatures sought out
targets to latch onto and make use of. The official reports from the UB Task Force were that Nihilego injected a neurotoxin that caused an immediate loss of one's mental filter, driving them to act on their first thoughts at all times. This, combined with the paralysis of nerve endings causing a severe reduction in pain responses, quickly made for terrifying encounters indeed.

Why oh why did they seem so interested in pursuing humans above all?

A storm of wind from the Braviary and Toucannon combined whipped through the streets of Heahea, collecting and dragging along those people with the parasitic Ultra Beasts affixed to their heads. Overpowering displays of force could scare the creatures enough for them to detach and flee, but showing such without doing real harm to their hosts was a difficult thing indeed. Kukui and Kahili circled a group, yelling voices and thrown rocks from below failing to reach up to them. One figure, arms bulging, succeeded in tearing a mailbox from the side of the street and throwing it upwards at the pair.

It disappeared into wafer ribbons before it ever reached them.

“There it is!”

UB-Blade: Kartana. A diminutive Pokemon almost one-dimensional in shape possessed of free-flight with its floating form of razor-sharp blades all edges of white body highlighted by red and gold like origami come to life with an intensity and speed that even the two master Trainers of Alola had failed to catch. Despite being lured into the trap of Wela Volcano it had fled, and Kukui and Kahili’s pursuit had chased it here. The Pokemon spun about in the air, the two Trainers above calculating attacks to make upon it that would not affect the infested host of people below.

The Kartana decided for them.

A building shuddered and began to fall, cut clean through five times over as the Drawn Sword Pokemon disappeared once more. Cursing Kukui wheeled his Braviary about, turning in pursuit. They needed to stop that thing first, before it levelled Heahea. Looking at the group below, Kahili reluctantly agreed and followed after.

On the docks of Heahea two disembarked. Chief Anabel of the UB Task Force, member of the International Police, and Gladion, partner of Type: Null, the Pokemon known as 'Beast Killer'. Anabel directed the young teen clearly.

“The number of Nihilego in Heahea City is the highest in Alola, we need to force them to flee their hosts so we can get these people to care. We have boats here to transport them to the Aether Paradise, so for the two of us we need to move ahead and chase those Parasite Pokemon off.”

“Understood.” Gladion nodded, Null beside him's growl echoing inside of the iron helmet it wore. The scent of Ultra Beasts in the air was more than enough to set the Synthetic Pokemon on edge. Yelling voices in the distance closed in, and as the two walked forward another emerged from a building’s side. A Nihilego attached atop their head, broken street sign clutched in their grip, a roar that sounded like it tore the throat caused no show of pain as they charged forward.

Gladion's Bond didn't waver in the slightest.

“Null! Go!”

It was delicate, Anabel observed, the savagery of Type: Null. A single launching leap had it course just over the head of the infested person, the huge Pokemon's claws drawing lines across the soft flesh of the Nihilego without ever reaching the individual below. In the time it took Type: Null to
land the Parasite Pokemon had already detached, screaming at the injury taken, fleeing from the Beast Killer that opposed it. It really was ridiculous.

Information received from the Aether Foundation had explained it. Null's body was designed to reject the Aura that pulsed through Ultra Beasts and strengthened those creatures, and so Null affected them as equally as any other Pokemon. For Anabel, who'd dealt with a number of Ultra Beasts before and cursed their unnatural resilience each time, it was genuinely shocking to see them harmed so easily.

And the Aether Foundation had two more Type: Null frozen away?

Unfortunately, as the reports were, the restoration process to bring those two back to health would take months. There was no way for them to be added to this cause. But Anabel, and the International Police, would be very interested in hearing of them after those months had passed. The Aether Foundation, even in the darkness of their president's obsession, may just have crafted the lights that would lead to a safer future still.

More Nihilego fleeing, many rising into the air. Activating an Ultra Ball, Anabel rose up upon the back of the Pokemon she chose. Her partner, the Dragon Pokemon Salamence.

There were Pokemon that seeing for the first time awed, and Gladion paused to witness the Dragon Pokemon arise. Anabel stood atop its back, Nihilego filling the skies, panicking and unable to choose their direction to hide. Without any hosts to hide behind. The UB Task Force Chief lifted a jewel upon a chain from a pocket, holding the rainbow Key Stone out.

“We're stopping this.”

Across the city Kukui and Kahili maintained the strength of their Pokemon, a Midday Lycanroc and fiery Baile Style Oricorio producing a mass of floating and burning rocks to block off the Kartana's escape. The Ultra Beast cut fast enough to reduce each stone to cinders, but the two Pokemon of the two master Trainers raised more just as fast. They were pressuring it, pushing it back, and finally gaining ground. Of all the Ultra Beasts they'd fought since the invasion began, this one was by far the most frustrating.

Aura glowing bright around it, once more the Beast moved at its full speed and burst through the forces in opposition. Kukui and Kahili both turned to follow after. It wasn't getting away this time!

It wasn't.

Frozen in the air the Pokemon remained still, a pulse of purple around it locking its form in place. Before it stood one and floated another, the dark-skinned and dark-haired Kahuna of Akala Olivia, and the black skinned and pink-shelled Guardian Deity Tapu Lele. Hand outstretched, Tapu Lele held the Ultra Beast in the grip of its psychic abilities. Olivia's hand was raised too, the mirrored action giving even more strength to the Tapu with which she held a Bond.

The Kahuna's eyes flicked to Kukui and Kahili, a clear instruction. Both moved to finish it.

“Alright Lycanroc hit it hard!”

“Oricorio unleash your flame!”

The two Pokemon lashed out, and from the swirling storm of fire and rock the Ultra Beast dropped, caught just before hitting the ground by Tapu Lele's power once more. The floating deity drew the Ultra Beast towards it, Olivia noting its clear defeat. Best find some UB Task Force members to drop it off with.
“They're more common on the south side,” the Kahuna said clearly. Kukui and Kahili approaching to make sure she was alright. Each Kahuna had been going all out with the Tapu since this began. Was Olivia okay? She shook her head to ignore the question. “The UB Task Force is concentrating here, I'd appreciate if you came back with me to help Konikoni's defense.” Nods from the two drew a slight smile from the tired Kahuna, happy to have allies she could call on. Even in disaster this was still Alola. Even in disaster they'd still practise Alola.

They'd all reach out and save the day.

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**Mission 05: UB-Assembly – Exodus and Purpose**

Malie City's population slipped hour by hour, the western paths choked by people fleeing the city at risk as afternoon set in across the region. Whether following the mountain paths up to Hokulani, where the observatory at the mountain's peak was taking in all seeking refuge, or even pushing all the way to Po Town, Team Skull occupants all vanished leaving it empty, all that mattered was no longer being in Malie. If Heahea City had the highest concentration of Nihilego in Alola, Malie was only a few steps behind. Hau'oli had escaped only by Kahuna Hala and Tapu Koko striking there early, a huge storm of electricity warding off the Nihilego seeking human host.

Olivia and Nanu had secured Konikoni and Mahihinu similarly, but that still left other cities to fall.

“This way! It's safe over here!” Hau's voice joined a chorus, UB Task Force members alongside those of the Aether Foundation providing guidance to those seeking to leave Malie behind. Anabel had deployed Hau here, telling him that with his Pokemon he'd be best at making sure people kept out of the way of the Ultra Beasts. Compared to what Gladion was doing, directly stopping the invading creatures, it was a lot less than what Hau wished.

But he had to accept that this was as far as he could go, right?

He didn't even see any Ultra Beasts here, was just part of those defining pathways for people to move. Checking in with houses, relaying directions to follow. Some people stopped and checked on him even as he advised them, but Hau just gave a smile and let them know to head on to safety. He was just doing his part.

As small as it felt in his eyes.

Districts of Malie were cordoned off, entire stretches of the city where Nihilego populations were high. Ultra Beast Task Force members entered as groups, returning with unconscious people to be taken to the Aether Paradise, Hau acting as one of those standing by. Just watching over it all. Doing so little indeed.

There was a Xurkitree in Malie Garden. By the time Hau pushed his way there those around had already brought it down. Reports of a Pheromosa fighting everything that crossed its path near to the library. By the time Hau remembered the way, a problem Lillie would never have had, it had moved on with Task Force members in pursuit. He stumbled across an Aether Foundation setup providing immediate first-aid treatment, both to those injured in any way, as well as staging for Nihilego victims being transported away. Nothing he could help with here. There wasn't... anything Hau could do.

Saying he wanted to help, what was he even doing? Maybe it would've been better if he'd just gone
with Lillie and Moon. Not that he doubted they'd be able to summon the Legendary Pokemon on their own. Maybe he was kidding himself that he'd help there as well.

More than ever before he felt so incapable of practising the Alola that he loved.

“Help!”

The loud cry Hau charged towards without a second thought, hearing the call for aid and wanting nothing more than to be able to give it. Across one street. Another. Yells for help continuing, but he didn't see anyone else with him. Had he left the UB Task Force behind?

Was it just him on his own?

The next street was occupied. Three people racing down it, one carrying a child in their arms, a Herdier running alongside them. And behind them, behind them was...


Hau's running steps came to a halt, watching the Ultra Beast stomping after the fleeing folk, four legs supporting a creature that looked like little more than a tower of bricks, were it not for the manifold grey blocks that made it up displaying vibrant blue eyes staring in the direction it pursued. It was like a building come to life, towering over them all.

Was there really anything he could do?

“Raichu go!”

The Alolan Raichu, golden-furred Mouse Pokemon riding atop its own yellow thunderbolt tail, borne aloft by its psychic powers, manifested and flew overhead, zooming past those fleeing as Hau waved them to follow him.

“This way!”

Behind him a crack and flash of lightning, Raichu striking the Beast with its full strength, Hau stood at a crossroads, directing the people on the path to go. “There's a Task Force station that way!”

Turning back to the Ultra Beast it was closer still, the bolts from Raichu striking it but doing little to stop the towering creature's march. Using his own Pokedex, Hau checked the records he had. Stakataka, Rampart Pokemon, Rock and Steel type. A creature of incredibly powerful defenses, known to inter itself as parts of buildings and live silently until disturbed. This one wasn't silent though. This one was on the rampage.

He had to hold it back until the people were out of sight.

But it didn't care about the power he raised against it at all.

Approached without pause.

Bore down right upon him.

...there was a song in the air.

Then there was a storm of sand, whipping around Hau and the Ultra Beast both, choking out vision before splitting apart, a Pokemon and figure atop that Pokemon floating between them. The woman kept hold of the great red cloth wrapped around her over her mouth, but the direction she gave still
communicated perfectly as she slipped from her Pokemon's back.

As the Flygon rammed the Stakataka at full speed and Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Dragon Tamers of Alola, landed on the ground below.

“Push it back.” The response to the command was a full expression of power, the Mystic Pokemon, an insectoid dragon of green body, red framing around tail, wings, and over eyes, beat its wings again and again, each time unleashing a wave of sand that blotted the eyes of the Ultra Beast before it. Pitaya's focus remained intent, the fullness of her expression upon her foe. Hau, right behind her, saw clearly the full shape of the Bond the Guildmaster and her partner Pokemon shared. If he and Moon put the entirety of their selves together against Pitaya's one Pokemon right now they'd lose. That was the sort of height necessary if he wanted to take his grandfather's mantle on.

If he wanted to stand up and protect Alola as a Kahuna, he needed to be at least as capable as this master Trainer before him.

The plumes of dust and sound of the beating wings of the Flygon, the song Hau had heard moments before, soon drew others: UB Task Force members, but also those dressed in the same soft yellows and Ula'ula reds as Pitaya herself. The Dragon Tamers of Alola descended upon the city.

Quickly the Stakataka, once surrounded, found itself overwhelmed and restrained. Pitaya turned back to Hau.

“My apologies for our lateness, we were required to secure the routes those leaving Malie were taking, and have been restricting the Ultra Beasts appearing outside of the city since beyond the morning.”

“I-” Hau, of all people, felt like he shouldn't be the one being told that at all. Pitaya smiled gently.

“You stood tall to protect others. Your grandfather would be proud, Hau. Well first I suppose he would be very, very worried. Then proud. I understand hearing it from me must be unpleasant, but you should avoid wandering and facing Ultra Beasts alone.”

There was a whole lot Hau couldn't say to that, his thoughts jamming up as Raichu returned to his side, his hand reflexively rubbing the Pokemon's soft-furred head.

“The columns of people leaving Malie still need guardians,” the Dragon Tamer spoke again, turning her head to look out over the empty city streets. “We will spread throughout the city to help control the Ultra Beast population here. Should you wish to join us, or wish to go and aid those beyond, is something you must determine yourself. What is it that you want to do?”

He wanted to be strong. He wanted to be able to do what Pitaya did, what he'd been hearing Kukui and Kahili were doing. What Gladion and the Kahuna did. Swooping in and saving the day, beating back the Ultra Beasts, turning things for the better. He couldn't though.

There was so little he could do.

“What... what should I do?”

A woman used to dealing with older teens at the youngest, Pitaya caught herself before speaking too strictly. She'd made this mistake once before with Moon. And Hau too, if she were honest with herself. Better yet...

“Anything you choose to do has meaning.” The woman offered the purest truth she could find. “Acting to guide those who are afraid, you will give them confidence and courage. That alone is
something the greatest hearts of Alola strive to do. If you stand on the path and smile, telling people which way to go and reassuring them they will be alright, you will do just as much as I will in fighting the Beasts. Does that make sense?"

Barely. Hau nodded, but it was a partially insincere gesture. He knew he wasn't doing as much as those like Pitaya were. But if she, and the Dragon Tamers, were here then...

“I'll go out on the path.”

Pitaya nodded, a smile at Hau's determination.

“Those on it will feel better for knowing you are there.”

Mina attached image: []

A picture of a Pheromosa, buried up to its neck in the soil of Poni Island, is attached, the shape of a gigantic palm print forming a depression with the Beast at its centre in the ground. Mina's hand, two fingers raised in a 'V', is held into frame.

Mina: kahuna hapu says hello
Acerola: Yes!!!
Mallow: :o she did it!!!
Ilima: My congratulations, to both her and yourself.
Kiawe: I fully believed she would do it!
Ilima: I'll let Kahuna Hala know.

Interlude: No Rest for the Weary

The second night of the Ultra Beast invasion of Alola progressed far more orderly yet no less peacefully for its inhabitants, the response of the UB Task Force providing the necessary structure for those of Alola to weather this storm but the storm unabating all the same.

As rest cycles allowed the strongest Trainers of Alola to operate in different intervals, and the Kahunas wavered from sleep to constant action alongside the Tapu, the factions of Alola – the Pokemon Rangers, the Aether Foundation, and the Dragon Tamers among others – all moved to secure regions and help the movements of the people.

A split of the Ultra Beasts appeared to be an interest in inhabiting and destroying human settlements for some, and an overpowering desire to destroy and leave behind in others. Blacephalon, Pheromosa, and Buzzwole aggressively struck out at any target they saw, tearing apart every man-made structure they crossed, but still tended to concentrate more readily in the wider stretches away from cities and towns. Stakataka and Xurkitree seemed to prefer to bury themselves in comfortable places – the first amongst buildings, the second attached to power stations – but still moved to attack anyone who got too close. Most concerning were Nihilego, who actively sought out humans to prey upon, and Kartana, who more than specifically attacking people, simply lashed out to carve through their environment as if the act were natural for them. Any appearing Kartana had to be stopped quick, lest it tear entire city blocks apart with frightening speed.

Whatever their interests might be, the only real way to draw their attention fully from others was with a display of Z-Aura. And woe befell those who choose to do so unwisely. Never has the aggression and power of an Ultra Beast shone brighter than when seeking to stamp out any sources of Z-Aura in
As the night settled things continued as they had over the day, but a steady state always yields progress in time. Colress, an Unovan scientist come to Alola to study Z-Aura, had spent the day creating traps and bindings that could seal Ultra Beasts in far healthier conditions than what the UB Task Force was used to. When asked to explain his work however, he tended to spend far too long discussing backing properties of Z-Aura he'd observed to get to the point. Nonetheless his work had gone a long way to helping the UB Task Force capture Ultra Beasts quicker than ever before.

The announcement of Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island shone a light in the darkness. For Alola to once again have four Kahuna, for the four Tapu to once more have partners they might join with to protect the region, it meant so much to so many. All to hear this news felt relief.

Captain Sophocles of the Hokulani Observatory remained hard at work. The staff of the Dimensional Research Lab, having fled Heahea City, moving what they could here, continued their monitoring of the Ultra Wormholes across Alola. Professor Burnet, who had last night been alerted that her life work would now be put to the test minimising the damages of Ultra Beast manifestations in Alola, had not slept once since it began.

Molayne, alternating between checking in on those tracking the Ultra Wormholes and helping look after the crowds seeking refuge from Malie City, often reminded those willing to listen to rest. Not many listened.

This was do or die.

It was an odd feeling for the former Captain, the best friend of Kukui. The lessons he'd been given, how to act as a leader for those in need, he'd never really believed they'd be relevant to him. Was always happier to play a supporting role behind the scenes. But today here he was, using the words his teacher had taught him. Calming people with the same way she used to speak to a crowd and draw their focus upon her.

Those same phrases, to believe in and look forward to the future.

The memories tasted like ash in his mouth.

But still he spoke to hold them all together.

Chief Anabel was exhausted. It came as no surprise to Looker, who'd been tasked with overseeing the UB Task Force while the Chief took her, admittedly impressively strong, Pokemon across Alola to lend a hand. At the very least Anabel had listened to Looker and was taking rest tonight, which was one point of relief for the long-time member of the International Police. Though the district of Malie he was walking through was one of the least damaged by the Ultra Beast attacks, still Looker maintained his caution. He wasn't going to let down his guard.

Once had been punishment enough.

The directions he'd been given led to a sushi restaurant, and Looker found himself bemoaning the day of visitation. Any other non-Ultra Beast day and he'd love nothing more than to settle down and try everything they had on offer. Today it was empty though. No-one there. Well, one person was. A shift of his head and the figure stepped inside, Looker with a sigh following after, his gaze only briefly lingering on the closed up red-shelled form of the sleeping Tapu Bulu.
Inside Nanu greeted the man with his ever-worn lop-sided grin.

“You look beat, 100kr,” the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island leaned against the front counter of the restaurant, holding out a bottle to the brown-coated man before him. “Rough day?”

“It's Looker and you know it, 000,” came the reply, no hand raising to take the offered bottle. “Does the Kahuna of Ula'ula Island commit petty looting now?”

“Don't get your tie in a twist,” Nanu pushed the bottle further forward, “I paid for it. Or do you not want-” unable to even finish the sentence before Looker had lifted the bottle from his grip, Nanu smirked. That was more like it. Grabbing a second he removed the cap and took a long drink. Nothing quite like it after a full day's work.

Though it'd be better if he never had a day like this again in his life.

“How have you taken to it?” Looker took his own swig of his own drink, looking over the grey-haired man before him. “Almost ten years now, and it's still hard to believe.”

“Who'd have thought it?” Nanu shrugged his arms, liquid in held bottle sloshing about. “You team up with one Pokemon you don't know to stay alive and suddenly you're one fourth of the cultural leaders of an entire region. Those Tapu have no taste I'll tell you what.”

“I can imagine.” Pacing around the empty restaurant, Looker pictured eating here in future days. That would be a good reward for setting things right. “Though you appear to have held up well, given you're still standing.”

“Well,” Nanu paused on that, spending a good while with the bottle he'd claimed to his lips. “Yeah.”

Silence held for a while. Eventually Nanu spoke again.

“So that girl in charge, Anabel-” Even before Nanu could make his point Looker knew what was on the Kahuna's mind. Nodded and confirmed.

“Yes, as someone who has passed through an Ultra Wormhole to come to this world, a 'Faller', the lingering presence upon her is a draw for the Ultra Beasts.”

“More bait,” Nanu grumbled, fixing Looker with a steely stare. “You're not gonna screw up a second time, are you?”

“Absolutely not!” Looker's response came with an expression of great displeasure at Nanu's words. “It is my burden to live with the guilt of failing one person, I will not allow it to be two.”

“Alright good enough,” looking for no arguments, Nanu wandered over and leaned against a wall. “Though things haven't even gotten that bad yet. Not one Glutton has shown up.”

Cold air for a summer night. Looker drank deeply indeed.

“Is it too much to hope one never will?”

The loud scoff from Nanu caused the International Police member to flinch, knowing it was far too soft indeed. Nanu turned an eye back on the man before him.

“You act like that you really are gonna get someone killed again.”

A long and tense moment hung between the two staring one another down. Then the Kahuna broke it and shrugged.
“Well, sounds like you get it. I've gotta get my beauty sleep or the Ultra Beasts are gonna run wild over Alola, so you take it easy, Looker. 'fore you change that name again.”

The art of Nanu's speech was such that Looker only just controlled himself from throwing the bottle he was clutching after the exiting Kahuna. Still his mood remained foul for the night, even when returning from Malie to the Aether Paradise.

Keep her safe, don't let it happen again, like he didn't already know!

Like he could forget even if he wanted to...

The dawn of the next day of Alola spread over the ocean as a wave of light cresting waves of water, first seen from the highest points of the region, second from the flattest.

The tiny islands dotted across the Alolan sea, most uninhabited, saw the light of the sun early, and so work began upon them early too. For one island, first populated only the day before, a number of small ships docked around it, it was time to get back to it.

The important task of saving Alola without fail.

“Now then hurry hurry! To work one and all, we have a region to ensure!”

The loud voice of Faba, Branch Chief of the Aether Foundation, made no difference to the activity of the gathered Foundation scientists and engineers, continuing their work upon the staging grounds for the rescue of Alola. This new base was, as the Branch Chief had put it, an essential component of the rescue effort, and that only by appropriately separating themselves from the efforts of those maintaining Alola as it was, would they have the freedom to develop the solution to this crisis. Current Beast Ball production was far too slow and costly to resolve this present situation, and so here those hand-picked brilliant minds he had gathered would overcome this challenge and create the same device in a fraction of the time at a fraction of the cost!

The efforts the Branch Chief had made to ensure no-one left behind would usurp this discovery, so that he alone could stand upon stage bearing the sole salvation of Alola, went unmentioned as needless errata.

Yesterday had been good progress indeed, but there was still more to do! With the imminent collapse of the Aether Foundation – after all its President was the source of this disaster within Alola! – going independent was definitely the right choice. Faba and those working beneath him, they'd create the miracle solution and be hailed as heroes. Well, Faba would bear the weight of the attention for this act, such that it need not strain any other.

Such kindness he committed daily.

“There is no time for slacking now Jace, after all we have all of Alola to protect do we not?”

The young man Faba addressed, approaching the end of his own teens, jolted slightly, looking up from his phone to see the Branch Chief puffed up before him. Faba tsked. “Jace Jace Jace, you too are an essential part of this solution. Please do not squander our precious moments by playing about with your phone.”

“I-” getting that sort of lecture was frustrating for someone cusping adulthood, and Jace struggled under it. “Are you sure breaking from the Aether Paradise to do this was right?”
“Of course!” Faba answered without a second thought. “All of our equipment for the production of Beast Balls is not only mobile, it should be more mobile! The creation of this device should be something that can be done anywhere in the world, so that no matter where an Ultra Beast might appear, a Faba-brand Beast Ball will be the solution!” The doubtful look from the young man before him prompted Faba to shake his head with a sigh. “Young Jace, you spend too often caught up in your own ideas. Were you not part of the creation of the Ride Pager? Are you not a key member of the Beast Ball team? Did I not hand-pick you for this essential mission? Let go of your reservations and trust in my eye for talent, and put your abilities to full use! That is the best thing you can do today, do you understand?”

Told not to think, only act on the thoughts of others. His talents praised. His thoughts diminished. A daily affair. Jace nodded.

“Yes, Branch Chief.”

With a smile Faba walked away to see to another, as Jace's eyes flickered back to the message he'd typed on his phone all the same.

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**Mission 06: UB-Beauty – Keeping Home**

“There you go, feeling better? I bet you are! I bet you are!"  

Sina had, very quickly, gotten over any concerns with the sheer size of the Totem Gumshoos of Melemele Island, and this morning was presently running a comb through its thick coat, clearing out burrs and tangles from the Pokemon's brown fur. None of the Totems of Alola, at least besides the Kommo-o of Poni Island, were able to stand up to an Ultra Beast alone, and so had helped most by acting as bait and lures, their Z-Aura drawing the ire of Ultra Beasts as soon as they made sight. Dexio, who was always to be found near enough to his partner, looked out from the cave they were resting in, one of the many large dens the Totem used as a nest.

“What was the count on Ultra Beasts captured yesterday?” His question prompted a moment's thought from Sina, before she nodded her head.

“Around... eighty, I think? Like thirty of that was Nihilego from the cities though.”

“And the rates still seem the same today, huh?” The brown-haired man shook his head, the sky overhead clear. It'd be a beautiful day to hit the beach, if the moment you turned your back a dimensional rift wasn't going to open and unleash a super Pokemon that would tear through your team and you too if it got the chance. “That's bad.”

“Well...” Sina tried to think of something to say in response to that, but came up short quick. It really was bad. Into the silence of that moment, Captain Ilima found his way back to the three.

“The majority of the Beasts in the forest appear to be heading south to Hau'oli. We should follow behind them and pincer with Kahuna Hala.”

“Right,” Dexio stood, Sina doing so as well with the Totem bumping its large head against her in thanks for the care. “We'll be following behind you, Captain Ilima.”

Another moment's pause came by, Ilima having checked his phone for an update again. Dexio and Sina glanced at one another as the Captain stared in silence at the screen.
Mahihinu, the community distributed along the western coast of Ula'ula Island, had done the unthinkable over the past day as its population returned from whence they'd come before. The northern settlements, clusters of housing with gaps from one to the next, had left to travel north, through the Ula'ula Meadow, returning to the walled Po Town at last. Abandoned by Team Skull after the local Pokemon's destructive assault, the location was now somewhere people felt safe, even damaged the walls still providing a sense of security that caused those around to gravitate here, whether from Mahihinu or Malie.

In truth the real source of safety for Po Town was the presence of the UB Task Force, who used this high density of life location as a perfect base for holding back the Ultra Beast tide. Truthfully the walls meant very little. An errant Buzzwole or capricious Kartana would burst through them with ease. The leaps of Pheromosa, and levitation of Nihilego, would bring them over as well.

Po Town was not nearly as safe as many believed.

Perhaps equally unsafe, though far less believed in, were the ruins of Tapu Village. While the northern population of Mahihinu had returned to Po Town, the southern had gone to that overgrown village, settled within and attempted to make comfort amongst the plant-rich ruins. It was an action none would have ever made in times past, but Tapu Bulu was far too busy at the moment to complain.

Even still, as she kept an eye over the area, Captain Acerola could not help the strange feelings being here and surrounded by other people prompted within her.

"-what with the halt of flights into the area, it's hard for others to get here. The UB Task Force had their own personal ships and all but even the Unova Elite Four have to rely on public systems. It's funny when you think about it, how easy a place can be cut off."

"It's really not." Acerola had far less academic interest in the ramifications of disasters such as this than Grimsley, former Unovan Elite Four member and current resident of Mahihinu. Displaying that his prior status was well earned, Grimsley had established himself from minute one as well capable of opposing Ultra Beasts in a way only a handful of Trainers across Alola could, and took full charge of keeping the area secure.

There was still no way to compare to a Kahuna and Tapu, and watching Nanu and Tapu Bulu razing Ultra Beasts across the area on the first day had grown more humbling by the minute as Grimsley went all out stopping those creatures on an individual level. That technique, that Z-Move the Kahuna and Tapu did together, there was nothing else like it.

Such were Legendary Pokemon like, Grimsley supposed. It wasn't like he hadn't seen his own few in his time, nor that he hadn't witnessed the power that defined them apart from all others.

There was just something about the fact the Tapu were here, always around, and at any moment should they and their Kahuna decide to, the Guardian of Alola could arise.

Villains beware, huh?

“Captain Acerola! Sir Grimsley! Help!”

The call to action received immediate response, Grimsley and Acerola both crossing the pathways of
Tapu Village – somewhat cleared to allow movement by those who'd returned – to approach the one calling them. The figure pointed desperately east. “Another Ultra Beast has appeared at the Refuge Zone!”

It wasn't an odd thing to see a Pokémon capable of both flight and bearing its Trainer amongst a powerful Trainer's team, the provision allowing movement of a class entirely of its own. Many Pokémon held the ability to handle the weight of their Trainer, the power that courses through them far beyond their frame. Grimsley was heading east in moments, atop the back of a partner Honchkrow, Dark and Flying-type black winged Big Boss Pokémon, while Acerola manifested her Drifblim just seconds behind. Sweeping through the air, past Tapu Village and over the Refuge Zone, indeed there was an Ultra Beast there, presently annihilating a parked caravan with a series of brutal kicks.

Pheromosa, Bug and Fighting-type, huh? A terrible match-up for Grimsley, but he hadn't gone this far in life without learning how to stand up even with the worst odds against him. Preparing one of the Mega Stones he carried, a bracelet holding a rainbow Key Stone drawn down to his wrist from within a sleeve, he swooped down and raised a Great Ball up.

“Houndoom we're standing strong!”

While Acerola's Drifblim had no issue carrying even a number of people, it was far slower than Grimsley's single-rider Honchkrow, and her arrival was already to find the battle in full swing. A sea of flames surrounded a tall black canine Pokémon, heavy white armour covering its upper body and forelegs, two great horns emerging from its head. A forked trident-like tail snapped through the fire that did not burn it, the Pheromosa having far less luck with the assault.

The toxins mixed into the flames Houndoom breathed were said to cause the pain to last forever without proper treatment. Being a Ghost-type Trainer Acerola wasn't unused to the darker natures of many Pokémon that could cause pain or worse if not approached carefully, but even still, watching Dark-type Experts at work was still always a bit distressing.

The heavy flame-spewing jaws of the Mega Houndoom stood at great contrast when wrapped around the slender white limbs of the Ultra Beast Pheromosa. Despite being creatures of another world, type match-ups still meant a lot. Captain Lana and Jackson of the Pokemon Rangers had successfully bested an Ultra Beast after Lana struck it with a Water-type Z-Move. And Grimsley, using fire against the part Bug-type Pheromosa, was causing it quite some harm as well.

Still to date only the Tapu appeared able to defeat an Ultra Beast in a pure one against one match-up. Some of the best Trainers could claim victory using multiple Pokémon – though the Ultra Beasts tended to attack the Trainers themselves if given an opportunity – but for the majority of Alolans taking part in the stand against the Ultra Beast invasion it was a matter of pack tactics. Combining attacks from multiple angles, applying effects that would weaken the Ultra Beasts and allow other Pokémon to score stronger strikes still. Using defensive abilities to ward off their attacks. The best situation was indeed for multiple Trainers to surround an Ultra Beast.

Thus the worst was quite obvious as well.

A spray of sand caught in the wind of its movement another white Beast burst from the entrance to the Haina Desert, surging through the flames and landing a direct kick into the side of Grimsley's partner Houndoom. The blow was true, and the Dark Pokemon's Mega Evolved state faded even as it flew through the air. Grimsley took upwards upon his Honchkrow, calling Houndoom back, the two Ultra Beasts below both looking upwards at the circling pair of Trainers.

Acerola frowned.
“Let’s lure them north.”

“Back into the desert?” Grimsley nodded, that place the best location to choose. “Did you let the Task Force know?”

“Yep.” The Drifblim carrying Acerola started to move, the two Ultra Beasts below still staring at them. A leap could bring either upwards with great speed, but two flying targets appeared to inspire caution. Grimsley circled Acerola atop his Honchkrow as the two crossed over the threshold. The uninjured Pheromosa followed after.

The hurt one turned its attention back to the trailer it had been tearing apart.

A quiet curse under Grimsley’s breath still drew Acerola’s eyes to him then back to the situation. A hiss of breath from her as well. Bad bad bad.

“Which can you do better?” Grimsley was quick to think, “occupy the one in the desert or finish up the one back there. One of us does that then joins the other, got it?”

“I’ll take the desert,” Acerola held up a Great Ball, “get that other one down.”

“Got it.” As the Honchkrow holding Grimsley peeled off, Acerola activated the ball and pointed it behind the Pheromosa that had followed them into the desert. The red beam from the ball hit the sand and did little more. But that was fine.

Palossand, Ghost and Ground-type Sand Castle Pokemon, a living spirit that shaped the sand around it into form, was now ready to work.

By the time the UB Task Force members arrived at the Tapu Village Refuge Zone, two Pheromosa awaited them. The first had suffered a significant degree of burns from Grimsley’s Mega Houndoom, then been pummelled from above by various Flying-type techniques from his Honchkrow. The second had struggled within sand that actively sought to mire it, each time it leapt punished by attacks from the two’s Flying Pokemon above, each time it landed and was caught by the sand strikes from a well-footed Scrafty weakening it further.

Admittedly it was still fighting at this time, but once the Task Force were present pacification and restraint was a done deal. Compared to their experience before the Ultra Beast disaster in Alola, the members of the International Police had gained many times more over this past day and a half. Restraint of singular, even multiple Beasts had become routine. There were strategies that worked.

If only there were a way to mitigate the numbers still appearing across the region.

An argument back-scored Grimsley’s discussion with the Task Force members, getting an update on how things were going closer to Po Town. Acerola, standing before one of the few occupied trailers in the Refuge Zone – thankfully not the one the Ultra Beast had been targeting, yet – was having no luck in convincing its occupant to move on.

Why did Rosia’s insistence on remaining here have to go this far?

“Auntie please!” Acerola shook her head, “even if you just head into Tapu Village to stay with everyone else, at least it’ll be better than being out here! You’re too far away from people keeping the area safe!”

“Acerola, dear,” Rosia showed no intention of moving on, “my decision to stay here won’t change. I will be safe here, do not worry.”
“That doesn't make any sense!” Caring for all those of the former Tapu Village was one of the strongest drives that Acerola had, and Rosia insisting on remaining in danger was driving her crazy. “One kilometre west! Five-hundred meters even, just a little bit to make it easier on us?”

Rosia shook her head.

“The home I chose to make here, I will keep here. No-one will move it. It has meaning to me more than anything else. Acerola, please go and help keep the others safe. I will be fine.”

The shake of Acerola's head did nothing to stop Rosia from stepping back within the caravan, the conversation ended just like that. The young girl shook her head again. What was that? What was she even meant to do now? The buzz of her phone distracted her, for a moment, and she looked at it for just anything else to focus on.

Her eyes widened to see the message that had been sent.

“Remember all! Failure is oft the mother of success! Be not discouraged and maintain your effort! Alola is counting on you!”

Motivational speeches were one of many abilities one had to obtain in order to rise to such an exalted position as Faba had thus far. Keeping this batch of Aether Foundation workers he'd pilfered, borrowed motivated and working hard was just proof that he had what it took to rise even higher! Sure the Madam President may have built the platform from which Faba had launched his career, but it was his own hard work that was carrying him into the stratosphere itself! The completion of mass produced Beast Balls, the descent of Faba and associates across Alola to save the day, would send his name and persona rocketing around the world!

Yes, without question this was the best decision of them all! Not a shred of doubt in his mind! And oh, look there, someone slacking off. Now now! “Jace!” Clapping his hands, Faba was rewarded by the young man turning to face him, “we are on a timeline after all! Back to work!”

Jace still stood there. Faba frowned.

“Come now, are you doubting yourself again?” Pacing forwards, the future hero of Alola – nay, the world! – shook his head. “I have told you so many times now, trust in the direction I have chosen! Now then, if you would.”

“I'm not doubting myself.” Jace interrupted Faba, surprising the scientist. Well now, how rude! Jace held his eyes closed a moment. Then looked forward with a smile. “I'm choosing what I think is right.”

And any response Faba could have made, any snide remark about Jace thinking better than he, died in a choked gasp as ascending the steep drop to the water below, the seven Captains of Alola answered the call.

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**Mission 07: UB-Blaster – Unrestrained Power**

Gladion's work had taken him across all of Alola since joining the UB Task Force the previous day, from Hau'oli on Melemele to Heahea on Akala, from Ula'ula's Mount Hokulani to the wide plains of
Poni Island. At first under Anabel's direct supervision, eventually Gladion was escorted by other members of the UB Task Force, the Chief accelerating her efforts in keeping Alola safe to a truly exhausting degree. There'd been words he'd heard, quietly spoken by those with him, expressing concern over the state the Chief was driving herself into. Apparently she'd been having hot flushes, moments of lapsed consciousness, and when not actively facing Ultra Beasts quickly fell into deep and unresponsive rest cycles.

Gladion hadn't personally seen Looker more than twice since leaving the Aether Paradise with Anabel and Hau yesterday, but word was the man was trying, and failing, to point Anabel in directions that would be less intense and far safer. Some Task Force members considered the act rather duplicitous. Others just appreciated that Looker was attempting to keep the Chief safe.

Hau had taken on the role of escorting people, joining caravans across Alola, lending his aid as part of the Task Force – one of many bringing Ultra Beasts down – while focusing on making sure people got where they were trying to go. It suited him, guiding and safekeeping the population, and the few times Gladion had caught sight of him, Hau had been so caught up in either working, or talking things out with other Task Force members, that he hadn't even noticed the blonde teen nearby.

Compared to the wishy-washy way Hau had been when they'd first met, just going with the flow and not showing particular determination about anything, right now he was giving it everything he had. It was good, and Gladion would be lying if he said he didn't find it on some level inspiring.

Not that he'd ever be able to say that to Hau's face.

With the midday long gone the orange light of afternoon was settling across Alola now, Gladion atop Type: Null's back patrolling the red stone slopes of the Ula'ula Rocklands. The research expedition of Professor Samson Oak had disappeared completely following the Ultra Beast invasion, only found a few hours ago camped in a secluded corner of the stretching stone environment. Being a rather uninhabited location, the Rocklands had not received significant guard, and so Ultra Beast presence had built up. Null had already gouged and driven off a number, the Synthetic Pokemon worn down but still standing strong. Gladion ran a hand over the back of its neck, just below where the iron mask that had been affixed ended. So there was little more to say.

Word was Faba had been found. The Aether Paradise was now putting its full resources into constructing Beast Balls, a large faction working on reducing cost and time while others just made what they could all the same. If even a few Beast Balls could make their way out, each Beast they stopped would be a disaster averted in a single throw. Providing the Balls were able to secure those powerful creatures.

It wasn't like Poipole, so small and so much weaker than those invading, was really a good test case at all. Gladion wondered whether his mother would even stand a chance in a world full of creatures like this.

Then squashed that thought. He'd chosen to believe in Lillie. No sense doubting.

He continued his patrol.

It wasn't a subtle creature. Its approach wasn't a surprise at all. A glowing star of flame flickering in the air, surging down through the afternoon sky into the Rocklands, Gladion instructing Null to keep a distance so they might observe the Pokemon coming in. He didn't recognise that one, but the red aura around it clearly made it an Ultra Beast. That size, that trail of fire behind it as it flew, it was dangerous.
He and Null should stop it here before it could go anywhere else.

The landing of the Ultra Beast sent out a wave of force that Null did not buckle under, proudly pushing through to approach the green-metal Pokemon, two great columns resembling cut bamboo resting beside the gigantic creature. Its bottom half was layered and wide, while its top quickly tapered to a point. Gladion definitely hadn't seen anything like this in the briefing he'd been given. Then again, Blacephalon had just been discovered yesterday. So there was one more new Ultra Beast, so what?

Gladion dismounted, and raised a hand with determination.

“Null, go.”

The battle between Type: Null, Synthetic Pokemon created to battle Ultra Beasts, and the unknown Ultra Beast that would be classified as Celesteela in the days and weeks past this moment, went as followed: racing in, Null headbutted the Pokemon directly with its heavy iron mask, pushing the huge creature back an inch. Leaping off of the ground, Null raised a claw high and swung it at the thin point connecting the Beast's body and head. One of the metal bamboo poles moved on its own to interfere, striking Null away. Rebounding quickly off of the ground, Null raced a circle around the Beast, leapt up behind it, and sought to strike at its back.

A tidal wave of fire burst from the end of each rocket the Launch Pokemon Celesteela controlled, and filled the area around it as an inferno beyond compare.

“Null!”

The pure heat pushed Gladion back, fire licking out at him and catching on his clothes, requiring him to pat down the flames as he moved back faster and faster. The torrent of fire became a storm spiralling around the Ultra Beast, a bonfire of such height it could be seen from across the Rocklands and even by those out upon the eastern Ula'ula sea. The Bond between him and Null, Gladion felt hurt. Distress. Fear. Clutched and held up the Master Ball he'd found at the Aether Paradise, been told to keep by Moon. If it worked, if he could stop this Pokemon, he could save Null. With all of his strength Gladion threw the ball at the Ultra Beast. It sailed through the distance between them.

And fell short.

Panic set in, Gladion seeing the ball drop amongst the flames. The storm was over now, but in its place was a field of fire, the red rocks scorched, errant flame still scattered about. The Master Ball... the Master Ball!

Ignoring the fire licking at him Gladion ran in, looking for where the ball had fallen. If he could get it, if he could strike the Ultra Beast with it, if it would work... he didn't care about ifs he would! He would stop it! He would save Null! He would...

Before him the Ultra Beast raised up one of its rocket arms once more. A red glow built within its grip.

The surge of fire washed as a spiralling column through the air, heat so intense it cut through anything it struck. But nothing did it strike, as the attack had been redirected. As a Pokemon had leapt upon the Ultra Beast at the last second.

And bit down upon it with ferocious beaked jaws.

“...Null?”
The Pokemon tearing into the Ultra Beast looked like Null. It had the same tail. The same legs. The same body. The fur around its neck, extending from its head, looked the same in shape and consistency.

But where Null's fur had been deep metal grey, this was shining silver. Where Null's crest had ended in a small fork, three blades that almost glowed emerged even further from the fur crest peak of the Pokemon before him.

And where Null had been shackled in bronze metal covering its head, this creature was free, and from its jaws as it pulled its head back and kicked off of the Ultra Beast, sending the giant Pokemon falling backwards, came a great howl of victory.

Null unchained.

As the Pokemon landed before Gladion he staggered. Felt the strength of their Bond, and the strength needed to keep Nu- no, to keep this evolved Pokemon going. But without any restraints, without anything holding them back... they'd go forward together and stop this no matter what.

With a focused expression Gladion stomped down to steady his quaking legs, and grasped his right wrist with his left hand. Alright then...

“Silvally let's do this!”

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**Mission 08: UB-Glutton – A Cry For Help**

The pace had changed.

Though Kahunas Hala and Olivia slept once more, exhausted by the constant battle alongside their Tapu partners, Alola did not suffer their absence as it had before. Ultra Beast Task Force members carried a new tool, a blue ball with yellow ridges, and applied it with great precision to end battles sooner than ever before.

They weren't perfect. Beast Balls could be escaped with strength. But once weakened by battle Ultra Beasts appeared unable to resist them. The same as any other Pokemon now. So the UB Task Force, the Aether Foundation, the Pokemon Rangers, the Dragon Tamers, and the Policeforce of Alola all went to work. The Captains kept at it. The Totems gave it their all. Every Trainer of Alola stepped forth.

As the afternoon set further in even Team Skull appeared to lend a hand. The majority of the punks, troublemakers, and runaways that made up that faction had little they could contribute, but they contributed it loudly all the same. Plumeria, returning to the home her grandmother kept in the Tapu Village Refuge Zone, decidedly told the old woman off for her stubbornness in staying. Rosia just smiled.

Her granddaughter had finally and truly come home.

Even the appearance of the Ultra Beast Celesteela had been contained. The actions of Gladion and his evolved partner Silvally, a Pokemon somehow even more capable of rending through Ultra Beasts than it had been before, pushed the pace even further. Sure Ultra Beasts continued to appear, but the more Beast Balls were made, the more Alola rallied, the less they could do.

It really felt like things were looking up.
The precise moment before everything fell to pieces.

Hau was at the Ula'ula Meadow. The red flowerfields had survived well the events to pass, the Ultra Beasts that appeared more interested in attacking the living, and man-made structures, than wild environs. A lot of the boardwalks had been smashed though. Still, the Pokemon Rangers had built a substitute direct path, and those travelling between Mahihinu and Po Town used it readily. UB Task Force members were always stationed around, this place one of high thoroughfare, guardians prepared to go in any direction to respond to Ultra Beast threats.

It had only been such a short amount of time before that he, Lillie, and Captain Acerola were here. It felt like the entire world had changed in the few days to have passed.

It was an overwhelming sensation indeed.

Three figures were having a meeting, gathered further back from the meadows. Standing at the base of the path that led up to the Lake of the Duske, Kahuna Nanu and Anabel and Looker of the International Police held quiet discussion. Looker was the most talkative of the three, Anabel rarely speaking. She was one of the ones pushing herself without slowing every minute of the day, and by now was running on fumes at best. At least, Looker considered noticing her slow blinks and slight sway, here at the Ula'ula Meadow was one of the safer places in Alola.

“It's complicated,” Looker shook his head. “As a solution to the Ultra Beast situation, Beast Balls are a miracle of miracles. Those at the Aether Foundation achieved something research divisions working with the International Police were never able to do.”

“But the problem is what they had to do to get there,” Nanu frowned, the truth of the matter leaving distaste in his mouth. “A system that ignores Bonds and, by design, was meant to be irresistible and unescapable. Even if they didn't get it that far, the backing technology is a goldmine for every villain the world over. That thing gets out, the wrong person figures how it works, and we're going head-first into a new age of the worst Pokemon treatment people can muster.”

Looker glanced aside. “That is the problem.” The summary in Nanu's words made him feel sick. A device that ignored Bonds, could not be escaped – that was a tool for nothing more than the greatest of evils. Using it to stop the Ultra Beasts with minimal damage was the best possible scenario.

But so many other scenarios were so much worse.

“Look,” Nanu raised a hand to rub at the back of his head, “I'm not with the International Police anymore. It's not up to me to make those decisions for you. That responsibility's for the two of you to decide on your own.”

“You can't at least offer advice as a former ally?” Looker's words... somewhere in her hazy thoughts as Anabel held her consciousness together she noted that Looker didn't address the former International Police member as a friend. Just an ally. They'd both been her superiors when she'd joined almost a decade ago. They'd both worked together too. And yet...

“Can't say I have a good opinion,” Nanu shook his head. “Don't really want to spend the time thinking about it either. That's for the two of you to deal with. I'm retired, just a simple Island Kahuna now. It's not for me to get involved.”

Looker's frown, and his intention to push the discussion to continue, never progressed further. For on the wind was a loud and howling cry, something distant yet so ominous it shook not just the air but the skin and soul. Anabel, hearing it, raised her head and focused. What a harrowing sound.
But her concern was nothing compared to the ice that manifested in the veins of the two that had heard that cry once before.

“Clear the area!” The booming command from Looker stunned Anabel, turning to him in surprise as those gathered in the Ula'ula Meadow, both Task Force and civilian, immediately scattered to the north and south. “This is a Code Gluttony! Contact every major Trainer in Alola and direct them here at once!” The rushed voices around Hau, as he moved with those leaving the Ula'ula Meadow, spoke of an incoming Ultra Beast known as a disaster of disasters. Pausing at the edge of the area, taking position to direct people out and make sure the Meadow was evacuated, Hau watched as the air behind him cracked and a surge of rainbow light poured forth.

Anabel and Nanu had partners at the ready, the floating Ghost-type Mismagius, a powerful magic user for Anabel, and the fearsome Intimidation Pokemon Krookodile for Nanu, already digging into the soft soil to tunnel into position. Tapu Bulu was absent, still resting from prior battles. Nanu's grim expression darkened. Of course there was no way they were going to get off so easily. With Ultra Beasts of every kind appearing? It hadn't been a matter of if but when.

It was kind enough that it had taken this long before disaster befell them.

“Get back Looker.” The direction from Nanu carried just as much weight as it had in the old days. Looker moved behind him and Anabel without even thinking twice. He had no Pokemon of his own, there was nothing he could truly do. All he could do was stand there.

Stand there and watch as the crack in the sky grew wider still, and be witness as the nightmare from almost ten years ago returned to Alola once more.

It began as an oppressive moment of silence, like even the sound in the air had been devoured. Then a great howl that grew louder and louder still as the crack in the air split and fractured, expanding outwards to become the largest Ultra Wormhole seen in Alola to date.

Equal to only one other before.

It fell with a crash shattering wood beneath its bulk two great legs of black skin stomping red flowers into the earth a rotund and gigantic body hauled atop those legs shaking in the air of this new world it had found a cavernous opening across its torso lined with teeth and leading to a glowing blue point like a gate to a world unknown two long and thick tendrils emerging from the base of that mouth ending in gnashing mouths of their own eyes and arms and a head with two more eyes all mounted atop its form of black skin and yellow teeth and claws and blue eyes and blue devouring force within its core. A tail ending in a ball of spikes slammed down upon the ground and another loud and echoing cry sounded out. At last a new place to feed.

UB-Glutton, true name Guzzlord, had returned.

“Cut its movement.” The quick digging Krookodile partner of Nanu tore through the dirt beneath the Guzzlord, its dug tunnels collapsing under the huge Ultra Beast's weight causing the creature to sink further and further down. The Mismagius of Anabel floated overhead, its Trainer gauging the effectiveness of the abilities her partner unleashed by the reactions of the howling Ultra Beast, previous records on the monstrosity having no data of weaknesses to exploit. Little information came from this barrage of attacks as well.

Just how strong could it-

Great mouths bit at the ground and hauled entire masses of dirt, flower, and wood into the air, before dumping each into the Ultra Beast's great maw, the matter all sucked through the blue portal within it...
into an unknown oblivion. Eating to dig on its own, the Guzzlord climbed its way back out of the pit Nanu's Krookodile was digging. The Kahuna's expression soured further. This one was just as strong as the last. No, pulling back, along the path that led up to the Lake of the Duske, Nanu watched as the Ultra Beast's snapping jaws grabbed and pulled trees lining the pathway into its open mouth, this one might be even worse.

This seriously sucked.

“We're backing up.” He gave the instruction to the two with him, Anabel nodding and stepping backwards, Looker behind them moving too. They'd lure this Beast all the way up the mountain, keeping it away from being distracted by anyone else. The last thing they needed was it deciding to target another.

A bolt of electricity striking the Ultra Beast at the back of the head mounted atop its wide body, a genuinely fine shot, received no compliments from the former and current members of the International Police. Hau, with his partner Raichu manifested, jumped as Looker and Nanu both yelled him down.

“Hau!” “Fool boy!”

“Get away from there!”

Too little too late, the Guzzlord already turning in the direction it had been attacked, hauling itself back down the path towards Hau. Muttered curses from Nanu accompanied his directions for Krookodile to burst from the ground behind the Beast, striking it hard in the back, causing it to whirl around again. For all the Krookodile’s fast speed, the snapping jaws mounted upon the two tendrils emerging from the Guzzlord's stomach moved faster, catching the Intimidation Pokemon in its grasp. More attacks from Hau, combining with the Mismagius of Anabel, hammered the Guzzlord as it began to draw the Krookodile into its wide maw. Looker struggled not to avert his eyes.

In doing so he was able to witness Anabel charge forward, calling back her Mismagius and unleashing her Salamence in the same moment, raising the Key Stone she wore high as the Salamencite affixed to her Pokemon by a band of metal around its tail glowed bright.

Mega Evolution once more.

She managed one attack. One incredibly powerful blow that threw the Guzzlord across the field, destroying a swathe of the red blooms as the Krookodile of Nanu was knocked free of its grip and dug into the ground once more. Then Anabel collapsed, the Mega Evolution faded, and her partner received no more strength. Her exhaustion had reached that breaking point.

Looker charged after her.

“Looker!”

Nanu's loud call, some of the most intensity he'd shown in years, went ignored as Looker moved to grab Anabel and get her away from the Beast. He wasn't going to falter before it. He wasn't going to let another be killed before him. Not again. Never again. Hauling Anabel over his shoulder, Looker grimly set to march away. He'd get her beyond this.

He would.

Pinning the Salamence underfoot, one of the Guzzlord's two tendrils fending off the Krookodile's assault, the other lashed towards the two humans before it.
...he wasn't going to let someone else be hurt again.

Those were the thoughts of Looker, knowing the attack was incoming, as he pushed forward and pushed Anabel away. An attack from Hau's Raichu, mixing into the struggling Salamence and aggressing Krookodile, struck the tendril with once more perfect aim, causing its blow to fall short.

Instead of snapping shut around Looker, a deep gouge left across his back instead.

Nanu's curses were coming non-stop, moving down the path now, preparing a Z-Crystal. Using a Z-Move drew the attention of Ultra Beasts, and the risk of tiredness from it would cause him to be in great danger. But if he didn't do something serious that Guzzlord was going to chow down on Looker – now injured profusely – Anabel – unconscious – and Hau – still here for some blasted reason!

They really were seconds away from an absolute disaster.

"Bulululululu!"

The loud voice of Tapu Bulu followed the sudden descent of the Guardian Deity of Alola, slamming into the Ultra Beast, throwing it back from the humans before it. Immediately with a wave of its hands Tapu Bulu grew great vines from the earth to wrap around the Beast, trees emerging after to imprison it. Nanu sighed and shook his head.

"Took you long enough."

It hadn't been that long since the last Guardian of Alola. A regular Z-Move had been risky but possible, but this... Nanu needed more rest. He could support Tapu Bulu for a fight, but not that Z-Move again. And against a Guzzlord, the only recorded victory against its kind having taken that much exactly... the Kahuna called his Krookodile back.

They needed to stick to the plan and get it far away.

"Hey great Tapu, let's take it up to the lake!"

The direction of Nanu came just before the Ultra Beast escaped its prison, devouring even the trees and vines holding it down. Yet the time it spent doing that kept it from responding to Tapu Bulu's flight, the Land Spirit ramming into the Guzzlord at full force and pushing it through the ruined field of flowers, all the way to the beginnings of the rise to the Lake of the Duske. Calling a Honchkrow of his own, Nanu took to the air.

"You remember the last time we had to deal with that thing, right? Got a Kahuna out of the deal? Maybe you'll get something better this time.” Nanu smirked at his own snide remark against the situation, something to hold off the stress. Seeing a Guzzlord again... it was filling him with all the worst memories he could muster.

Never again.

As Tapu Bulu continued to force its Guzzlord foe higher and higher up the path to the Lake of the Duske, those left behind had to face the experiences they'd just had.

“Hau... help me up.” The request from an almost face-down Looker before him jolted Hau, who'd approached the two UB Task Force leaders as Nanu and Tapu Bulu drove the Ultra Beast away. The sight of the deep tears through the back of Looker's clothing was beyond sobering. Hau felt a deep chill.
As Looker, with Hau's aid, returned to his feet, the Salamence of Anabel went to them, Hau helping Looker move the unconscious Anabel onto its back, then Looker himself after. “I-” little could Looker express as without direction the Salamence rose up, intent on carrying its partner and her subordinate away from this. Hau, momentarily wondering what Looker was going to say, turned and looked in the direction the Tapu, Kahuna, and Ultra Beast had gone.

He... he should go. The call had gone out for the strong Trainers of Alola to converge here. They would save the day. He... he'd done so little. Made so small a difference. Moon was out there with Lillie, the two calling for the Legendary Pokemon. Gladion was stopping the Ultra Beasts all on his own. That guy... he was so busy now, even when Hau saw him earlier Gladion had been too busy for him, just kept on moving without pause. If he... even if Hau couldn't do a lot... even if he could only do a little... even if this was maybe too much...

He wanted to stand up like Moon, Lillie, and Gladion did.

Hau took the path leading up.

The central disc of the Lake of the Duske cracked and groaned, sections of its stone form sloughing off into the waters it was set within. The ascent with Tapu Bulu pushing the Guzzlord had been slow, and tiring, but getting the Ultra Beast somewhere people weren't had been first priority. Now, at least, if they had to pull back they could just leave it up here for a bit.

But Nanu wasn't quite ready to do that yet. Not when they still had a chance.

Tapu Bulu's great strength allowed it to ram and push around the Guzzlord, even as the Ultra Beast attempted to bite back. It was a battle of stamina, the creature so violently healthy that even after being pushed all this way, even after being wrapped and bound in plants it had time and time again broken through, even after being struck with all the power the Tapu could muster, it still remained willing to fight.

Could the two of them burn it down to exhaustion? Wear it out so the Task Force could get here with those new Beast Balls the Aether Foundation had made and capture it? If they could just occupy it this long...

Seizing jaws caught hold of Tapu Bulu and slammed it into the ground. The exhaustion of maintaining this battle reaching him, Nanu struggled as he went for a Pokeball to try and get one to help. But could he even handle that?

The question didn't get the chance to be answered.

Another arcing bolt of electricity, aimed with perfect psychic ability, struck the Guzzlord in the head once more, a loud howling cry echoing in response. Nanu's disbelieving gaze went to see Hau, with his Alolan Raichu beside him, appearing from the tunnel that led underneath the water to this disc. What was he doing here?

“Get it, Kahuna Nanu! Tapu Bulu!”

The distraction Hau's Raichu had provided gave Tapu Bulu the room to break free, and once more the Island Deity charged into the Beast with full strength, this time lifting it up into the air and setting it spinning, the large-bodied creature landing down upon its own head. Another wave of electricity from Hau's Pokemon coursed over the Beast. Nanu shook his head, too focused on the Tapu to even admonish this ridiculous child. He'd have Hala give Hau the chewing out of a lifetime for making a
dangerous choice like this.

But...

It was working.

The constant attacks from Hau and his partner fit perfectly between the gaps of Tapu Bulu's assault, and slowly but surely the Junkivore Ultra Beast Guzzlord was worn down. It yelled out, bit at the air, but failed to do anything more as it was pushed back again and again. Victory within their grasp.

Or so it seemed.

As Nanu focused on these final pivotal moments, Tapu Bulu still giving its all despite the tiredness each felt after their day's exertions, Hau circled closer to the Kahuna. He'd known the choice to come here had been risky, and stupid, but to prove himself he'd... he'd wanted to do it! And it had worked, right? The Ultra Beast was just about done!

It was almost over.

So they believed for one singular precious moment.

Rainbow light cascaded behind them in a wave, the bite taken by the beaten back Guzzlord tearing open a way. The twitch in Nanu's eye at the sight of another of the Ultra Beasts, another massive black-bodied Guzzlord emerging, was pronounced.

“You have got to be f-”

There was no manner of fighting back.

As the stone disc centre of the Lake of the Duske cracked Tapu Bulu sunk beneath the waters, its attempt to fight this healthy Ultra Beast tragically short-lived. Too slow to avoid being grabbed, too tired to resist being slammed into the ground again and again, when thrown it had no consciousness left to do anything but fall.

Nanu's partner Persian appeared, but made its own choice for him as Nanu's fading strength failed to give it confidence in this fight. It grabbed him and raced away from the pair of Guzzlord, down the tunnel leading out of this place.

Leaving Hau to stand before the Beasts alone.

Raichu tried. It grabbed Hau and pulled at him until a wave of pure force from the two Beasts' yells dropped them to the ground. Heavy stomps carried each closer to him, Hau struggling and failing to stand from the attack that had knocked them down.

He looked up at the Beasts before him. Oh. He really had been stupid to do this after all.

Moon and Lillie would be so sad. They'd trusted in him. And he'd let them down. They were so strong. So incredible. Shouldered great challenges and went on. Smiling. Confident. Believing. To be more like Moon he'd given everything he could to grow. To be more like Lillie he'd always looked for ways to be kind.

He really wished he could have said that to them face to face.

A little rainbow crack in the air opened before him. A scratch cut three evenings ago, by the call of a tiny Pokemon seeking home. The Lake of the Duske, last place the sun's light touched. That light
holding out here as across the rest of Alola it gave way to the moon. Another heavy step of the Guzzlord closest to Hau. The crack widened before him. His vision was blurring. His heartbeat pounding heavier and heavier.

In his ears he heard it, a sound from beyond. Two flutes, played as one.

And in answer a distant, echoing roar.

Chapter End Notes

I've really and truly learned my lesson. I'm not going to say "this is definitely the biggest chapter Eldritch will have". I sure HOPE that's true, I don't wanna write this much in a single chapter again. There was a bigger than usual gap between chapters solely because this is a bigger than usual (by a metric) chapter, I still did about the same amount of work over time to make it. So here we are.

Nonetheless I remain insistent that this chapter needed to be like this. The only reasonable break point would have been at the night between days, and that drops too much of the mounting tension to maintain the flow and build-up to the final scene. It's my hope that using the titles to split this chapter into parts makes it easier to read through, that you can do a bit and come back to it later. But really I'm banking on my readers, having already come this far, not being put off by this much chapter. I really, really hope I don't do this again but I can make no promises. We'll just have to see.

Ultimately I can only write what feels right.

My continued thanks to all my readers, I look forward to hearing your thoughts. This was a long and complex chapter for me to put together and make feel right, but in the end I'm happy with it and prepared to move on to the next. Chapter 42 will be one we've all been thinking about for a long time. I say this every chapter but I mean it every chapter.

We're really and truly here.
Rushing wind washed over Moon, blowing through her short cut hair as, together with Lillie atop Lunala, evolved form of Nebby, they continued on through the hole of light. On to the world beyond.

To a silent world of darkness.

The change was immediate. From the bright surge of rainbow light so intense Moon struggled to keep her eyes open to an absolute and consuming darkness, the only light faint glowings of things unknown in the distance far below. Nebby flew on, the wind still blowing past them, but the feeling in the air was so much different already. Moon clutched tighter on to Nebby's back, Lillie behind her tightening her grip around Moon's waist. Nebby flew further still.

Flecks of white, tiny pieces of stone, spiralled in a trail behind them, flaking away from the Z-Ring clasped around Moon's wrist.

Revealing a similar yet different shape of black stone beneath.

Down through the darkness Nebby plunged, many of the distant glowing lights now racing up to meet them. Just at the last moment, with a heavy beat of its wings, Nebby slowed down to a stop, pulling up to float just above a smooth stone surface below.

They'd arrived.

Further down Nebby's back Lillie was the first to dismount, Moon sliding after, reaching out to catch Lillie's hand and be steadied in landing upon the ground. A faint glow came from the rocks around them, tall pillars emitting pale light, and by that light the two girls who'd come to this world beyond could see its shape around them.

Lillie breathed in, then coughed.

"The air..." placing a hand on Moon's shoulder to steady herself, Lillie slowed her breathing, "it feels so thin... it... almost hurts to breathe..."

There was something wrong, Moon felt with certainty, looking through the darkness around them. There was an emptiness here that went far beyond the physical. Something was very, deeply, wrong.

"Nebby?" While Moon was focusing on their surroundings, Lillie had turned back to the partner she and Moon now shared. The one each held a Trainer's Bond to – an impossible thing only a Legendary Pokemon could do – and by that Bond could feel not only Nebby but each other as well. Each time she considered that Lillie felt herself struggle to process it, and moved to instead think of only the now. There would be time for her, and Moon, to figure out what this meant for them after all of this was done.

For now...

Bending down, Nebby brought its star-filled face towards Lillie, the lights within so much fainter than they had been moments after its evolution. Raising her hands to place on either side of Nebby's face, Lillie brought the Pokemon's, the Lunala's, head to rest against her own. She could feel it.
“You're tired,” it was no question, the understanding coming through the connection between them. “You only just evolved and coming this far... it wasn't easy, was it?” Lifting her head a little, bringing Nebby's down just a bit, Lillie placed a gentle kiss atop the Pokemon's forehead. A soft croon came from it in response. “Rest, Nebby,” a hand running along the side of its face, the same caring touches she'd always given to Nebby before. “Moon and I will go on, and find my mother, and then come back to you. Wait for us. And... thank you. Thank you so much.”

Lillie's gratitude. Nebby's love. Moon felt both pass back and forth between them, an intensity of emotion that filled her own heart. This connection, she'd never imagined it.

But in her heart of hearts she fully believed she would never once regret it. Lillie turned to her. All it took was a look for them to feel the same. Determination. Focus. They were here to bring Lusamine back. And they would.

Lillie's gaze flickered to Moon's wrist. “Moon, your Z-Ring?!”

Only now looking at it did Moon's eyes widen to see her Z-Ring was no longer as it had been before. The Sparkling Stone Tapu Koko had given her, the one Kahuna Hala had fashioned into a ring of white, it was now black as pitch, its stone cold to the touch. Tracing her fingers atop it Moon felt out the point where a Z-Crystal would rest. It felt different too. Retrieving one of her Z-Crystals, setting it into the waiting groove, Moon noted it still sat right within. If she performed a Z-Pose it would most certainly work. But... still something was different.

Another flicker of emotion they both felt. Whatever strange things were happening, what they needed to do hadn't changed. Moon and Lillie both looked up, the direction before them outlined by pillars of faintly glowing stone. Step by step they moved on, together.

A shift of movement and, emerging from out behind one of the pillars, one came to greet them. “Alright now listen up,” in this dark and empty world beyond the Ultra Wormhole, the voice of Team Skull's Boss Guzma still had that crackle like it was fighting the air itself. Even with so little to breathe. “I'm the Team Skull Boss who's hated and feared, and I ain't never been afraid of nothin' or nobody! People are scared of me! So it's really, really important that you understand when I say...”

A brief moment of inhalation so he could really give this announcement the volume it deserved. “Y'all are stupid!”

The stunned expression from Lillie and offended from Moon did nothing to stop Guzma now that he was started on giving his rant.

“How did you even get here this is another freakin' dimension already! And a miserable one too! It's dark, the air's so thin you can barely breathe, and there's these awful Beasts everywhere while I'm at it! I tried to nab one with one of the Prez's Beast Balls and it just dodged and then...” stopping for a moment to breathe, Guzma appeared to struggle to hold the air, Moon quickly moving forward to make sure he was alright. He held up a hand for her to stop, speaking again after a moment's recovery. Quieter this time.

“But those things, they take you over. One latched onto me and I just... I wasn't in control anymore. Like I was watching someone else entirely inside of my own body. I was lucky that something spooked it, and it ran off, so I could get away but... that fear... you don't forget that.”

“Mr. Guzma,” Lillie stepped forward, keeping beside Moon. “Ms. Plumeria asked us to bring you
back. Where is my mother?"

A moment passed as Guzma stared at Lillie in surprise. “Plums did?” He sounded genuinely shocked. “The Prez, your mom, kid, she's... one of the Beasts tried to do to her what it did to me but... something else happened to them. I think because she wanted it. She's... she's lost it, kid, there's no way you'll be able to bring her back. I... sorry.”

“I will be the one to decide that.” Lillie's resoluteness Moon felt as well. Unflinching determination. She focused forward. Was Lusamine that way? Guzma turned and looked.

“Last I saw her,” he spoke slowly, as if not wanting to give the directions at all. “Listen, you don't... you don't gotta take me back or anything but don't try going after her. It's bad out there.”

“Nonetheless,” Lillie stepped forward, alongside Guzma then past him, Moon with her every step of the way, “I will not stop.”

The darkness of Ultra Space stretched high above them, an infinite well of black covering the sky to all horizons. The land they stood upon, small lights dotted across it in the rocks giving only the barest definition to their surroundings, was only a piece floating in the void. But even that was hard to tell with the depth of the darkness around them.

Moon held out an arm, raised before Lillie as she pointed out an edge. A plunge into the abyss. Focusing on it now Lillie could see it properly, but if she hadn't she wouldn't have seen. Moon had good eyes for the darkness. Moon didn't quite know how to feel about being told that.

A lilting yet distorted voice echoed through the dark.

“I had wondered whether Guzma had already lost his mind and begun speaking to shadows, but no, instead I find you, once again intruding upon the happiness I have created. Why is it you continue to torment me? Have you not hurt me enough already? Get out! Get out get out get out!”

From the depths of the shadows a shape emerged, floating in the void before Moon and Lillie. It was jellyfish-like in appearance, a shape perhaps once a Nihilego, UB-Symbiont, the Ultra Beast Moon had seen at the Aether Paradise once before. But it was different now, larger, once-white transparent form now tinted black like the world around it. Each long tendril hanging from its body now ballooned into a thick shape tipped with spikes, four moving as if arms, four more hanging loosely down.

Yet the true feature that defined the Beast to appear before Lillie and Moon was the one within it. Was the Aether President Madam Lusamine, her upper body completely subsumed by the Nihilego's bubble-like head, her once blonde hair stained black, filling up and stretching out the inside of the Ultra Beast's core, her waist and legs hanging limply below. Though held within this Beast, Lusamine's eyes remained focused, her snarl from within its head aimed clear. She was alert, aware, and staring at Lillie and Moon before her with clear anger coursing through her.

Lillie and Moon stared back.

“You!” Lusamine's arms were covered in parts of the Nihilego, what looked like stone crystallised around her, those large tendrils acting as arms for the Beast emerging two from either side. All four pointed forwards as Lusamine spoke. “All you've ever done is lash out at me! All you've ever done is try to hurt me! I came here myself! I made this paradise myself! The Nihilego and I, our love uniting us together, it is all I need now! So why are you here? Why are you trying to interfere yet again? Haven't you done enough? I don't want you! I don't want to see you! I don't need you! Get out! Leave! Leave! Leave!”
“Mother!” Lillie's clear voice in response stood opposite to Lusamine's, which grew only more distorted the further her ranting went. “Your paradise was built on the suffering of others! The misery you've caused... I won't let you live a life without atoning for it! Return Poipole to Moon! And come back to Alola to face the consequences of your actions! Stop acting like a child and take responsibility for what you've done!”

The look of surprise on Lusamine's face at Lillie speaking to her in such a way all too quickly morphed through a cascade of emotions, anger, disgust, hate. Teeth grinding together, Lusamine stared white-hot fury down upon the two girls before her.

“You...” she drew out the word, vision locked upon Lillie, “to think you would speak to me in such a way... you truly are no daughter of mine. Disgusting. Disgusting disgusting disgusting! What is such a foul creature as you doing in my paradise?! Get! Out!”

Moon saw it, the shape emerging from one of the outstretched tendrils towards them. Activating a Pokeball, the poisonous shot that surged out from Lusamine was quickly blocked by a barrier raised, Shelgon stomping the ground as Moon and Lillie pulled back. Lusamine, within the Nihilego, rose up.

“You,” her attention now switched to Moon, “are you the one who did this? Who warped Lillie into that awful thing? You horrible creature, coming here was your doing as well, wasn't it? You always had to break every limit, defy every rationality. Disgusting. The both of you... Disgusting!”

Another shape emerged from one of the tendrils, Moon calling for Shelgon to block the next shot as well. But that wasn't it. It wasn't a blast of poison that emerged from the Nihilego's arm.

It was a black and yellow Ultra Ball. And when it clicked open a beam of red descended from above to manifest into the shape of the Fairy Pokemon Clefable. A sudden tension in the back of Moon's mind was Lillie's reaction to that Pokemon, all of Lusamine's being symbols of the woman's control over Lillie's life thus far. Moon activated a series of Pokeballs of her own.

She wasn't going to lose again.

“Look at you,” Lusamine's body, even as large as it was with the Nihilego wrapped around it, was difficult to see in the darkness above, only her voice reaching down to those standing below, “holding those Pokemon. Enough to crush so many adults with their weight and yet you don't even show it. Do you even have any concept of what a true Bond means? The feeling of holding that connection and giving effort to keeping it strong? To keep those Pokemon without difficulty, how can you even be a true Trainer? You're just a monster. And my paradise has no place for monsters.”

The barbs in Lusamine's words, Lillie felt clearly Moon ignoring them. That determination, it strengthened her too. Reaching out she grasped Moon's hand with her own, the squeeze in return accompanying the feelings she received. Moon would do this. She'd set this right. Even if she had to stand up to someone as powerful as Lusamine herself...

She wasn't doing it alone.

“Get rid of them!”

The loud howling cry of Lusamine boosted her Clefable into action, the large pink Fairy Pokemon quickly waving a finger and preparing a blast to unleash. But before it could even fire the strongest partner of Moon – besides Lunala itself now – surged forward, a swing of the Bisharp's bladed arm cutting through the blast before it could fully form.
Moon’s focus remained set. Lillie had told her what the Pokemon of Lusamine were in preparation for the event they may have to fight, and Moon had spent much thought on preparing for it. Clefable, Fairy-type Pokemon, held both advantage and disadvantage against the Dark and Steel-type Bisharp. But the Bisharp was strong, and more experienced than all the rest of Moon's Pokemon combined, and so Moon trusted in it. While the rest of her manifested team – Decidueye, Shelgon, Sylveon, and Larvesta – remained gathered around her and Lillie, Moon focused only forward.

She couldn’t afford to slip and give ground an inch.

Slash by slash the Bisharp cut, the Clefable dancing quickly through the strikes yet the pressure preventing it from fighting back. In the fight before Lusamine had unleashed a second Pokemon, a Milotic alongside Guzma’s Vikavolt to crush Moon, Hau, and Gladion together. But this time it was just the two of them, Moon and Lusamine both. A second Pokemon, splitting focus, could put either into the wrong situation, especially with a battle as close as this. So the match remained close, and the dance continued on.

The air was thin, Lillie quietly reminding Moon to breathe more evenly. Those Pokemon, Moon wondered whether either was okay in an environment like this. This empty world, it felt so wrong to her. How could Lusamine truly be happy here? It didn't make sense.

“Fight!”

The demanding cry of Lusamine pushed her Clefable further, this time a quickly formed blast not being stopped before firing, the Bisharp pushing into it so it could strike in that moment too. Both Pokemon stumbled back, both hurt now by the exchanged attacks, and the air so thin that breathing proved difficult for either. Moon warned the Pokemon around her to be ready, each instructed on which of Lusamine's would be their duty to face.

But a drawn battle was more than enough to spike Lusamine's fury, amplified by the Nihilego's toxins coursing through her, to an explosive level. She would NOT be bested by a child!

She denied it.

One by one four more Ultra Balls activated, four more beams of red light shining down from above. The Grass-type Flowering Pokemon Lilligant, a maiden-like shape of green leaves topped by a royal orange flower. The Ghost-type Magical Pokemon Mismagius, a being of floating purple wrappings resembling the outfit of a witch, red jewels set across its waist. The Water-type Tender Pokemon Milotic, a creature that can only be evolved through its perception of its own beauty. How many words had Lusamine spoken to it over the years to bring it to this state? Moon wondered often how that Pokemon had come to be.

The Strong Arm Pokemon Bewear, Normal and Fighting-type. A huge bipedal creature of rounded shapes, the fuzziness of its fur – whether the black that made up its body, pink its face, or white its ears – and general appealing appearance contrasted by the danger Moon knew it to possess. Rotomdex had instructed Moon in everything it could find to be ready to face each of the Pokemon before her.

But she hadn't been prepared to face them as one.

“Crush them!”

Lusamine, how was she supporting them? Was the Nihilego attached to her giving the strength to do this too? The unison between them allowing her to support these five Pokemon in battle? The drain from their acting at once should be too much. But the constant yells from Lusamine above showed
she was suffering no tiredness at all.

No, Moon and Lillie both shook their heads, she was just showing no suffering. This had to stop. Moon called her Pokemon forward as well, and chose the best Z-Crystal she could.

They'd stop this together, just like they'd said.

Fight!

A battle of five against five was a thing rarely ever seen in the world, those capable of undertaking such the most limited of breeds. Though Moon had one more Pokemon with her, it was the Tauros that had carried her and Lillie to the Altar of the Dawne, a Pokemon not raised for battling as the others had been. Ultimately if added to this battle it would only take more than it would give. So it had to be just her trained five. Five against five.

This was the best that she could do.

Bisharp against Clefable. Decidueye against Milotic. Larvesta against Lilligant. Shelgon against Mismagius. Sylveon against Bewear. Those were the match-ups Moon had decided upon. The best arrangement for victory.

Yet Lusamine was a Trainer too. And there were combinations that would favour her instead. Clefable targeted Shelgon. Bewear Bisharp. Milotic shot a stream of water to Larvesta, Mismagius formed balls of ghostly energy to strike Decidueye, and Lilligant's scattered spores sapped at Sylveon's strength.

Each moved to counter the other.

Shelgon gave a barrier blocking Bewear's critical punch, sparing Bisharp the moment to strike out at the Mismagius harassing Decidueye, the Arrow Quill Pokemon changing its arrow shot to a Grass-infused attack aimed at the Milotic already tightly squeezing Larvesta in its grip, a surge of flames allowing the Torch Pokemon to break free and spiral down into Lilligant with fiery strength.

A shield from Clefable blocked the fiery blow, Lilligant's dancing still sending out waves of power to push the Pokemon of Moon down, giving room for the Mismagius to continue blasting ghostly energy from above, Decidueye held back from stopping the Milotic pouncing upon Larvesta once more, the Bewear powering through another of Shelgon's barriers to send the Endurance Pokemon bouncing along the ground with a single shattering strike, the Dragon-type coming perilously close to the ledge that fell into the darkness below.

Things were worsening by the second.

Moon had thought of strategies to face Lusamine in a drawn-out battle, trusting in each of her Pokemon to slowly hold out and overwhelm Lusamine's own – the way Pitaya had taught Moon to face a superior opponent down. But Lusamine's madness, and the power the Nihilego was giving her, was allowing for the type of battle Moon had no way to win. If she didn't do something, if she didn't change the battlefield right now, her team would fall apart. Thinking that, looking for an answer while tracking everything occurring at once, Moon only saw the target of Mismagius's next attack too late.

The battle against Nanu when Moon had called out all her Pokemon, Poipole had been the key to it. Even though the Poison Pin Pokemon had simply remained floating above the battle, because it saw clearly everything below Moon trusted in the senses she got from it, her understanding of where everything was reinforced. But without those extra eyes, without that extra focus, she couldn't keep
up here. Not like this. It was too chaotic.

And by that chaos the blast Mismagius formed and released towards Moon’s Shelgon, too close to the ledge by far, struck cleanly into the barrier the Pokemon raised and broke through. Hit it head on.

And pushed it back.

The immediate slowing of time to her eyes, the speed of her heartbeat accelerating, the panic and fear coursing through Moon’s veins, Lillie felt it too. Saw as Moon did the Endurance Pokemon struggling to grip the ground against the blast pushing against it.

Failing as it was driven off the ledge behind it.

One wish in two hearts. In this dark world drained of light one filled with her own cried out, Lillie’s will to do something, anything, mixing into Moon's own and driving the power Moon gave further and further still. A stream became a river, a river a torrent, as Moon all but shone and pushed everything she could out in this single, desperate, moment.

In the far distance a being even darker than this empty world looked up, in the direction of the light it craved.

It was not a thing she could have ever done alone. It was not a thing she could have ever done without the intensity of this moment fuelling her and Lillie both, their combined wills pushing the power Moon could give her partners further than should ever be possible. But it was done and the result was clear.

More than just Moon shone in the darkness.

In a beat of great red wings a Pokemon rose up from the darkness it had fallen into just moments ago, wide-jawed head upon long neck, blue scaled body of four legs and stretching tail, the armour plating Shelgon had been covered in left only across the underside of its new form. Of this evolution. Of the Dragon Pokemon Salamence, now flying free.

Yet the roar of Salamence announcing its existence to this dark world came second as surprise to those witness. For first had come an explosion of flame, scattered dust igniting into a firestorm, another winged being floating over the battlefield. The three other Pokemon of Moon had pulled back to her, each momentarily reinforced by the strength she had sent out, but that strength had been given strongest to the two most in need, and the first to show itself remained in place as the fires it controlled washed out and over Lusamine’s.

As with each beat of its six red wings, the Sun Pokemon Volcarona, evolution of Larvesta, a flying moth of thick white fur, light blue and black scaled body, red horns framing a black head and piercing blue eyes, announced itself in tandem.

By her light given, Sun and Dragon risen.

Moon performed a Z-Pose.

The storm of fire formed by the beating wings of Volcarona spiralled around it, condensing into a singular blast that glowed just before the Sun Pokemon's horns, its form turning to point towards Lusamine’s Pokemon, also retreated from the flames unleashed. Lusamine above yelled her commands down. Moon gave her order.

Fire.
The ball of Z-Powered flame surged forth.

Into a barrier it smashed and broke through, Clefable conjuring protection after protection before it. Streams of water from Milotic, blasts of power from Mismagius, shot after shot went into preventing the strike from landing.

Salamence curved around the group at full speed and flew right into the gathered foes.

This struggle Moon guided the rest of her team into, Bisharp still standing strong even after the blow it had taken, Decidueye and Sylveon still ready to fight. Salamence, in the midst of the gathered Pokemon, thrashed wildly, snapping jaws seeking any target it could claim, slamming tail cracking through the air. But the dispersal of the Z-Move had been successful, and even with Salamence's attack Lusamine's Pokemon remained focused. They were raised with precision and intense care, moulded into strength, and held experience and lifespans far beyond Moon's own bar Bisharp itself.

Even two more evolutions couldn't quite close that gap.

It was a more even battle than ever should be, for a girl who'd formed her first Bond only three months ago and a Trainer with years of intense effort shaping her team into their perfect form. Volcarona, exhausted by its Z-Move, fought strong still but a powerful beam of water from Milotic struck it down. Moon called it back.

Occupying the Mismagius with its powerful attacks Bisharp left its back open to Lusamine's Bewear, who even the newly evolved Salamence could not stop from breaking free and attacking. Yet the moment of relief provided to Decidueye allowed Moon to complete the Ghost-type Z-Pose, and the surging, grasping hands of the Ghostium-Z's Z-Move, Never-Ending Nightmare, that burst out from the earth seized hold of the Mismagius and dragged it down. Struck at each of Lusamine's Pokemon within reach.

Two beams of red and two Pokemon called back, Moon's Bisharp and Lusamine's Mismagius. Milotic turned another beam of cold upon Decidueye, now tired from a Z-Move used, the blast only blocked by a stream of fire from Salamence's mouth. Clefable and Lilligant, preparing a combination attack, were intercepted by Sylveon jumping into them, the Intertwining Pokemon's ribbons tangling the special attacking pair. Held tight between them though, Sylveon lacked little to do as Bewear charged in and rapidly pummelled it, thrashing relentless movements striking the white-furred Pokemon again and again.

Milotic, occupied by Salamence's fiery breath, took a surging Grass-charged arrow from Decidueye and fell back, Salamence continuing to unleash waves of breath, transfiguring from red flame to draconic blue. Two of Moon's Pokemon focused upon one of Lusamine's. Three of Lusamine's struck down one of Moon's. Two more beams of red. Two more returns.

Decidueye and Salamence against Clefable, Lilligant, and Bewear. Another wave of Clefable's hand and Lilligant glowed bright. Then sent a blast of glowing green energy racing at speed beyond reaction to strike the worn-down Decidueye directly.

One against three.

Salamence stood tall before Moon and Lillie as Moon called Decidueye back. The three remaining Pokemon of Lusamine approached them undaunted, ignoring the warning roars of the Dragon Pokemon opposing. Defeating two of Lusamine's Pokemon, that wasn't a small act. Not for even a competent Trainer. But to win, such a thing was still so far away. So desperate and distant.

Even though the tension bore heavily down upon each of them, still Moon and Lillie stood strong.
Lillie placed a hand on Moon’s shoulder. Moon didn't need to look back to know the expression Lillie was giving her. They'd come here to fix things. That meant not backing down.

No holding back.

From the bag she carried Moon withdrew a white orb, red and blue spiral of colour within, its weight heavy and warm in the palm of her hand. In her other hand she held up a chain, rainbow jewel dangling from it. The gifts given to her on her first day in Akala. Dexio and Sina had been strange figures, handing her such, but in this moment Moon was truly, deeply, thankful to them as she pushed the Mega Stone Salamencite forward, focusing on the Bond she shared with the Dragon Pokemon before her.

The rainbow Key Stone in Moon's other hand shone brightly as the Salamencite touched and freely entered the Salamence's body.

Moments ago it had shone and changed, the round body of Shelgon expanding outwards, the form nurtured within its shell breaking free and revealing itself to the world. Now once again it shone, a red glow obscuring features and building around its shape, Moon keeping her focus forward. She could feel it, the strength her partner was drawing to achieve this new form. And she gave it willingly. To keep going forward, without stopping, she'd apologise for ignoring Pitaya and Ryuki's advice at a later date.

For now, Mega Evolution.

Warping and transfiguring energies flowed through the thrashing Salamence, the Dragon Pokemon charging forward and lifting off of the ground as its wings grew larger and larger still, curving forward and merging into one wide crescent, its points aimed forward beyond its face. The shell remnants from its previous evolution grew further, wrapping around the Pokemon's shoulders, and into that shell it tucked its forelegs, its shape built to fly even faster than ever before. Yet the power coursing through it, the intensity of the strength it now held, Moon felt it in the howling roar that shook the air as the red light washed away and the Mega Evolved form of Salamence flew free.

It was almost beyond control.

The thin air split, the Dragon Pokemon flying beyond speed, curving through this void world Lillie and Moon had chased Lusamine to. Blasts from the Lilligant and Clefable, the much shorter range Bewear standing as guardian behind them, raced out after the Mega Salamence but failed to catch it, the speed it moved at far too fast to strike. Changing its angle the Pokemon flew back over the floating island of stone, the wave of wind following it washing over them all, Moon and Lillie struggling to stay standing against it. Focusing on her Bond Moon sent a command. Called for the Mega Salamence to target the Pokemon of Lusamine. Among the three remaining was a Clefable, who as a Fairy-type held immunity to the draconic attacks of Salamence. Use fire. The Lilligant would struggle with that too.

Once more the Mega Salamence blasted by overhead and unleashed another torrent of wind. Moon snapped a voiced command this time.

She felt no response.

Was it... had she lost control? Pushed the newly evolved Salamence too far too fast and failed it? The worry, the panic setting in, a pull on her shoulder turned Moon to face Lillie. Lillie's green eyes staring into her own.

“Moon, you can do this.”
That determination, that belief from Lillie, it restored Moon's will. She nodded. They would.

The Bond she reached out to, that connection between her and her dragon partner, the Pokemon Ryuki had guided her to catch back on Melemele those months ago. What was it doing, rampaging like this? They had a battle to win. So. Focus!

Ryuki had told her to pull back on her Bond. To restrict the power she gave, so that her partner would not be overwhelmed by it. She didn't have a clue how to, but believed she could and through that intent made it reality. Like a river narrowing the volume she gave reduced, Salamence at the last moment curving up instead of flying over, dodging once more the blasts from the Lilligant and Clefable pair. There. That was better. Moon called out for the Pokemon to attack now as she'd requested.

It flew down and did so.

Flames pouring from its mouth the Mega Salamence breathed out, a torrential firestorm unleashed upon the battlefield below, Moon and Lillie backing up further and further from the battle taking place. Within the fires Clefable maintained barriers against it, Lilligant and Bewear huddled close, waiting out the storm. The amount of strength to hold against this, the injury Bisharp had struck before the mass battle began, the Clefable reached the end of its stamina only moments after the flames came to a stop. The barriers vanished and it fell, caught by the Bewear beside it.

Lilligant, having prepared a Hyper Beam for this moment, fired it directly up into the curving wings of the Mega Salamence overhead.

Another beam of red light from the darkness called back the Clefable, Lusamine observing the battle in silence now, the strength raised against her stunning her speech. Salamence hit the ground, the injury to its wing striking true. With Moon pulling back upon the power flowing through it, it did not have the raw energy to resist a blow like that. The distance between them Lusamine's Bewear crossed and immediately began its assault, strikes and smashes raining down upon the grounded Dragon Pokemon before it. Lilligant, though possessing less effective abilities while exhausted from its attack before, nevertheless applied a drain against the Salamence's energy as well.

Two against one. Salamence losing power. What could she do... Moon struggled for the idea. There was... there was only one thing she could think of. And it was scary but...

But losing was even scarier too.

Moving her hand to her bag, Moon met Lillie's own, the blonde-haired girl already having retrieved what Moon was after. Pressed the deep blue-green crystal into Moon's palm. They both shared this determination. This intent. They'd come here to fix this.

There was no stopping.

Once again Moon let the power between her and her partner flow free, the Salamence immediately roaring and lashing out, a heavy headbutt striking and pushing the Bewear back. Another powerful beam from Lilligant, recovered from firing it before, was charging. Moon placed the Dragonium-Z into her Z-Ring.

No other way.

The Z-Pose for the Dragon-type Z-Move Devastating Drake was performed by holding one's arms out with hands clasped together before drawing them apart, miming jaws being opened. It was by this action that Moon began the transfer of power, Z-Aura building around her and then flowing,
through her Bond pouring overwhelmingly into the Mega Salamence, carrying it the strength for this move too. A pulse, a wave through the air that made Moon and Lillie stagger, Bewear and Lilligant pause, and Lusamine in the air above give a cry of shock.

The Lilligant, bravely, fired its next Hyper Beam. The attack struck true, into the shining mass of purple light building around the shape of the Mega Salamence.

Did little more.

The roar shook this dark world, floating island rocking as a great purple beast took a menacing forward step. The Mega Salamence within the attack could no longer even be seen, an aura forming a shape of an even larger draconic being around it. A beat of huge wings lifted it from the ground, a creature of surging light and power. A storm of wind bowled Moon and Lillie over, the dragon spiralling into the sky at speed even faster still, its huge tail winding behind it as wings beat again and again. It didn't even look like a Salamence anymore. The glowing shape extending its form, painting a new one, was something else entirely. Moon stared up as it turned in the air overhead.

Then dived down below.

The Z-Move Devastating Drake, as Pitaya had shown Moon, unleashed a surge of energy in draconic shape, something like the great beast of light Moon had transfigured her partner into, yet far smaller in size. Still that Z-Move had shown incredible power, and the blast Pitaya had struck into the rough mountains of the Ula'ula range had left a most telling impact.

This went beyond that by far.

It was controlled, in a way, the flow of power from this attack. At its fastest speed yet the dragon descended, hitting the ground at full force. A great shockwave coursed through the earth, a ring of crackling purple forming around the glowing Pokemon, just far enough to encompass the Bewear and Lilligant too.

Then it burst, unleashing a pillar of light reaching just as high as the dragon had flown before. Light, lingering, held out in the darkness moment by moment as Moon and Lillie, each pushed to the ground by this intensity, just stared into the power that had been unleashed.

Slowly, the light faded.

And the battle came to a close.

Bested were Lilligant and Bewear, the power of a Z-Move from the Mega Evolved Salamence something never before seen on history's page. But so too silent was the Salamence itself, no glow remaining to its form, the Mega Evolution faded and the Salamencite lying beside it. Racing forward Moon went to her partner's side, placing a hand against it to feel the breaths it still breathed. They were belaboured, and clearly exhausted, this environment poor for any recovery. Whispering thanks, praise, and love for her partner, Moon raised a Pokeball and called it back. Reached down to pick up the Salamencite as well.

Stared at the two bested Pokemon before her as two beams of red light came and claimed them as well. The battle over.

Or so it should be.

“Monster.” From the darkness above Lusamine descended once more, having pulled more and more distance from this battle the more and more Moon surprised her. “You horrifying creature, look what you've done.”
Reassured by Moon's own calm, Lillie moved up to stand beside her.

“It's over, mother,” she called up to the woman before them. “Come back to Alola.”

“Over?” A warped laugh made it out of the Nihilego Lusamine in the air. “It is over for you.” A tendril reached up, pointing at the two girls below. “For I.” Red glow, the aura of an Ultra Beast, built bright around the laughing woman. “Will now be rid of you.”

Over their heads drifted the Ultra Beast and Lusamine, united as one together. A perfect merger. So what if that girl had bested all of Lusamine's Pokemon, so what if there would be no way to return them to health here? With her beloved Nihilego she had found her paradise. This was all she needed. And no intruders would be tolerated upon her world.

Tendrils reached out, spikes emerging from them as they coiled down to the two girls within her grip. There. Now and truly.

“It's over.”

A loud crack of sound was followed by a scream, Moon and Lillie staring up, moments away from Lusamine's grasp, watching as a great beast burst from the darkness, seized the woman and Ultra Beast unison in a clawed hand, and flew further still, Lusamine's scream echoing as the one holding her disappeared into the darkness once more.

One moment of shock and then...

“Nebby!”

Turning to run back in the direction they'd come, Lillie called out, Moon moving with her, Guzma that way having been watching the entire battle stunned. That br- that kid, Moon, she was... that was beyond anything. What was she? Seeing the President get grabbed just like that was a shock to the system.

Seeing one of the two Legendary Pokemon of Alola, Lunala, flying right past him was another entirely.

With a beat of its wings the Moone Pokemon curved around Lillie and Moon, Moon first to grab onto its back, Lillie after taking hold. Guzma burst into action. “Hang on!” And as Lunala accelerated again, towards the edge of this floating island in pursuit of the beast of darkness that had taken Lusamine, Guzma leaped after and with outstretched hand grasped hold of its tail.

Lunala, with Moon and Lillie upon its back and a loudly yelling Guzma hanging on to its tail, zoomed off into the dark.

Pulling herself forward Moon wrapped an arm around Nebby's neck, holding herself up so she could raise her head alongside the Moone Pokemon's own, both staring out into the darkness beyond. There, Moon's focus locked on, where the darkness was its deepest, there was the monster carrying Lusamine. That directive given, Lunala curved its movement after, following Moon's commands. Trusting in her.

Through the empty void they flew.

It did not take long for the sound of Lusamine's yelling to return to their ears, Lunala moving at speed far faster than this void beast they pursued. It had not escaped them, and Moon, placing a palm against the back of Nebby's head, conveyed the will she, Lillie, and Nebby all shared.
It would not escape them.

Nebby shone, a brilliant white light in a place all that kind had been devoured down to nothing. Lillie holding onto its back, Guzma to its tail, both shut their eyes against the shining beacon of light they now rode, Nebby outstretching its wings to soar, forming a perfect circle of yellow by the armour plating along its wings uniting with the crescent that formed its tail. From that circle energy coalesced, concentrating into a single sphere between the crescent points of Nebby's head, Moon just behind it, Nebby's third eye glowing bright. This was the most powerful attack of the Moone Pokemon Lunala, Legendary Emissary of the Moon.

This was Moongeist Beam.

As a pillar of light it shot forth, piercing through the dark void of Ultra Space, a single line of radiance viewable from far across the empty blackness of this realm. Moon's directions, her eyes locked upon the beast they were hunting, it gave Nebby all the accuracy it needed. The beam, fired from above, struck down upon the black being racing through the dark. Light split upon it, scattering in different directions as it pushed into a body designed to devour such without end. But the power behind the beam, the force the beast was fed this energy, was of a different kind than it had experienced in so long a time.

It couldn't resist.

Lusamine dropped from its grasp.

“Mother!”

Lillie, looking over from Lunala's side, saw her mother fall, still inside of the Nihilego, and her will moved Nebby to action without question. A steep dive built speed, Moon and Lillie tightening their grips, Guzma with both hands on Nebby's tail still barely holding on as the Moone Pokemon made its descent. From the dive Nebby burst forward, soaring through the dark sky, towards the falling woman and Ultra Beast unison before them.

A shattering cry overhead was the beast of darkness's fury, diving after its target as well. Lunala, faster, grabbed hold of Lusamine first, claws grasping one of the tendrils from the bloated Nihilego, but the added weight now slowed its flight. Lillie, looking up, saw the black beast approaching.

Moon, looking forward, saw what they had to do.

Nebby dove again, a more shallow angle, and circled over another of the floating islands in the void, black rock given definition against a dark world only by the tiny lights glowing within. Nebby dropped Lusamine onto the ground and pulled up. Moon didn't need to say anything. Lillie already knew.

“I will stop my mother!” She dropped from Lunala's back, landing on the ground as well. “Moon, you and Nebby need to drive off that beast!”

Moon knew too. Set her eyes upwards at the monster diving down upon them. Guzma, feet just trailing above the ground, let go as well.

“Hey kid!” This much happening was way too much for him to deal with, so all he could do was what occurred to him, “I'll keep this one safe so you get that thing out of here, got it?”

Smiling, Moon gave a yell that she would as, with a burst of speed, Lunala flew upwards into the opponent before them.
She'd stop this and they'd all go home together.

On the ground below, as Moon and Nebby tangled with the black beast in the sky above, Lillie raced towards her mother. The Nihilego attached to her seemed deflated, sluggish, lying against the ground and unwilling to rise, its weight such that Lusamine herself could barely struggle to a stand. Couldn't take even a step forward with the Ultra Beast's mass holding her back. Her eyes settled on Lillie racing towards her.

“You!” She couldn't even move her arm to point at the girl before her, bound as it was in the Nihilego's form. “It's your fault! You did this!” Coming to a stop Lillie stood there, before her mother, as Lusamine screamed again and again. “I'd finally done it! Finally created the perfect paradise for me, a beautiful place I would know no pain, only love! And look at what you did! You brought that monster girl to attack me! And following you came that other monster as well! It's your fault! It's your-”

“It's YOUR fault!”

Lillie's own yell, louder than Lusamine's, brought stunned silence and a shocked stare from the older blonde-haired woman. Lillie shook her head.

“You've blamed everyone else around you every time things didn't work out, never even once trying to face reality! A perfect paradise? A beautiful place? You ran away to an empty world to hide on your own! And it still wouldn't have worked even if Moon and I hadn't come to save you because, mother, you are the reason for your own misery!”

Little more than a shocked gasp forced its way out of Lusamine as she stared at her daughter before her. Lillie was unmoved.

“You were the creator of the Aether Foundation, you were the one who gathered all of those people together and united their will! You were the one who made it work and worked so hard to do it! I admired you! I thought you were brilliant! But then how did you decide this was what you needed to do? How did you decide to do something so cruel and stupid, mother? To fall so far you-”

“What do you even know about-”

“I am not finished speaking!”

In the moment of absolute silence, Lillie's snap response cutting off her mother's interruption, a low whistle from Guzma, standing behind them all, echoed out. Lillie continued unabated.

“Father is gone,” her stare burned into Lusamine, the older woman averting her gaze. “But did you really think losing him gave you the right to do this? To lash out at the world and blame everyone for something beyond anyone's control? I may not remember father as well as you, or even Gladion, but I still know he loved Alola too! So in losing him you decided to attack Alola? Unleash Ultra Beasts across the region and plunge it into danger? If the moment you lost him you turned against everything he loved, how do you think that makes anything better? Is it any surprise you've been so miserable since?”

Opening and closing her mouth attempting to speak, no words came from Lusamine. Guzma, keeping watch as he'd promised, looked down as well. Ouch.

“What kind of person are you, that uses and throws away everyone around you? That controls by fear and threat? Gladion and I lived terrified day to day because of you, and you thought that was fine? You believed we were good little children because we were too scared to speak up? That's not
fine! You called me disgusting, but mother you are the most awful of them all! How can anywhere
you go be called a paradise with the suffering you've caused to get there? If what you want is
happiness then face the consequences of your actions instead of ignoring and running away from the
world! Because if you stay here, all you'll have is your misery to keep you. And I... I wouldn't wish
that much pain on even the worst person I knew.”

Into the inside of the Nihilego enveloping her, a single droplet fell, a tear running down Lusamine's
face and falling free past her chin. The weight upon her, more than just the Nihilego now, drove her
to her knees. Head bowed to the brilliance before her.

She...

She...

Above them the black beast facing Moon and Nebby glowed, a rainbow brilliance of its own making
it a star in the dark, a brief reveal of the light it had devoured over the ages. Beam by beam burst
forth from its dark body, curving through the air, pursuing Nebby as the Moone Pokemon dodged,
Moon on its back providing the focus and power necessary to do so.

But the attack wasn't to strike, it was to occupy, and while its Lunala opponent evaded, the black
beast dived. Its original prey was still below.

“Lillie, I-”

That was as far as Lusamine got, the black beast slamming down upon the Nihilego attached to her
from above. One claw grasping the Nihilego's soft body, the other pushed through and held
Lusamine against the ground.

Then tore the Ultra Beast bound to her free.

The piercing scream from Lusamine lasted only moments, fading as the pain overwhelmed her in an
instant. A screech of its own in victory, the black beast held the prize it had claimed. A source of the
light it craved, grown fat by the host it had been bound to. More food for the dark.

An even brighter light shone from above.

Moon had felt it in her hand as she moved Nebby to pursue, the sharp point of a Z-Crystal she hadn't
been holding a moment before digging into her palm. It was dark purple, marked with a symbol
resembling Lunala itself, misshapen in a way. Where every Z-Crystal Moon had seen before was a
perfect diamond in shape, this Z-Crystal had two strange bulges at either end. But it still fit perfectly
within her Z-Ring. Moon was sure it wouldn't have in the Z-Ring she'd had before.

The Ghost-type Z-Pose. Atop Lunala's back Moon performed it, and the Z-Aura within her built and
transferred into the partner she rode. Before Moongeist Beam had been named as the most powerful
attack of Lunala. That was true.

But the most powerful attack of Lunala and its chosen partner combined, the Z-Aura transfigured
Moongeist Beam, was another level more. Was six great points of light forming around Lunala's
shining body, six great beams converging into one.

This was Menacing Moonraze Maelstrom, true power of the moon.

This was an attack without equal.

Slamming down upon the black beast it pushed harder and harder still, the stone beneath the creature
cracking, the light-devouring beast unable to fight back. Lillie, the sight before her horrifying, couldn't move. Guzma raced in to grab Lusamine and pull her free, moments before the power of the attack pushed the black beast into the ground, then out through the base of the floating island itself.

Cast into the void.

From Lunala Moon could feel gasped breaths, exhaustion after the attack unleashed. From Lusamine in his arms Guzma saw a pallid colour to her face, breathing uneven, veins across her body standing out dark in colour. Lillie, still standing there, having witnessed the beast tearing her mother from the Nihilego, was in shock. That act of violence was... too much.

Moon brought Nebby down to land.

They needed to go. As soon as Moon spoke Guzma nodded, moving Lusamine to Lunala as Moon went for Lillie. She was still barely responding, but when Moon took her hand Lillie let herself be led. Lunala lowered its back to the ground, Guzma seated at its rear settling Lusamine before him, Moon at its front with Lillie behind her. With a heavy beat of its wings the Moone Pokemon rose, its flight slow through the air. Placing a hand upon its back, Moon offered all that she could give. One more Ultra Wormhole. One more way back home. Please.

Please.

To those it was connected, Nebby gave answer.

The rainbow light washing over them was the way back, the Legendary Pokemon of Alola slowly passing through the Ultra Wormhole it had opened, the four humans upon its back carried home. To a night sky filled with stars they arrived, far above the Altar of the Dawne below. The moon was risen high, hours past the moment they had left. But they'd returned.

They'd done as they'd promised to do.

Nebby's landing was the end of its flight, the heavy breathing of the Lunala showing its exhaustion clearly. Moon breathed deeply too, the proper air of Alola a welcome gift to her lungs. That other world, beyond the Ultra Wormhole, it hadn't been right. Too empty. Missing some key component.

The beast that ate light... that story she'd read before, at the Malie Library. Moon's eyes widened as the memory came far too slow. The beast come to Alola to devour the light, banished through a hole in the sky by the Legendary Pokemon. That was... Moon turned to look up, as Guzma and Lillie pulled Lusamine away from Lunala, Lillie trying and failing to rouse her mother to wake.

The slam of Nebby's wings threw Moon back as one more rainbow hole of light opened above her.

Under the moonlight of Alola she could see the beast's true shape as it emerged, a crystalline creature of pure blackness, massive clawed arms stretching out from a geometric core. That arm, Moon realised in shock, was the same as the one that had taken the Nihilego from the Aether Paradise before. And the face, jagged rainbow triangles dancing within a black screen beneath a spiked head, she'd seen that too. In the darkness of an Ultra Wormhole momentarily opened over Heahea.

It had been so close to her so many times.

But Nebby's reaction had pushed her free, changed the target of the beast that ate light. Upon the exhausted Lunala it instead slammed down, and as a glow filled its body it bent over to grasp its prey tight. Flash after flash of blinding light as the beast's body broke apart, momentary golden glows between separating joints seen as it shaped itself around the Lunala. As the black beast subsumed the Legendary Pokemon just as the Nihilego had Lusamine herself.
Covered in its form, a suit of black prism armour now coated the Moone Pokemon. A black triangle of the beast's shape, set over Nebby's face, glowed with two burning pink eyes behind it, the place Nebby's third appeared now covered with a prism of colour. The Bond between them, Moon could feel the struggle of Nebby fading. The Pokemon's will fading. She reached out, not knowing what to do.

One final Ultra Wormhole, just beneath the devoured Lunala, and it dropped from this world into another. Fell away from those it could no longer protect. Then the hole shut tight and Nebby was gone. The black beast had taken it. Left Moon standing there blankly, Lillie and Guzma behind her staring, an unconscious Lusamine in their arms.

Moon's hand, that had reached forward, fell to her side.

...Nebby?

Chapter End Notes

In the Sun and Moon games, one of the first things Lillie says upon entering Ultra Space (specifically the Ultra Deep Sea as USUM reveals) is that the air is so thick it almost hurts to breathe. By contrast here the air is described as thin, and the darkness far more oppressive. The light in Ultra Space has been consumed readily for some time, from the point Ultra Wormholes stopped releasing Z-Aura upon Alola, and because of that things are different. Most notably is that Lusamine's team, unlike the games, lack Z-Auras that make them like Totems.

It's an interesting decision because Lusamine's totem team in sumo really defined her as the final "villain" of the game, standing with such a wall of power. But the more I thought about it, firstly, there's no justification for Lusamine's team to be totem. What Moon did was only possible because of her and Lillie's mental state combining and pulling even more from the limitless reservoir that Moon is. Secondly, frankly, I don't think Moon could have stood up to Lusamine's team if they all had totem level strength. The battle as it was came down to a draw. Any more power and Lusamine would've taken the win.

The design of Ultra Space here is based off of how it appears in the Pokemon Sun and Moon anime, with floating islands of stone hanging in empty space. It's a lot darker here though, but then someone's been feeding on the light for a good while. We've seen bits and pieces of the Beast that eats the Light across Eldritch, but this is the first true sighting. I hope it was memorable for you. I've known this was coming for a long time.

Thanks all for reading, your continued presence, kudos, and especially comments are a huge part of my motivation to keep going as I have been. With this chapter completed we can finally rest a moment, the six shooter I loaded during There's No Stopping finally empty. But that doesn't mean the chapters coming next aren't going to continue the ride. We'll just calm down, a tiny bit. Just a bit.

For those reading, if you can, please consider sharing either this twitter or tumblr post, to help bring Eldritch to even more readers! It's greatly appreciated, thank you so much.
https://twitter.com/TaurusVersant/status/999637533209321472
https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628
And please, folks, look forward to the second half of the Poni Island arc! By my count we have six chapters more to go for this arc, and at this point it's 99% original content. I've got plans. Let's see how they go.
Lingering Hurt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was sinking, grasping hands wrapped around her, dragging her further down into the depths. There was no light to be found in this world, yet somehow the darkness into which she sunk grew even deeper still. An endless abyss that devoured without pause. An appetite that could never be sated.

That pain...

She was hungry.

A jolt of movement caught in the bedding wrapped tight around her by her own nightmare thrashing, Moon's rapid heartbeat hammered within her chest as she stared up at the dim ceiling overhead, the darkness of this room, that same room in the Aether Paradise given to her yet again, nowhere near the depths she had just escaped. It was almost exactly the same as before: her exhausted and injured Pokemon taken for healing overnight, Lillie elsewhere, Moon left alone. A partner missing. And no feeling of victory within her heart in the slightest.

The first time, she'd come here to save Lillie. She'd done so, and lost Poipole in the process, taken by Lusamine into the dark.

The second time, she'd pursued Lusamine with Lillie. Brought back Lusamine. And, in the process, lost...

Trying to turn over in the bed she'd been given, Moon could do little more than shift slightly, the bedding wrapped around her too tightly to move. A long sigh filled the room as she set to extracting herself, too awake to return to sleep. Once more it was time to face the new day before her.

Here's to the next day of her Pokemon journey. Again.

It hadn't been long after Nebby was taken, the night before at the Altar of the Dawne, that a helicopter had crossed the skies and descended down to find them. Wicke was with those present, who immediately loaded Lusamine onto a stretcher then into the helicopter, before directing Moon, Lillie, and Guzma to join them. Guzma had made noises about going his own way, but Wicke had firmly told him he needed a medical evaluation after spending the time he had in Ultra Space. Too tired to argue back, in the end he'd just shrugged and boarded the helicopter after all.

It had been an Ultra Wormhole signal of massive strength, Wicke had explained to the silent three on the trip back, that drew attention to the Altar of the Dawne. Knowing that Moon and Lillie had been travelling there, Wicke had organised for a helicopter to leave the Aether Paradise and head to that location, believing she would find those needing aid. She had.

As soon as the helicopter landed at the Aether Paradise a team was on-hand to take Lusamine from it, bringing her to a medical centre within the floating structure for care. Lillie had stayed by her mother's side, Moon making mention that Lusamine's Pokemon were all injured as well. She remembered following the stretcher as Wicke retrieved the Pokeballs on Lusamine's person for transfer to a healing centre. Remembered asking if Wicke had found any more than the five occupied Ultra Balls and handful of unused Beast Balls. Remembered asking whether Poipole was there.

It wasn't.
She’d stopped then, standing still, realisation of loss overpowering her mind. Not just Nebby then: Poipole was still gone too? She’d tried to round on Guzma for answers but he hadn’t been there. Had been escorted away for an examination to ensure his time in Ultra Space hadn’t done him ill. There was no-one to turn to. Lusamine, with Lillie following behind her stretcher, had been taken in to emergency care.

There was no-one at all.

Anabel, though weary, intervened then, appearing and speaking to Moon, guiding her away from this point she was about to break down. Brought her to this room, ensured there was food to eat that Moon didn’t touch and, as Moon collapsed into the bed, asked to take Rotom-dex with her. So Anabel could see what it had recorded of Moon’s journey. Moon hadn’t responded.

She didn’t even remember falling asleep.

“Excuse me, Moon?” Wicke’s voice again at her door. Moon not sure if she even managed a response but she must have because Wicke spoke again soon after. “Chief Anabel and Mr. Looker have requested me to bring you to them: would you care for breakfast first?” Looking at the abandoned tray of food from the night before, Moon felt her stomach turn over. She didn’t feel well. A quiet moment passed. Then... “May I come in?”

Wicke’s entrance began as soon as Moon formed the first affirmative syllable, the acting Branch Chief – and indeed substitute President while Madam Lusamine was incapacitated – of the Aether Foundation stepping into the room. The first thing she did was set a tray of five varying Pokeballs down upon a table, next to last night’s untouched food, then moved to place the back of her hand against Moon’s forehead, an immediate check of temperature. The dark-haired woman frowned. Moon felt cold.

“Moon,” she spoke in a caring voice, the kind used to help children understand just why she said such, “I understand you must not feel well, but not eating will only make things worse. It might not be easy, but I would like for you to eat something this morning, if you would.”

A small nod from Moon was good enough. Wicke took the tray of untouched food from the night before and soon returned with one prepared for this morning, light food, but things that would provide energy and health. Moon ate slowly, but to Wicke’s delight with increasing vigour over time. Miss Lillie’s condition right now was distressing enough as it was but for Moon to end up unwell too would have been...

Why only five Pokeballs? Moon’s question, some life now returned to her expression, Wicke answered with what she had been told. As difficult to believe as it was. “Your Salamence,” she really had to pause on that, the fact that Moon had evolved the Dragon Pokemon in the time since Wicke had seen her last, “is suffering from intense exhaustion, as well as severe physical strain. The Aether Paradise has some of the best facilities for Pokemon care in Alola, but it will still take longer for it to be ready for discharge. And even after you should avoid battling with it for some time.”

What sort of battle was necessary to sustain such damage? Wicke wasn’t an active Trainer herself, but she knew enough about the natural resilience of Pokemon to know something like that was far beyond the norm. Moon looked actively distressed. The older woman moved to give her comfort.

“I can understand your concern,” she gave a gentle smile, a reassuring pat to Moon’s shoulder, “but rest assured your partner will be fine. And I know that everything that happened you needed to do, to bring back Miss Lillie and Madam Lusamine. Thank you, Moon. You’ve done an incredible thing.”

The slow nod from Moon Wicke smiled at further, stepping back as the young girl before her moved...
to stand. Taking another step the dark-haired woman opened the door. “Now then, shall we go and see Chief Anabel and Mr. Looker?”

The two leaders of the Ultra Beast Task Force, and members of the International Police of which the Task Force was part, were found in the same room they had been before. In a way it felt like nothing had changed in the two days that had passed since Moon had been here last.

In another it felt like everything had.

“It is good to see you up,” Anabel gave a smile of her own as she held out a hand, Rotom-dex rising from it to return to Moon, the free-floating Pokedex circling around her before announcing it was fully-charged and ready for another day. Moon gave a smile at it. The Rotom-inhabited device enjoyed chattering aimlessly when given the opportunity.

She'd appreciate the noise.

“We have studied the recordings taken by Rotom-Dex,” Looker gave the facts, seated across the table from the entrance, “and have added them to our own information stores. For now, the Chief and I have given that creature you observed the codename 'UB-Black’.”

It wasn't an Ultra Beast. The surprised pause in the air didn't stop Moon from shaking her head and continuing. Ultra Beasts had Z-Aura, but that thing ate Z-Aura. It wasn't the same as them. It was The Beast That Ate Light, from the legends of Alola. She was sure of it, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

That creature had been a monster of legend.

“Well,” Looker attempted to continue, Wicke – a scholar of Alolan Legends in her own right – staring in shock as Moon declared she'd encountered such, “for now we will use that designation as a stand-in. Should we obtain enough information to provide a proper name for the creature, you will be notified.”

“Moon,” waving a hand Anabel drew all eyes, focusing her own on the girl before her, “what we're about to tell you now is vital information for your own safety. Please listen carefully.”

Surprised by this sudden announcement Moon nodded with wide eyes. Anabel continued.

“Within the UB Task Force, we designate people who have passed through the Ultra Wormhole as 'Fallers'. It is a term used to describe those affected by such passage.”

“To the best of our understanding,” Looker traded off with Anabel, the two knowing what each needed to say, “the act of passing through the Ultra Wormhole leaves an effect upon humans only – Pokemon not touched in the same way. The effect is that the presence of those humans now resembles the Ultra Wormhole, and those who can sense such will see them that way.”

“In the past,” Anabel took over once more, “Ultra Beasts encountered by the UB Task Force would be drawn towards those figures, for their resemblance to an Ultra Wormhole confused the Beasts into believing those individuals would be a way home. Here in Alola the situation has been different, with Ultra Beasts instead moving to flee from signs of the Ultra Wormhole – which we believe may be due to the actions of UB-Black as you have recorded – however over time it may be that you will be approached. For your own safety, it is best not to travel unaccompanied in wild locations, as any Ultra Beasts remaining in Alola may approach you seeking a way home.”

That was... a lot to process. Moon frowned. Didn't that mean Lillie was also a Faller? And Guzma and Lusamine too? Anabel and Looker both nodded. Moon frowned deeper. She didn't like the
thought of Ultra Beasts approaching Lillie. That concerned her more than anything.

“Miss Lillie will be safe within the Aether Paradise,” Wicke spoke to reassure Moon, who quickly replied that Lillie should be safe everywhere in Alola. That sort of response, despite being snapped at Wicke couldn’t help but smile. To see someone care for Miss Lillie to that extent... meant a lot to Wicke. She nodded. “Then when she travels beyond this place, please keep her safe, Moon.”

Wicke didn't even need to ask, Moon confirmed. She would.

“For now,” Anabel spoke again, “it is best you remain at the Aether Paradise to rest. I understand one of your Pokemon is still undergoing recovery here, and we have contacted your mother, in addition to Professor Kukui and Kahili Hano who have nominated themselves as your guardians. One of them should be here for you soon enough.”

Wait, Moon shook her head, what had happened since she and Lillie had left? There'd been Ultra Beasts appearing all across Alola! Was that over? She hadn't heard anything since she'd returned. Was Alola safe again?

“Safer,” Looker answered, Anabel leaving reporting the events beginning yesterday evening to him, “is the best we can describe it.” The coat-wearing member of the International Police stood and began to pace. “At sunset yesterday evening two extremely dangerous Ultra Beasts known as Guzzlord appeared at the Lake of the Duske on Ula'ula Island.” Stopping shortly after taking a few steps, Looker rested a hand against a wall, steadying himself against the injuries upon his back. Anabel's exhaustion via pushing herself well beyond her limits, and his injury taken in protecting her from the first of the two Guzzlord, meant neither was going afar today. Thankfully they did not need to. The man turned back to Moon.

“Shortly thereafter a massive Ultra Wormhole signal occurred in the same location, and the Legendary Pokemon of Alola Solgaleo appeared.” Looker held back a smile to see the stunned expression on Moon's face. He felt the same, truth be told. “Once active, Solgaleo demonstrated not only incredible strength, defeating the Ultra Beasts before it with ease, but the ability to open Ultra Wormholes at will, allowing it to banish its opponents once bested. After dealing with the two Guzzlord at the Lake of the Duske, Solgaleo continued across Alola at rapid pace, dispatching Ultra Beasts through Ultra Wormholes without pause. This event lasted until the beginning of dawn this morning, when the Legendary Pokemon left through an Ultra Wormhole opened at the same location it first appeared. In the time since, we have received only occasional reports of Ultra Beasts in hiding across the region, and none of any further Ultra Wormholes appearing. It would seem that, besides cleanup the Ultra Beast Task Force is currently engaging in, the Siege of Alola is over.”

Sunset yesterday? Moon's eyes were still wide. That was when she and Lillie had played the Sun and Moon Flutes, when they'd helped Nebby evolve into Lunala. To happen at the same time, and at the Lake of the Duske when the two of them and Nebby were at the Altar of the Dawne...

“Yes,” Anabel nodded, the idea having settled firmly in her and Looker's minds as they'd reviewed Rotom-dex's recordings, “it is very possible that your actions summoned Solgaleo as well. As you and Miss Lillie had promised to do. Moon, it may be that the two of you saved the lives of countless people across Alola. We are deeply thankful.”

The bow of Anabel, Looker, and Wicke quickly made Moon shake her head. She didn't want that! No – not that she didn't want to help just-

“We understand,” Anabel raised her head. “You would rather the world not know of your actions.” Moon's nod was one relieved. She didn't... there were enough people looking at her as it was.
Anabel frowned. Unfortunately that was only going to remain true. “When you are older,” speaking slowly, the Chief gave this opportunity for Moon to hold onto, “the Ultra Beast Task Force will support an official announcement of your and Miss Lillie's actions, should the two of you wish to state such when feeling more confident in handling its reception. You need only let us know. I have updated your Rotom-dex with contact information for the Task Force, should you encounter any more Ultra Beasts as a Faller.”

Moving to give her thanks, Moon stopped. There was a question more important than any other she needed to ask.

Could they help her find Poipole and Nebby?

The three adults in the room all glanced at one another.

“Passing through an Ultra Wormhole isn't an easy thing to do,” Looker shook his head, “even knowing where and when one will appear. Your doing so before was likely only possible because you had the Legendary Pokemon Lunala with you. Attempting to do so without one... will either fail, or end with you lost and unable to return. It is simply far too dangerous to do.”

The shake of Moon's shoulders, despite her stable expression, Wicke caught and shook her head quickly to catch Looker's attention. Anabel caught it first.

“The work of the Ultra Beast Task Force,” she held Moon's eyes on her, giving what hope she could, “involves studying the Ultra Wormhole as well – which we intend to form a relationship with the Dimensional Research Lab in Alola to continue doing. Should we find any means of traversing it, we will let you know. And Moon, when you are of age, without question we would welcome you to join us.”

That was... a bit much for Moon to consider right now. But she would keep it in mind. Thanked Looker and Anabel with a quiet voice. Her acceptance of total loss delayed, just a bit. Wicke took over.

“Moon, while we wait for someone to come for you, I would like to have you checked over by our medical team. Miss Lillie has already been so, and been given a clean bill of health, so I am confident you will be fine as well, it is just precaution.”

Nodding, Moon turned to leave, Anabel and Looker watching her go. When the door closed the man sighed and collapsed back into his chair, wincing at the pain in his back as he did so.

“The act of saving the day, but still losing someone important all the same... I know how they feel.”

“Indeed.” Anabel had read the report notes from the UB mission shortly before her discovery by the International Police. “And things won't get easier either.”

A deep moment of silence held between them. Anabel fell back into her seat as well.

“We'll just have to do the best for them we can.”

The checkup with the medical team of the Aether Paradise – at least those not busy caring for others – was over quickly, Moon leaving the compound with Wicke shortly after arriving. Scans had been taken for analysis, but the initial outlook was that Moon was completely fine. She didn't feel it but... she knew full well the pain she felt was in her heart. Wicke's own hurt to know Moon felt this way.
She wished that she could help. But, right now...

Could Moon see Lillie? Moon's question Wicke expected, but the answer she could give was not the one she wished she were able.

“Miss Lillie is remaining with her mother while Madam Lusamine is being treated for the damage she has suffered. At the moment only family members and medical professionals are allowed near her.”

Oh, Moon looked down. She wanted to be there to support Lillie. They'd done so before, when getting Lusamine back. Did Wicke know? Because Moon and Lillie had both helped Nebby evolve into Lunala, the Legendary Pokemon had formed a Trainer's Bond with each of them. So they could feel more than just Lunala through it. They could reach each other too.

If Moon was there, maybe she and Lillie could help one another stay strong.

The most common knowledge of Legendary Pokemon was that they approached Trainer's Bonds in strange ways. It wasn't... heard of, specifically, two people sharing a Bond with a single Pokemon. But Wicke didn't doubt it either. Didn't consider in the least that Moon was speaking anything but absolute truth.

As shocking as a truth it was.

Miss Lillie and Moon shared a connection through the Legendary Pokemon Lunala? Wicke had never raised Pokemon for battling, but even she understood enough the feeling of a Trainer's Bond. No doubt the Bonds connecting Moon and Lillie to Nebby were countless times stronger still. The feelings those must give, connecting them together...

Wicke turned and placed a hand on each of Moon's shoulders.

“Moon,” she spoke clearly while looking into the young girl's dark brown eyes, “please be there for Miss Lillie as best you can. She is very important to me, and I would be happy to know she has someone as kind as you caring for her.”

Moon nodded. That was what she wanted to do. She wanted to be there for Lillie. With Lillie. But she couldn't right now, could she?

Wicke paused, struggling. Maybe, if she argued right, Moon could...

“Moon.” A stern tone to his voice, Gladion approached the two women walking through the halls of the Aether Paradise. “Can I speak with you?”

“Master Gladion!” Wicke smiled to see him, “how are you feeling?”

“I'm fine,” Gladion rolled his shoulders, recovered from sleeping off the effects of Null's release yesterday afternoon. He'd stayed up just long enough to hear about Solgaleo's appearance, then collapsed, and waking up been relieved to hear things had gone as well with that Legendary Pokemon as could be.

By contrast...

Moon nodded and moved to walk with Gladion, Wicke bidding the two of them good day, returning to her own duties. Between managing care of those retrieved from Ultra Space, the Aether Paradise’s work in caring for those injured by the Ultra Beasts, recovery efforts around Alola working with the UB Task Force, and general runnings of the Aether Foundation as a whole, she was as busy as could
be.

Though she didn't mind not having the room to think.

“Let's head outside,” Gladion took a direct path through the corridors of the Aether Paradise main building, heading for the great doors that opened onto the tree-lined path leading to the mansion at the vast floating structure's back. He needed the fresh air. Moon did too.

“Hau's here as well,” the blonde-haired teen spoke as they walked, Moon quickly asking if Hau was okay. Gladion nodded. “He's sleeping, recovering from working hard throughout the night. He'll no doubt want to tell you all about it when he wakes up.” Moon smiled. It was good to know he was okay. She'd enjoy seeing him later as well.

The hope to find out that at least someone had passed through the last two days unharmed.

Once outside Gladion activated a Pokeball, manifesting a Pokemon, his signature partner in its true form. Immediately Moon focused upon it, the Rotom Pokedex with her taking a rapid series of pictures of the Synthetic Pokemon. Silvally stood tall as Moon ran her hands through the fur around its neck, but Gladion could see in the way its eyes closed slightly that it was enjoying her touch. Same as ever then.

“Type: Null was created by the Aether Foundation,” Gladion explained, Moon looking back at him while her hands continued to stroke the fur of the Pokemon before her. “Three were created successfully, and each immediately rampaged upon completion. To resolve that they were bound in those iron masks, but even that wasn't enough. So they were moved to be put into cold storage. Like the others my mother kept.” Just the mention was enough to make Moon shudder. That room... thinking of it still horrified her. Gladion nodded. He felt the same.

“I took Null before they could do that, the other two weren't so lucky. Over the two years since, Null and I built a Trainer's Bond, and yesterday the bindings upon it finally shattered. It's not... really evolution, but I'll consider it that all the same. The original name for the project was Type: Full.” Gladion reached a hand forward to rest upon the top of his partner's beaked mouth. “I've named this one Silvally.”

Silvally... Moon smiled at that. It was a nice name. Raised her hands to rub at the Pokemon's cheeks, before stepping back. It lowered its head more to Gladion as he ran his hand over it. Moon smiled at that too.

Gladion had done well indeed.

“The two still frozen,” Gladion continued after a moment, returning to the topic he'd thought of for some time, “they're being treated now. It's going to take a long time to return them to health, but the Aether Foundation will do it. The UB Task Force made noises about being interested in the other two after Silvally here did so well against the Ultra Beasts.” A hand shifted around the Pokemon's head to rub underneath its chin. “But I think if you wanted to take one, it would be happier with you.”

Moon paused. A Type: Null – or Silvally – for her? She supposed she'd have to care for and raise it the same way Gladion had, so it too could break its bindings? It wasn't like... she couldn't, she fully believed she could – which Gladion while unsurprised by still found the slightest bit off-putting, acknowledging that for Moon it would likely be far easier than it had been for him – but Moon she... she shook her head. She didn't want to think about taking on new partners right now.

She just wanted Poipole and Nebby back.
“...I'm sorry.” The apology from Gladion surprised Moon. But she appreciated it. Wished things could have gone better. Gladion looked away. “I doubt anyone told you yet but... my mother... isn't well.” Moon stared at Gladion's back as he continued to face away from her so he could say this out loud. “There were a lot of Nihilego victims across Alola. Any infested for more than a few hours are still in a coma here. But my mother... she was in Ultra Space for almost two days. And bound even deeper to a Nihilego than anyone else. That alone was bad enough but then... being torn from it like Lillie told me she was it's... bad, Moon. It's very bad.”

How... how bad was...

“My mother is going to die.”

Moon’s blood ran cold. That... that was... no! No! She and Lillie had done everything to bring Lusamine back! Nebby and Poipole were still gone! To do all that only for Lusamine to... no!

“That's why I'm sorry.” He refused to face her. To let her see his face. “The Nihilego the UB Task Force have captured, they're not cooperative, obviously. So we can't get any proper toxin samples from them to try and develop a cure. However long it'll take... we might be able to help those in comas eventually, but it'll be too late for my mother she... they say she won't make it through the night.”

...so they had until tonight then? Moon’s question, asked with a determined voice, made Gladion pause, looking up while still facing away from her. What did she...

So they just needed a cooperative Nihilego before tonight, right? Moon asked it again. Gladion turned, just slightly, to look back at her. “What do you-”

There were still Ultra Beasts in Alola, Anabel and Looker had already told her that. And she- she’d formed a Bond with Poipole! And the Nihilego that appeared at the Aether Paradise before, she’d been able to reach out to it as well! So she just had to find a Nihilego before nightfall, form a Bond with it, and then they could make a cure, right?

Against his own grim acceptance a tiny spark of hope lit within Gladion. He shook his head to try and snuff it out.

“Moon, that’s too much, you’ve done everything you could, it’s ov-“

It wasn’t over! Moon’s snap silenced Gladion completely, her eyes staring with intent into his own. She could do it! Find a Nihilego! Have it help save Lusamine! This wasn’t over! Not yet!

They still had a chance

Gladion stared blankly. Was... was there really a way to...

“Would you two pipe down, I’m having a conversation here!” The loud and grumbling voice of Guzma, Boss of Team Skull and just recently discharged with a clean bill of health patient of the Aether Paradise, made Gladion and Moon both jump, looking to find him sitting amongst the trees along the way between the Paradise Main Building and mansion at its back. Two Pokemon were with him – the Stag Beetle Pokemon Pinsir, and Eyeball Pokemon Masquerain – the two Moon recognised as being left by Guzma when they’d battled here before. The lanky man raised a hand to run through his white hair. “I’m giving some apologies so shove off, I don’t need you lot thinking I’ve gone soft.”

That was good though, Moon smiled, the Pokemon with him still seemed happy. They must’ve wanted Guzma to come back for them. That meant they cared about him. He couldn’t be that bad if
that was the case.

Saying all that very quickly got Guzma to emerge from the tree-line.

“Oi!” The size he dwarfed Moon by did nothing to shelve her smile, even as she had to crane her head to look up at him. “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m Guzma, y’hear, the big bad Boss of Team Skull who beats down anyone who stands against me! Don’t give me that sappy garbage! Me and mine could still crush you and don’t you forget it!”

“You’re lively.” Gladion’s tone showed far less amusement with Guzma’s actions than Moon. “If only everyone could bounce back from Nihilego possession as fast as you did.” The venom in his words was almost as toxic as the Nihilego’s own. Guzma continued to be unaffected.

“Yeah well, sucks to be everyone but me.” Turning around Guzma activated the Pokeballs the two Pokemon behind him would rest in, calling them back to rejoin his team. “Anyway I’m outta here, no reason to stay. See ya you brats, next time we cross paths expect to get beat down. Maybe walk on the other side of the street when you see me comin’. Just keep your heads down and stay outta my way.”

Did he know? Moon asked, uncowed by Guzma’s attitude in the least, about Lusamine? Guzma stopped mid-step away. Frowned but didn’t turn back.

“Like I said, no reason to stay. Ten years pass, I find someone else I wanna follow, then she gets done in too. Two for two, I’m out. Had enough of all of it. It’s all bull. Just forget about it.”

Gladion gave a strange look, unsure of just what Guzma was speaking about. Moon knew precisely. But what if he could do something? Her question, it made Guzma turn back, just a little, to look at her. She was staring up at him with that same calm look, like she wasn’t afraid of anything at all. Ugh listening to her was the worst, she sounded so much like... Guzma turned away again. “I don’t care.”

She was going to find a Nihilego! Moon insisted, stepping around Guzma to stand in front of him. If she could convince one to come with her, form a Bond with it, then it should be able to help save Lusamine! There was still a chance!

“Find a- what are you even talking about, kid?” Guzma shook his head. “And why do you even care? The Prez stole that Pokemon of yours and only ever did you wrong, what’s it to you if she bites it?” Moon looked down, for just a moment. Then back up. It would hurt Lillie if Lusamine died.

“Feh!” A loud exhale was Guzma’s rejection of that idea. “Look at you, little miss heroine, saving the day for everyone! You really think you can? Just gonna run out and grab an Ultra Beast to fix this up? You keep diving into trouble thinking everything’ll work out – what has so far, huh? Nothing. You go on like that you’re just gonna make things even worse.”

A long moment passed, Moon staring up at Guzma, before he sighed and shook his head. Ran a hand through his tangle of white hair again. “So I guess that means I’ve gotta tag along, to keep you out of trouble then, huh?”

The choked sound of surprise from Gladion behind them would be downright insulting, but somehow the pleased expression on Moon’s face Guzma found even more upsetting. He frowned.

“Don’t go getting the wrong idea, kid, I just owe you one is all. You went and pulled me outta that hell world so the least I can do is make sure you don’t get ganked by some wild beast. I’ll come with
this once and that’s it! Got it? You get today and today only then I’m back to the hated boss that beats you down and beats you down and never lets up, got it?!”

Moon nodded. That was more than good enough. Shifted to look at Gladion. Now they just needed to find an Ultra Beast...

“You have people coming to get you,” the elder brother of Lillie was quick to remind. “After everything that’s happened, if they show up here and you’ve run off to go looking for an Ultra Beast, they’re not going to be happy with you, you know that, right?”

Moon shook her head. She didn’t care. Right now what she had to do was what was right, so that was all she cared about. Gladion sighed, seeing her determination. Guzma, who very much enjoyed rejecting authority in all forms, couldn’t help the little smile crossing his face at Moon’s declaration. She’d pick a fight with anything if she thought it was the right thing to do.

He didn’t hate that.

“Fine, fine,” Gladion relented, “the cruiser I took from Po Town is still at the docks, here.” Pulling a key from his pocket, Gladion held it out only for Guzma to snatch it from his hand. The Team Skull Boss looked unimpressed.

“That’s mine, you punk, so I’m taking it back. You hung out with Team Skull long enough to take up thieving, you sure you can go back to cushy living in that mansion back there?”

“I’ll survive.” Gladion barely gave Guzma a moment’s eye contact. Focused on Moon. “Moon, I don’t know if Chief Anabel and Looker are going to want to help you or stop you on this. It’s crazy but... you’re the only one who could do this. It’s hard to say how people will react.”

Moon shook her head. All she needed to do was find a Nihilego. If Gladion could get her a report of one, that would be enough. Gladion frowned. He wasn’t quite sure how to but... he’d think of something.

“I’ll be in touch. Now follow me, I’ll take you down to the docks. The two of you wandering on your own will just get the wrong attention.” Taking the lead Gladion set off, Moon and Guzma following behind. Even then strange looks came from the Aether Foundation workers they passed on the way. Guzma gave them all stares back until they looked away.

Did Gladion... Moon bit down on her words, only for Gladion to question what she was thinking. After a moment Moon spoke up again. Did Gladion still have the Master Ball? In surprise Gladion stopped and turned back to her. Slowly nodded after a moment more.

“I do but... we still don’t know if that will even work properly on an Ultra Beast. I can try and get you a Beast Ball if you need to capture it but-”

No, Moon shook her head, it wasn’t for the Nihilego, she’d bring that back uncaptured. It was just... Moon looked away. If she saw that Black Beast again she wouldn’t stand a chance against it in a fight. The best way would be to capture it outright. And it didn’t have an Aura like the Ultra Beasts did, so maybe a Master Ball would work on it okay.

If she ever saw it again she wanted to save Nebby no matter what it took.

“...alright.” Gladion had heard enough about the Black Beast from what Lillie had recounted to him that morning. Retrieving the Master Ball, he held it out to Moon. It was burned, patches of streaked and warped colour across its surface, but still in one piece. Moon took it and added it to her bag.
“Are we going?” The loud voice of Guzma, already with the key to the Team Skull cruiser in the ignition, echoed over the start of the boat. “You got a time limit don’t ya?”

Quick to move to board, Moon thanked Gladion again. He didn’t feel like he deserved it at all. “If I hear anything about where a Nihilego could be I’ll send word, but at this point I doubt they’ll tell me. Now that Ultra Beasts are no longer appearing, I’m back to being a child to them instead of a temporary Task Force member. Even with Silvally.”

Moon smiled. But the two of them would still save the day. As Guzma began piloting the cruiser out from the Aether Paradise, Moon waved from its back to Gladion. He raised his own hand in farewell.

Then turned to try and find what he could to save his mother’s life.

The black cruiser branded in Team Skull regalia raced over choppy waters, a light but persistent covering of clouds overhead muting only barely the sun’s bright glow. Compared to the dark world Moon and Guzma had been in the night before, even this was so radiant as to blind.

Guzma huffed and looked away from the open seas ahead, jumping to find Moon standing behind him quietly looking up at him. Don’t do that! Freaky little kid.

“What?”

Did Guzma know what Lusamine had done with Poipole? They hadn’t found the Beast Ball containing it on her when she came back. Guzma only had a shrug for an answer.

“Dunno, kid, pretty much as soon as we got in the Prez walked right into one of those jellyfish monsters, did the deed, and floated off. Ditched me right away. I got real bad taste, don’t I, throwing in with her, huh?”

Not everyone could be Holei. Just saying that was enough to make Guzma’s nostrils flare, an unpleasant look curling across his face. Moon didn’t seem put off by it.

“Hey for real I hate hearing her name in your voice, stop talking about her to me.” Guzma turned back to watch the waves ahead. “You only showed up in Alola a couple of months ago anyway, why the hell do you know anything about her? Stop, don’t answer that,” Moon closed her mouth per Guzma’s request, “whatever the reason I’m just gonna hate it more. Just... don’t talk to me about her. I don’t wanna deal with that.”

The cruiser was heading east – was Guzma taking it to Ula’ula Island? That, at least, was an easy topic to handle. Guzma nodded.

“Yeah, back to Po Town. Gotta pick up the pieces of whatever’s going on with the gang, find Plums, and then we can go Beast hunting. Them punks of mine, they get all over the place, so if anyone’ll know where one of those things is camped out it’ll be them. What’s your plan anyway? You gonna try and capture that Beast normal-like? You know that don’t work, right?”

Honestly... she was just going to talk to it. The Nihilego she’d seen before at the Aether Paradise, and Poipole, they’d both been receptive to her. She just hoped that would be enough.

“Feh,” Guzma gave another unimpressed noise, “how happy-go-lucky can you get: ‘oh I just hope it’ll be friends with me if I talk to it’,” he gave a very unflattering impression of Moon’s voice, “get
real. Those things are awful. They ain’t like regular Pokemon, yo. You’re not gonna make nice with one. If you walk up to it it’s just gonna grab you like it did me and all those other people still out cold. That’ll really make that little girlfriend of yours cry won’t it?”

Guzma’s words struck Moon silent, but not for the reason he thought.

The walled Po Town came quickly into view as the cruiser approached the western Ula’ula coast, but something was immediately off to Guzma’s eyes. The town had a dock, an exit onto the seas, but there were... way too many boats around it. His gang hadn’t taken up fishing or some garbage had they? No, that didn’t... those were just regular people out on the water.

What in the hell?

A crackle of static was followed by Gladion’s voice emerging from the speaker embedded in the dash of the boat.

“-you there? Guzma pick up, I know you know how to use this.”

“Yeah yeah,” Guzma’s muttering accompanied him activating the receiver, “what, did you write down the frequency for reaching out here? You got a transmitter tucked away back home or something, kid?”

“Or something,” came the terse reply. “Now shut up, I have information. The Ula’ula Rocklands had a lot of Ultra Beasts that got left alone, since there weren’t really any people out that way. Reports are that there’s a bunch nesting all around the east and south coast of Ula’ula Island, just hiding out. Nihilego are drawn to people, so your best bet is to check out Mahihinu and Tapu Village. That’s the best I can-” Gladion’s voice cut out as Guzma turned the radio off. Moon snapped at him for it. What was that for? Gladion was speaking to-

“It don’t matter,” Guzma’s stare was one into the distance, barely considering Moon’s complaint. “Rules are I ain’t allowed south of Lanakila. Big Tapu Bulu threw me and Kukui both out after the Tapu Village thing went down. Made pretty clear if we went back it’d make an even bigger mess than last time. I ain’t ever gonna respect or follow the Tapu but... I don’t wanna see that. Not again. Not that.”

Moon’s fingers dug into her clenched fists. Tapu Bulu... she didn’t like it. Guzma barked a laugh.

“You and me both, kid. You see why I don’t like the whole Island Challenge? Cause the Tapu all fawn over people for doing it and screw them, right? Right?”

Moon shook her head. She wasn’t doing the Island Challenge for them. They could like her all they wanted she didn’t want them to or care about what they thought. She was doing it to see Alola, which she had fallen in love with. To meet its people, and its Pokemon. To become part of the wea-

“Don’t!” The sharp bark of Guzma’s voice silenced Moon immediately as the Team Skull Boss turned off the engine of the boat they were in, unsure about getting closer to what looked like a now not-Team Skull occupied Po Town. He slowly slid down to sit on the ground. “Don’t say that word. Not in that voice. Don’t do that to me. I can’t- I can’t hear that in your voice.”

Curling up leaning against the inside of the cruiser’s cabin, Guzma was now smaller than Moon. She moved to sit too. It didn’t feel right being able to look down on someone who stood that tall.

Would he... tell her about Holei? A scoffing noise came from Guzma’s mouth, face covered by his arms crossed over his knees. Moon waited for him to reply.
“What do you even wanna know – sounds like you know her as good as anyone else for whatever messed up reason. What can I tell you?”

Whatever he wanted to say. Moon sat there quietly, waiting for Guzma to speak. A sigh echoed from behind his arms.

“Listen, kid, I- I had a bad home, alright? Bad home bad family. Ditched that as soon as I was old enough, went out on the Island Challenge and just never came back. Ran into Kukui and Molayne on the way, somehow ended up as friends. Mostly we just fought a lot but... I dunno. Maybe that was just what I needed.” Moon stayed silent. Waited as Guzma breathed in to speak again. “So it was about on Ula’ula that you run into the wall, or you’re meant to – you obvs didn’t. And being stopped like that, it drives a guy crazy. Holei stepped in then, picked me up to live in Tapu Village. Took on teaching all three of us, prepping us to become stronger Alolan Trainers. Molayne made Captain cause of her – though me and Kukui both didn’t. Even still I... that was good times. Having a home and family, that was good. I was into that. And Holei she... she was the best of them, kid. She really cared, about everyone and everything. That’s why it sucks so bad, that the Tapu just decided they didn’t like something and destroyed it, then threw a fit when she scolded them for it. A family and home gone just like that. You know anything what that feels like? It’s the worst.”

Moon nodded. It was.

A real long silence came from Guzma then.

“Anyway, you can fill in the rest,” he concluded eventually. “Kukui got too scared by the Tapu to do anything about it. Molayne never even joined up with Holei’s group to stop them to begin with. And I went and made Team Skull. Plums came to me asking for something to do with her anger and she and me, we both got to grow up in that place. So we made a new one for ourselves. That’s it. Team Skull here to beat down anyone who tries to push us around. Team Skull who won’t accept any of the Tapu’s stuffy old traditions. Team Skull who go anywhere without a care in the world. Except, for me, back home.”

Guzma’s hands shifted, pushing against his face. The next words to come from him were his quietest yet. Moon still heard them clearly.

“They wouldn’t even let me go and see her damn grave.”

...screw them. Guzma looked up in surprise. “Huh?”

Screw them! Moon stood up. Who cares what they say or think? This is Alola and it meant sharing the world together! Just saying someone’s forbidden from part of it, who do they think they are? Forget about that! They should just go to Tapu Village anyway! If Tapu Bulu really has a problem with that... it could say it to Moon’s face.

It wouldn’t be the first time she’d told the Island Deity of Ula’ula where to go.

The wide-eyed stare from Guzma soon enough transfigured into laughter, and that into tears of mirth that maybe weren’t just that alone. The Team Skull Boss’s chest heaved as he collapsed in upon himself cackling at the declaration from this tiny brat before him. Seriously? Seriously?

“You kid...” his voice emerged from the ball he’d wrapped himself into, “look at what you made me do, telling you all that sappy garbage. It’s seriously because you sound just like a younger version of her, you’ve seriously gotta stop that. It’s driving me nuts.”

She absolutely would not. Saying that made Guzma laugh as well.
“It ain’t just words anymore, I swear I’ve heard that exact speech before too. Don’t go repeating that in good company, Kukui’d come kick my ass if he heard you talking like that ‘cos of me.”

Well, Moon gave a smile, she wouldn’t make any promises. A barking laugh of disbelief came with Guzma finally unwrapping himself and standing back up. A more classic defiant grin on his face now. This little brat, she’d be the end of more than just him if she kept this up.

How interesting.

“Alright then, kid, you’ve made your case. Come hell or high water we’re heading to Mahihinu then Tapu Village to find that Ultra Beast! Here we go!” Revving the cruiser back up to speed Guzma set it turning south from Po Town, to curve around Ula’ula’s western coast for the docks of southern Mahihinu. Coastline he hadn’t seen in years, long since learned not to stare at from the sea for the feelings it forced him to have. But today he didn’t feel that longing at all.

Why?

Because he was going home.

Even as soon as his feet settled on the docks of Mahihinu Guzma’s arrival prompted reaction. People scattering from him, some calling out that he shouldn’t be here. Some noticing that he wasn’t alone.

A man warily approached, on the side of Moon, attempting to ask if she was okay. Moon turned her gaze on them and Guzma watched as they took a step back, clearly caught off guard by the intensity of this eleven-year-old girl. That was a thing she kept doing. Guzma enjoyed seeing other people have to suffer her instead.

She was fine, thank you. Had he seen a Nihilego today? Moon’s question prompted a stammered nothing, which she thanked the man for and kept on walking, Guzma following behind. Oh this was intensely enjoyable for him. He’d never really been to see this region of Mahihinu, it was strange. A lot of the styles of Tapu Village survived here, but they were all coating those pop-up cubes the Aether Foundation put around. Like a veneer of paint to make a place look more distinguished than it really was. It made him want to just grab and tear the decorations away, pointing out the smooth white walls beneath. Look! This is what’s left of Tapu Village because of Tapu Bulu! Are you happy with that? Huh?

That wasn’t what Guzma did though. He just followed Moon up the path towards the place he’d once called home.

There was someone at its entrance, at the point the road leading through the abandoned village passed its overgrown threshold. That girl, only a few years older than Moon, purple hair hanging down around her face, stared down at the two walking up towards her. Her eyes focused on Guzma alone.

“You shouldn’t be here,” were the first words Captain Acerola of Tapu Village had spoken to Guzma in a long time. Back when Tapu Village was a thing most of what she said to him was to come chase her around, being a precocious and enthusiastic four-year-old always looking for people to play with. Guzma usually brushed her off. Kukui was always more popular with kids than him anyway.

“Says who?” Guzma’s drawl hid the heavy beating of his heart, now looking at the entrance of the home he’d left behind ten years ago. “Looks like I’m not the only one who’s been visiting anyway.”
It was true, the road to Tapu Village was well cleared, and showed heavy foot traffic upon it. Acerola frowned. This wasn’t what should be happening.

“We’ve just finished being invaded by Ultra Beasts, are you trying to make another disaster?” The young Captain shook her head. “We’re lucky enough Tapu Bulu didn’t get upset at the people hiding in Tapu Village while the Ultra Beasts were still appearing, and gave everyone the time to move back out. You shouldn’t be here. Why are you here?”

Moon was looking for a Nihilego. Her words, they finally drew Acerola’s focus to Moon – who she’d acknowledged the presence of but needed to focus on getting Guzma out of here first before she could address whatever this was. Acerola's frown remained.

“What?”

The people sick because of Nihilego, they needed a cure. If Moon could find and form a Bond with a Nihilego, she could get its help making that. So she needed to find one. Did Acerola know where one was? Moon had heard there were Ultra Beasts around.

The Captain’s expression held even as her eyes widened in surprise. What was Moon doing?

“Th- that’s crazy, Moon, you can’t just-” She’d formed a bond with one Ultra Beast already. She was strange, she knew that. She might be able to with a Nihilego too. And if she could, if she could help people then she had to! Acerola, please, tell her where one was.

“I-” Acerola struggled. The ghosts of Tapu Village had whispered warnings to her of Ultra Beasts hiding in the more abandoned and overgrown areas, part of why Acerola had pushed people to head back to Mahihinu, and applied pressure for the UB Task Force sweep to come here soon – though they were still busy ensuring Malie was clear at the moment. She, if Moon could help, and Acerola knew there were many victims of the Nihilego, then she should...

The rationalisations of the Captain came too slow, Moon closing the distance between them, looking into the overgrown Tapu Village beyond. By day it felt far less imposing than by night. Even with the ghosts dancing about in full sight.

Huh?

Acerola turned to the noise, stammered sounds coming from her at the sight of the pack – Gastly, Haunter, Misdreavus and even one of the rare few Mismagius floating about – seemingly calling for Moon’s attention. Moon moved to follow them as they disappeared down the twisted paths of the ruined village. Acerola glanced between the leaving Moon and wide-grinning Guzma behind her. D-darn it!

She turned and chased after Moon.

Left to his own devices Guzma slowly walked into the ruins of Tapu Village. Well a bolt of lightning didn’t strike him down as soon as he crossed the threshold, good start. Though that would’ve been more of a Tapu Koko deal than Bulu. Slowly walking, the Team Skull Boss made his way through, memory layering what the village should be over the broken ruins around him. Ah, it didn’t make him feel any better. Great.

He really was about to yell.

Then footsteps. Then a voice calling his name. Then he looked up to see a woman emerging from the paths herself, as natural a part of this place as she had been ten years ago. He stood there as she crossed the empty town square towards him.
Here together again, huh?

“You’re back,” Plumeria said it and Guzma wasn’t quite sure which part of ‘back’ she meant. Maybe all of it. He shrugged.

"Blame the kid, she won’t stop going above and beyond, it’s seriously annoying.”

“You’re telling me,” Plumeria held a slight smile. “She even sounds like-”

“I know it’s the worst!”

“I can’t stand it.”

A moment hung in the air before both laughed. Another sound this place hadn’t heard in ten years’ time. Guzma let it fade.

“Plums, do you know where-”

“Yeah, I can show you.”

Following behind, Guzma kept his silence. Went over the words he wanted to say.

The way he could finally properly bid her goodbye.

Captain Acerola knew a lot about Ghost-type Pokemon. Way more than most people knew about them – even a little more than most experts knew about their chosen types. She knew that Ghost Pokemon that lived in rarely travelled areas were some of the most dangerous, known for taking away any who got too close. She knew that the old legends about how each Ghost-type Pokemon was born only applied to a few individuals, their existence perpetuating in the way all Pokemon did past that point.

And she knew Ghost Pokemon loved beguiling, misleading, and obfuscating the truth. So to see this group of wild Ghost Pokemon, who lived within Tapu Village’s ruins and generally avoided human presence, leading Moon precisely through this twisted plant-choked environment, that really just flew against everything Acerola knew. It really felt like some greater spirit was directing them in how to act.

Quietly under her breath she asked if Holei was there with them.

No answer.

A Pokemon was walking beside Moon now, one of her own. Decidueye, Grass and Ghost-type final evolution of the starter Pokemon Rowlet. Acerola listened as Moon instructed the Arrow Quill Pokemon to watch over her, but out of sight, so the Ultra Beast she was looking for would not be frightened. Quickly the Pokemon disappeared amongst the overgrowth of the village. Acerola noted the other ghosts fading out as well.

“Moon, is there an Ultra Beast-”

There was.

Moon raised a hand, asking for Acerola to hang back, the Captain displeased by that thought. But Moon needed the Beast to not be afraid. Any more than just her... would be a problem. She needed
to go forward alone.

Acerola still resolved to watch this from as close as she was allowed.

Moon’s Bond, her connection to Lunala, was still there. Muted. Constrained. The barest sliver of
thread across an unfathomable distance separated by entire dimensions between them. All of her
Bonds remained, the excessive strength needed to support them at such distance paid easily by the
infinity she contained. Even then it wasn’t like she could call out to it. Sense where it was. Or feel its
thoughts. All she knew was that, just barely, she was still holding on.

And all she got in return was the sense of hunger, the desperate need, that told her clearly where the
greatest light could be found.

Before her was one such.

She announced herself just outside of the building. Her name was Moon, a Pokemon Trainer of
Alola. She needed the help of the one inside. A moment passed without response. Moon spoke
again. She’d seen it, the Black Beast. It had taken one of her friends. Maybe two. If she ever crossed
paths with it she’d fight it again. She’d do everything to stop it. To save those important to her but
also... to keep those threatened by it safe.

The faintest noise, a mote of curiosity, echoed from the collapsed ruins before her.

But right now she needed help. To heal people injured. She knew it was scary, what the Beast before
her had been through. Running from the hungry dark. But Moon, she would help. Offer light. A
place safe from it. Please, let her in?

Another faint sound, but Moon seemed pleased with it. Stepped through the threshold of the ruins
even as Acerola tried to call out and tell her no.

Silence held long enough for the Captain to attempt to move forward, but as she did a flutter of
movement revealed Decidueye by her side, the Arrow Quill Pokemon as fine a silent mover as could
be. It held out a wing, blocking the way forward. Acerola frowned.

“Is it really okay?”

A deep hoot was all she got in response.

The Captain grumbled and set to wait.

And then Moon emerged.

And then in her hand was held a white tendril, leading up to a frill-capped head that extended many
more. That was indeed a Nihilego, UB-Symbiont, the Parasite Pokemon. Acerola stared blankly as
Moon called Decidueye back to her. Introduced her partner to this Ultra Beast. A brief dialogue
between the two Pokemon before Moon continued on, leading the Nihilego by the tendril,
Decidueye walking alongside. Acerola turned, watching, as Moon walked by, just like that.

Then raised her phone and snapped a picture.

Last minute crushing victory in their selfie league.

Reactions as Moon made her return to the Aether Paradise were as expected. First a crowd of people
around the southern reaches of Mahihinu as Moon emerged from the western entrance of Tapu Village, an Ultra Beast led by her hand, the Team Skull Boss Guzma following uneasily behind. The people kept their distance, not knowing at all how to react to this, only watching as Moon continued on down to the docks. The cruiser Gladion had taken was out of fuel, so they needed to use a ferry instead. Luckily it was not a long wait for one to appear.

Those disembarking attempted to give the waiting Moon and Nihilego a wide berth. As she boarded many more considered letting this one go without them. Guzma gave a lot of belligerent looks to those staring. Though honestly he felt pretty much the same.

This was seriously beyond surreal.

Activity as Moon disembarked at the Aether Paradise was immediate. Plenty of calls ahead had been prepared, and a team including Anabel and Looker were there to greet Moon as she stepped off of the ferry, still holding the Nihilego by an outstretched tendril. It was trusting in her, she told the shocked masses around, and so she had to stay by it. But it would help. Where did they need to go?

Quickly Moon was led to a lab cleared and prepared to create the cure to save every Nihilego victim’s life.

Kukui, who had arrived at the Aether Paradise not long after Moon’s departure, having promised Jewellery he would return her daughter to her, had spent the next few hours freaking out about being unable to track her down, with no-one having any idea where she’d gone. There were mentions of seeing her with Gladion and Guzma, but neither of them were to be found either.

Gladion had decided the easiest way out of awkward questions was just to use the fact he knew the Aether Paradise and where to hide in it as well as anyone could. Guzma, on return, did not have that same luxury.

Kukui rapidly pulled him aside.

“What did you do?”

“Big words,” Guzma smirked, staring Kukui down as equally as Kukui stared at him. “I’m the one who got dragged around by her, not the other way around. I went and saw Holei’s grave, by the way. You should make the time to do the same. She’d be mad you put her off for so long.”

The grip of Kukui’s hand on Guzma’s shoulder tightened to a painful degree.

“Guzma...”

“Hey now, you gonna complain about her being a hero?” Guzma raised his arms, open palms held upwards. “She went and got one of those Beasts so cures could be made, no-one else could do that. You got a problem?”

Kukui’s burning stare didn’t waver. Neither did Guzma's smirk.

“Yeah, see, you were always the scariest one of us all so I still don’t get why you had to coward out.” Moving an arm Guzma pushed Kukui’s off of him. “Anyway I’m done here, paid my debts and everything. Gotta go figure out where to set up camp now that Po Town went and got stolen back, can you believe that? Turns out I can’t leave for more than a day or two.”

Kukui didn’t budge from where he was standing, having pulled Guzma over to a wall. Guzma pushed past him.
“Don’t freak out next time you hear her talk;” the Team Skull Boss gave a chuckle. “Or do. I’d enjoy that if you did, truth be told. Anyway have fun playing with your league. At least you’ve got one decent competitor in it.”

The exit of Guzma went unopposed, the man wandering back down to the ferries to wait for a ride. Where to go, now that new home wasn’t that either? He didn’t really want to go back to Tapu Village anymore. Once was enough. Maybe he’d go crash on a beach somewhere. That’d be good enough for a start.

Whole new world ahead of him.

Moon sat quietly, waiting outside of the lab work was underway within. Nihilego had produced the toxins necessary, samples of enough concentration for development to finally begin. The Aether Paradise had some of the finest medical technicians in the world, Lusamine accepting nothing less than the best to stock the teams that made up her creation. Such good she’d created, before her madness had consumed her.

Such good still existed in this world.

The Nihilego remained beside Moon, floating freely, seemingly unconcerned with the going-ons about it. There was a Bond now, faint as such new things could be, and Moon felt the connection to the Pokemon beside her. It was... calm... because it had Moon to rely upon. Moon who had promised it safety, and offered it a light to live beside. So as long as it remained with her it would not fear. Chose to believe in the light of the one who’d reached out for its aid.

It was late-afternoon by this point, the hours ticking by. Moon had no concept of Lusamine’s situation, but by the busyness of those at work, clearly there was still a chance to save her. So Moon kept her hope held. Believed that this would end well.

As well as it could for what had already been lost.

“Moon?” The voice of Jace, Aether Foundation engineer and best friend to Captain Ilima, raised Moon's head, the Nihilego with her not rising to action due to the peace its partner felt at this figure approaching. Jace held out two spheres to Moon. One occupied and one not. Moon accepted both gratefully.

“Your Salamence is healed,” Jace too stumbled on the name of the Pokemon, shocked beyond belief that in so short a time Moon had raised such to this state. “But it needs to rest as well. No major battles for two weeks.” Moon nodded, understanding. Thanked Jace for bringing it to her. Considered the other sphere. Turned to the Nihilego and explained.

This Beast Ball would keep it safe, beside her. That way it could go wherever she did, even while resting, and Moon could care for it with ease. The Ultra Beast seemed to consider that, unknowing of Pokeballs compared to the way Pokemon of this world tended to. But Moon expressed that it was a safe place, and it had put its faith in her. So it reached up a tendril to touch the ball and disappeared into it within a red flash. Moon held the Beast Ball as it sealed tight. Jace nodded to see it.

“Almost one-hundred people in Nihilego-induced comas here,” the young man spoke after Moon’s successful capture. “The cure to wake them, you’ll have saved each of their lives.”

Moon shook her head. She’d helped others save their lives. She was just part of the entire thing.
Those working in there right now, they were even more important than she was. Jace slowly nodded. That was a surprisingly mature attitude for one so young. At her age he’d have relished being called so important.

Then again at her age he hadn’t nearly suffered the attention she had for her differences.

“Here,” he had one more thing to offer her, holding out a small green device. Moon accepted the Ride Pager readily. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get that back to you. It’s been a busy few days.” Moon nodded. It sure had. Jace sighed.

“I’ll admit to some complicity in what went on – Branch Chi- Faba, took me and a number of others away from the Aether Paradise to work on the Beast Balls remotely. It was to keep us from distraction, he’d said, but really he just wanted a cell to take the credit for on his own. I called the Captains for help but... it still took me some time. I wonder... how many people were hurt because it took me so long to do that.”

Moon shook her head again. It was Faba who hurt them for his selfishness not Jace. Jace had moved to help. That was what mattered. Her reassurances settled a smile on the young man’s face. She was so young but so mature already. Her Island Challenge had done far more for her than his had for him.

But maybe racing Ilima to do it as fast as possible meant Jace had skipped all the important lessons to begin with.

“I need to get back to work,” the engineer returned to his feet, “but I’m sure I’ll see you around. Thank you for all you’ve done. I think... maybe I was inspired by you to stand up more on my own. Thank you. I mean that. Thank you.”

Moon saw Jace off as he took his leave, activating the Beast Ball she now held to give Nihilego the experience of exiting and entering the device, to become familiar with the sensation. Regular Pokeballs could be exited at will by the Pokemon within, to prevent being sealed inside. It seemed as though the Beast Ball didn’t work that way though. Or at least Nihilego couldn’t figure out how to do so.

Moon resolved to mention her concern over that to Jace the next time she saw him.

Soon after, she stepped outside, into the fading afternoon air of the greenery-lined pathway beyond the Aether Paradise main building. Activating the Pokeball that held her partner Salamence, Moon quickly tried and failed to apologise for the Dragon Pokemon’s condition, who responded with a light headbutt bowling her over. The message she was given was clear. Moon had done what she’d needed to do, and the Salamence did not regret it one bit. She smiled up at it, standing and wrapping her arms around its neck in a hug. Thanked it, so much, for helping save them.

She’d make sure never to put it through that again.

The sense she got in return was that of course not, for the next time they’d control that power far better. They had a stage to reach together after all. No holding back.

“Moon?” The voice of Hau brought a feeling of intense relief to Moon, turning to see him walking down the path towards her. He was looking up at the Dragon Pokemon with her in awe, shocked by the evolution that had occurred in the short time Moon had been gone. Moon was shocked too. Ran forward and seized Hau’s left wrist with her own left hand. Raised the both of them up.

Compared the two black Z-Rings resting side-by-side.
“Moon? Wait- you-”

Where had he gotten this? Moon’s demand came fast. Hers had appeared after entering Ultra Space with Lunala, had Hau- was he at the Lake of the Duske the night before? The surprised expression on Hau’s face didn’t go away. Slowly he nodded. Moon’s own eyes were wide.

Was he the partner to Solgaleo?

“No!” Hau shook his head. “I- I got knocked out by the Ultra Beasts just before Solgaleo appeared and... there’s no Bond.” Moon demanded to know everything. Hau breathed out heavy.

“Solgaleo appeared and picked me up, I woke up on its back as it was flying all over Alola. I couldn’t really... do anything, just held on, and it kept going all night. I only noticed my Z-Ring was different after a couple of hours, I don’t know when it changed.” Moon’s shocked expression wasn’t going away as Hau spoke. “When morning came Solgaleo flew back to the Lake and dropped me off, then disappeared back through the Ultra Wormhole it came from. Some Aether Foundation people came and got me and brought me back here and I just... fell asleep. I’ve been out all day. What happened to you? Can you tell me everything?”

She did.

As her story went on Hau’s eyes grew wider and wider, his interjections less and less frequent. Moon had... seriously done all that? She and Lillie they were... incredible! Moon shook her head. Hau had done amazingly too. And... she looked down at the black Z-Ring around Hau's wrist again. Maybe...

“Moon?”

Could Hau call Solgaleo? Could he summon it to take Moon back into Ultra Space to find Nebby and Poipole? There was a desperation in Moon’s tone that Hau hated, because he knew the answer he had wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“Moon, I, I’m not connected to Solgaleo. I don’t know how to call it back. I don’t think I can.”

Maybe... maybe if the two of them played the flutes at the Lake of the Duske! Moon reached out for an idea. Anything. The Solgaleo must’ve been fully grown, unlike the just-evolved Nebby. It could definitely stop the Black Beast! It could save them! She just needed to-

“Hey Moon,” Hau raised a hand, putting it on her own she’d been resting on his shoulder. “Can we... talk about this later? I’m still... really tired.” Oh, Moon pulled back, then apologised. She was sorry. She just... needed to do something or... she’d lose it. Hau considered how he’d thought the same due to his own felt insufficiencies the day before.

Somehow knowing Moon suffered the same as him made him realise even more how foolish he’d been.

“We’ll figure something out.”

She smiled at him with genuine relief to hear that.

Kukui had checked in on Moon, multiple times, since she’d returned to the Aether Paradise, but never really spoken for long. Each time Moon spoke to him he jolted, then looked ashamed for doing so. Mentioned that he’d stay to see her home to her mother once this was over. But acknowledged Moon’s insistence that she was going nowhere until the cure for Lusamine was done.
Soon after nightfall it was.

Wicke came to get Moon, who was eating enthusiastically alongside Hau in an Aether cafeteria. Looking up, as soon as Moon saw the relaxed smile on Wicke’s face she forced herself to swallow what she was eating and bounded to her feet. Was Lusamine-

“Yes,” Wicke nodded, “the antitoxin has been produced and she has been treated. She is still unconscious, but her vital signs have improved dramatically. Moon, you’ve saved Madam Lusamine’s life.”

The jubilation Moon felt was so extreme she didn’t even notice the hug Hau gave her, practically lifting her from the ground before setting her down again. Moon stepped forward. Could she see-

“Yes,” Wicke nodded again, “I’ll take you to her.”

Deep in the medical wing of the Aether Paradise an intensive care unit had been dedicated to the monitoring of Aether President Madam Lusamine. Compared to every moment since her arrival, a lack of tension now hung in the air. The vigil of what was believed to be her final hours over in the best possible way.

A miracle pulled from despair.

Lillie turned to face Moon as soon as Moon entered the corridor Lusamine’s room was on.

“Moon,” her soft breath of Moon’s name was more than enough to break Moon into an almost run, crossing the stark white corridor to go to Lillie’s side. Was Lillie alright? How was she feeling? Had she eaten? Or slept? Moon observed the dark circles under Lillie’s eyes. She needed to care for herself.

A hand rested on Moon’s shoulder. Shifted a little to touch her cheek, before dropping away again. Lillie smiled at her and Moon felt only a smooth wall between them. The way to Lillie, the connection binding them, blocked off. Even Lillie’s smile was... static. On and off like a light switch. Oh, she was...

“Thank you.” Lillie breathed the word again, Moon feeling it but knowing the Lillie behind it was still unwell. Losing Nebby, even more than for Moon for Lillie it had been... “You’ve saved my mother’s life, as awful as she has been to you. And to me. But even still if she’d died I would have...” silence held as Lillie failed to find the words. Shook her head instead.

“Moon, you should go and see your mother too. I need to stay here with mine. Thank you, for everything. Thank you.”

She didn’t have to go, Moon shook her head, she could stay here with Lillie and- “No,” Lillie rebuked the idea, “please go back home for now. Your mother is important too, and she is no doubt worried about you. Please, Moon. For me?”

There was little Moon could say in argument to that. Bowed her head. Then promised she’d come see Lillie again. She couldn’t even feel the acknowledgement of that from the sealed Bond between them.

Lillie returned to her mother’s room.

Moon stood there in the corridor alone a moment longer.
“Just like you promised.” Emerging from the room shortly after Lillie’s entrance, Gladion’s voice made Moon jump. He nodded to her. “It’s hard to say how thankful I am. You’ve saved my mother, Lillie, and me over and over. Even when we were coming to rescue Lillie before, I just thought of you and Hau as people who could help me. Being raised here under my mother’s care, then going out to join Team Skull, I can’t say I’ve ever really had real friends before. It’s weird but... is it wrong to call you and Hau that now?”

Moon shook her head. Not at all. A small smile came to Gladion’s face. “Alright then.”

Wicke, at the far end of the corridor, giving Moon the space to speak with first Miss Lillie and then Master Gladion, called her name. It was about time for Moon to return home. Gladion spoke again.

“I’ll keep watch over my sister, and let you know how she is. What happened hasn’t been easy, for any of us, but she’s the strongest of us, so I know she’ll be okay.”

Moon nodded in response. That was true. So she’d believe too. Thanked Gladion for everything he’d done as well. Then turned to take her leave.

It was time for her to go home.

Wicke guided Moon to Kukui. Kukui guided Moon and Hau to the boats. The ferry took them all back to Hau’oli. A flagged cab brought them to the Hau’oli Outskirts. Kukui would take Hau back to Iki Town and his grandfather’s care.

They saw Moon off at her door.

Inside was home. The feeling of a place welcoming her back. A safe place she could finally rest. No more rushing across Alola, racing the clock, seeking to save the day. Just a place to stop. Jewellery, awaiting her daughter, rushed to hug Moon the moment she was through the threshold.

And finally since her return from that dark world, shelving the loss in her heart for what needed to be done, Moon let herself feel those missing from her side.

And cried in her mother’s embrace.

Chapter End Notes

And so here we are, the halfway point of the Poni Island arc. The excessive damage having the Nihilego attached to her torn away did to Lusamine put her life on the brink, and it was solely thanks to the Aether Foundation Lusamine had created and the hard work of Moon that she survived. This was a very interesting chapter for me to write, with a heavy Guzma focus in it. The further away I get from the path of canon now, the more I can go into my own styles and interpretations. I hope what I did set well with you all.

And I hope you remain excited for what's next to come.

Next chapter... is probably going to be a large one. I'd rather it not be too big, but my instincts say given how much needs to pass over the course of it, it's gonna. Turns out that once you're way deep in your detailed world fic, you start having a lot you need to say at all times. Who'd have guessed?
Anyway that's it for now. Thank you to all readers, especially those who go on to share Eldritch with others, and/or leave comments here for me to enjoy! I hope you're excited for the other half of the Poni Island arc, and the things I'll get up to within it. Since you've finished this chapter, consider sharing this fic on twitter or tumblr using the following links - anything that helps bring it to more people is very important to me. It would be very appreciated.

https://twitter.com/TaurusVersant/status/999637533209321472
https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

Other than that, I'll be back with the next chapter whenever it's done. Please look forward to it. I'll see you then.
She was hungry.

It hurt. She was empty. Devoid. Starving. An endless suffering consuming an emptiness even deeper than the darkness that surrounded it. No light to be found. No way to be sated. That pain...

It hurt.

Moon’s eyes opened to the hammering of her heart within her chest, the moonlit darkness of her room in her house warmly surrounding her. This was not that depth. She wasn’t there. She wasn’t it. Still her. Still here. Still safe.

Rolling over, the feeling of sweat covering her made Moon frown. Pull herself to her feet and move to the washroom.

Another nightmare...

It wasn’t every night. Some nights she slept deeply and fine. Others... this nightmare. That darkness, and the feeling of hunger. The sense of pain. Looking at herself in the washroom mirror, Moon saw a tired expression. She didn’t feel great. Even after cleaning off her face and arms, standing there on the cool tiles just looking up at the bare ceiling overhead, she knew sleep wouldn’t come easily again. Sighed and just went to lie down in bed and do the best that she could.

It wasn’t easy.

A week had passed.

It was strange, this week, how simple it was. She woke each morning in her own bed. Shared breakfast with her mother and Pokemon – though many of the latter had to be fed outside for their now larger size. Inside the house Sylveon was the most common of Moon’s Pokemon to be out and about, her mother’s Meowth quite intimidated by the larger and stronger Pokemon. Moon had asked her mother whether she’d thought about catching other Pokemon, or having the Meowth evolve, but Jewellery had made mention that she wanted to keep things as they were, for the moment.

Maybe a little later she’d mix things up, but for now she was happy without any more change.

The days passed simply. While staying at home Moon returned to her studies – the second round of her education. It was a section of one’s schooling life that shaped itself to fit between the gaps of their Pokemon Journeys, completed at a different pace for everyone based on their time given to each. Principal Asuka of the Pokemon Schooling System had visited Moon and Jewellery again, happy to talk with each about Moon’s studies, as well as make noises regarding having Moon attend the Pokemon School just down the road.

Moon wasn’t quite sure if she was up for that just yet.

She’d told her mother everything. Every last bit of the story, even what she hadn’t mentioned before.
It was odd, recounting it, to realise how quickly everything had come to pass. The time between the Trial in Tapu Village and Moon’s return home from the Aether Paradise, it had been only slightly more than a week in total. More had happened within that week than any other in Moon’s life. Maybe more than any other she’d have again.

The story without question floored Jewellery. To hear the fullness of what her daughter had gone through and done, Jewellery struggled with the weight of it all. She’d believed Moon was under the care of the leaders of Ula’ula Island. But instead Moon had been tricked into running into the grasp of Team Skull itself, without anyone knowing she was going. Then pursued a kidnapping to the Aether Paradise, and fought alongside her Pokemon against terrible foes.

Then gone even further still! Not been cared for, or directed home, but instead allowed to go to Poni Island just herself and Lillie alone! That Ultra Beast they’d passed by in the Vast Poni Canyon, hearing what it did the thought of what if Moon had been any closer made Jewellery’s heart seize. And then! And then! To evolve a Legendary Pokemon... to form a Bond with it... to go through the Ultra Wormhole and fight in another world, only to nearly be taken by some legendary monster, then as soon as she’d recovered set out to find a Nihilego to save the lives of so many...

Jewellery couldn’t handle it at all. The mass of emotions, terror for what could have been, awe for what Moon had done, fury for those who did not guard her, pride in her daughter’s will, Jewellery cried openly because that was all she could do with so many feelings swirling within her. Moon hugging her didn’t make it any easier. Her daughter, her daughter who she loved so much, had gone through all of that. Had come so close to disaster so often. But had been a hero. Had come home safe to her.

Was still here.

Jewellery held Moon even tighter.

And after everything her daughter had done, still she’d lost two so important to her. One taken and one missing. It wasn’t fair. Every last bit of it wasn’t fair, from what Moon decided she needed to do to what was done to her. She was eleven! Was her ability, that allowed her to take on her journey so much faster than anyone should, also drawing such fate towards her? Even one more adventure like this for Moon would make Jewellery’s heart fail for sure.

She wasn’t crazy for thinking this was all far too much, was she?

Was she?

They saw someone in Hau’oli to talk about it. Moon was less giving with the story to others, but at least it was the chance to talk. To go over what she’d been through. Something an eleven-year-old should never have had to do. It was hard to know for sure if it helped, but Moon didn’t speak against it either. Jewellery did her best to believe that was good enough.

Hau visited, often. Moon smiled when he was around, the two wandering about the outskirts and beaches, Hau’oli proper and Iki Town too. No Pokemon battles, but often Pokemon presence, each manifesting a number and just... being. Jewellery was very thankful to the young boy for that. Told him so and got a bashful smile in return.

“It’s good to look out for our friends!” he’d announced to her. Alola... Jewellery nodded. If nothing else, she would never regret that she and Moon had come here to start their new life.

Moon left the area around her home only once, a few days after her return. It was atop the back of a flying Dragon Pokemon, a Salamence, that she departed, following another Pokemon through the
sky. Though the Charizard Mohn had given her flew fast, Moon’s partner Salamence made equal speed. It wasn’t as comfortable to ride without equipment like the Charizard had, but Moon was not prepared to have one of her strongest partners weighed down with such.

After so many hectic battles to have come before, the thought of being able to prepare before being thrown into the next did not come easily to her.

This flight was to learn, for Moon and Salamence both. The experience of riding her partner over a long distance, and the direction across Alola to go. East from Melemele, across to Akala Island’s western shore. Then further still, over that island too, until the sea greeted them again. Then north. North to the small cluster of islands nestled amongst the waves.

North to the Poke Pelago.

Mohn’s welcome to Moon had to wait, the number of Pokemon living across the many islands – now interconnected by floating wooden bridges not dissimilar to Seafolk Village’s own – immediately swarming Moon upon her return. This many around her, this many connected to her, the feeling of such filled Moon’s heart, and gave her a moment where absence wasn’t what defined her. It helped.

It had been too long for her since her last visit, but every day had come so fast, and every night had been so full, that time had slipped away again and again. Mohn smiled at Moon’s apology to her Pokemon, something he was sure not one of them would hold against her. That day’s visit, Moon unleashing the rest of her Pokemon to join those here, was one she took to finally, finally, relax. It helped a lot.

Watching those Pokemon, Mohn couldn’t help but shake his head. Even without a firm grip on his memories or the full extent of whatever knowledge he once had, he still knew seeing those Pokemon – especially the newly evolved Salamence and Volcarona – that they were of vastly incredible strength. Of course what stood out the most, even more than those two, was the one Pokemon that shone with a light all of its own.

The Ultra Beast UB-Symbiont, Nihilego.

It didn’t seem to eat, Moon had quickly learned, the Pokemon when manifested from the Beast Ball that kept it simply floating absently around. Rotom-dex suggested that the energy given by the Trainer’s Bond connecting Moon to the Nihilego was enough, but admitted when Moon pressed that it was just a guess. The living Pokedex did ensure to always keep watch over the Nihilego though, so it might better log the nature of this mysterious Ultra Beast.

Her actions were known. She’d been seen, both at Mahihinu and the Aether Paradise, leading the Nihilego along. And those with the lightest effects of merger still left in comas, they’d begun to wake. The Aether Foundation took as much credit for the cure as it could – as Moon preferred it to – but still the fact she was the one who’d brought this Ultra Beast to them was known. That and the nature of her Bonds, revealed in battle with Kahuna Nanu on the shores of Mahihinu.

Moon with seven Bonds at once, at least. Moon who’d had a partner Ultra Beast – Poipole, as the UB Records showed, Anabel having added the data from Rotom-dex to the UB Task Force’s own – and had another now. Had captured a Nihilego who obeyed her, or so it seemed, and sought to cause no harm. After the events of the Ultra Beast Invasion, such a thing seemed ridiculous. It was all ridiculous.
The words of the Masked Royal still lingered in the hearts of the people. The interest in Moon, many who’d pursue it were reminded, both by others and theirselves, that she was still just a child. That to harass her for their curiosity would never be excused. For those few who still pushed past that to at least try and seek an audience, the unnerving presence of Nihilego beside Moon, and the sharp dismissals of Moon’s mother for those without the sense to understand they needed to leave her be, continued to keep the peace.

For the moment.

There was one thing about this all that Moon truly regretted, though she was not sure how she would rather it be. She didn’t want her and Lillie’s actions to be known, in evolving Nebby to Lunala and, likely, calling Solgaleo to Alola. But the actions of the second, who had driven away the Ultra Beasts, had left their mark. The design of the Sunne Pokemon was to be found everywhere now. In every tourist shop brought to prominence, marked upon decorations and artworks, furniture and cutlery, plush dolls and toy figures, Solgaleo’s popularity in Alola had exploded.

Lunala’s had not.

What would Moon rather? That all of Alola know what she and Lillie had done? Absolutely not. Never ever ever. But... each time Moon passed row after row of Solgaleo-designed products amongst the shopping centres of Hau’oli City, seeing not one Lunala amongst them, it made her heart hurt. Nebby had done its best for Alola too. It deserved acknowledgement as well.

It wasn’t its fault.

So many thoughts swirling, so many things she carried even as the days passed by. At least here, in this moment visiting the Poke Pelago, Moon felt herself relax. Could make sure that each of her Pokemon greeted one another. That each knew they were part of this together.

It was by the shores of the main island, where Mohn’s small shack was built, that the caretaker of the Poke Pelago finally joined Moon, approaching as she sat by the water running a hand upon her Milotic’s head, the Tender Pokemon having emerged from the water just enough to be at Moon’s care. Moon wished Milotic could have been there with them, in the stand against Lusamine, but the system of six Pokemon was enforced at all times.

The only way she could keep more with her was to go without Pokeballs to begin with.

“And you’re sure?”

Moon nodded. With Salamence she could now visit the Poke Pelago on her own. Mohn had given her a Ride Pager and she’d given it over to the Aether Foundation because people she trusted, the Captains of Akala, had asked her to. She was sorry for not telling him that sooner.

“Well,” Mohn tilted the wide-brimmed straw hat he wore to keep Alola’s sun at bay, “I wouldn’t say it’s a problem, and if you think it was best I’m happy to believe that too. I’ll admit that being able to call on Charizard again will be nice though. I’ve missed their company!”

Moon smiled. At least, in the days to come, she’d have more time to visit again. Try to be more
regular about it. Forming Bonds with all of these Pokemon, she'd felt a little selfish in doing so, but seeing these islands where they could live happy, that was enough to make her sure she'd not been wrong.

Alola was people and Pokemon living together. So these islands made by the Pokemon she was connected to, they were Alola too.

And making more of Alola was something Moon was very happy to do.

That was the week that passed since her return home. Schoolwork with her mother. A visit from Asuka. Many visits from Hau. A trip to the Poke Pelago. Wandering Hau’oli City. Simply... being.

And then, as the week passed by, the letter of invitation arrived.

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Dear Moon,

One of the roles of a Kahuna is to carry on the traditions of Alola, to ensure they continue on from one generation to another, from ancient past to distant future. The coronation ceremony of a Kahuna is one such tradition, that for me went unseen to due to the situation at the time. Nonetheless it is still expected.

Nonetheless the ceremony must still be held.

This letter to you is an invitation, for you and a guardian to join me within the Ruins of Hope upon Poni Island as witness to my coronation. That you, and Lillie, were there to see me take on the mantle of Kahuna means so much to me. For you to join me again would mean the world.

I have sent this invitation to yourself, Hau, and Lillie, dear friends I have made in the journey that brought me to this point. The other Kahuna of Alola, alongside Captain Mina, will also be in attendance. Should you be willing, I would be most delighted to see you there.

Your friend,
Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island

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Ferries from Hau’oli City’s docks were most commonly bound for Akala’s Heahea City. After that the far longer journey to Malie, taken via the Aether Paradise nestled between the four islands of Alola. Poni Island, the least populated of Alola’s four islands by far, saw only a few bound for it each day. Most people didn’t visit.

Even then the ferry leaving that morning held still so few indeed.

“A pleasure to be travelling alongside you.” The voice of Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island was the same as ever, joviality and gravel, a figure with a rough growl who rarely ever spoke without a tone of amusement. Alongside him was Hau, his grandson invited and Hala taking the role of guardian in bringing him here. Not that Hau didn’t have the full ability to make the journey on his own but... after everything that had happened, even Hala found himself feeling just a little more protective than before.

“It’s wonderful.” Jewellery smiled, seated with Moon opposite the Kahuna and grandson. “I’m so
happy that Moon was able to make such a good friend, who would ask her to see such. I’m so happy we came here to Alola.”

“Yeah!” Hau was enthusiastic to agree. “Cause that means Moon and I get to be friends too!” Moon smiled at Hau’s declaration and nodded along. She was happy to be a part of the Alola she loved.

“Hmmm,” a ruminating sound came from Hala, who’d been listening out for each of Moon’s short expressions since they’d met at the docks of Hau’oli. “You’ve picked up an Alolan accent I see, young Moon.” The nod the Kahuna got in response from Moon came with a calm gaze. She’d done similar before, watched the world silently, but there was a new focus and discipline that gave her an intensity of an entirely different kind. Combined with the accent Moon had – one of the less common Alolan variants endemic to Ula’ula’s south – it gave Hala a very strong impression of one person in particular.

He didn’t know at all how to feel about that.

Since picking up the former Team Skull Boss Guzma off the shores of Hau’oli City, the former Kahuna of Ula’ula Island had been on Hala’s mind. Doing what he could to help Guzma find a new direction in life – difficult given the man’s natural obstinance to anyone’s guidance – Hala had ruminated long on the effects of Holei’s actions.

He clearly needed to spend even longer than that.

“Nevertheless I am pleased you are joining us,” pushing past those thoughts Hala continued on, “to celebrate the Bond of young Kahuna Hapu and Tapu Fini.”

How did it work, Moon asked, unsure of the specifics. Captain Mina had told her the Tapu controlled the Bond between Kahuna and Island Deity, that they could connect and disconnect it at will. Hala nodded. That was, in essence, correct.

“The Tapu and Kahuna share a duty of guardianship for Alola,” the older Kahuna explained. “Each doing what they can alone for it: the Tapu preserving the shape of the land, the Kahuna the shape of our culture. When a danger appears that neither can stop alone, then we join together to dispatch it. You were witness to the Z-Move we share, were you not?”

Moon nodded. That great golden giant... she wondered if anything could resist it. Maybe Lunala. Or Solgaleo. Maybe.

“Perhaps!” The Kahuna laughed at Moon’s consideration. “The legends do state that combining their power, Solgaleo and Lunala once bested the four Tapu together. Of course neither had a partner behind them, which may well have changed the result!”

Maybe the Z-Move Moon had performed with Nebby was that strong. There was little anyone could say in response to a thought like that.

“As for our Bond,” the Kahuna continued after a long silent moment, “the Kahuna of Alola keep the room to connect it at any time, though such requests are rare things indeed. It has been some years since I last joined with Tapu Koko before the Ultra Beast Invasion.”

Moon nodded. It was still strange to think about, the connection between Tapu and Kahuna, especially with how much she admired most of the Kahuna and how much she disliked the Island Deities. That wasn’t really something she felt comfortable talking to Hala about though. Maybe Hapu.

Or Mina.
“Hey Moon?” Hau shifted from his seat to sit by Moon, “have you heard from Lillie? Do you know if she’s coming?”

Moon shook her head. She’d tried to reach out to the Aether Paradise a few times over the past week, but been unable to reach Lillie each time. She didn’t know how she was. Or how Gladion or Lusamine were. She hoped... she really hoped she’d see Lillie here today.

“Mhm,” Hau nodded. “I hope so too.”

Two others waited at the docks of Seafolk Village – the largest settlement of Poni Island slowly returning to its true shape as those who had fled the Ultra Beasts returned. The nature of a coronation ceremony for a Kahuna called for those other Kahuna of Alola to attend, and so Kahuna Olivia of Akala Island was here. The nature of Kahuna Nanu was to avoid everything he possibly could to do with his role, and so Captain Acerola had come in his stead.

The two greeted those disembarking warmly.

“Moon,” Kahuna Olivia approached first, Moon looking up to the taller dark-skinned woman, “it’s good to see you again. I’m sure Kahuna Hapu will be delighted to know you’ve come.” Moon nodded back, paused a moment, then asked if Olivia or Acerola had seen Lillie. Both glanced at one another.

“She hasn’t come through,” Acerola shrugged, “or if she has it was before I got here!”

“I didn’t see her on the way from Hapu’s home,” Olivia added, having travelled down the path to greet and escort those arriving. “She may still be coming however.”

Either suggestion didn’t help Moon’s despondency, Hau trying to cheer her up by insisting there was no way Lillie would miss this. The smile Moon gave him back didn’t have a lot of energy behind it.

Jewellery stepped forward.

“Well why don’t we head up to the Ruins to start with, we might just find her there!” The energy and confidence of Moon’s mother by contrast restored some to those gathered. Olivia nodded.

“Jewel’s right,” the Kahuna smiled, “Kahuna Hala, Captain Acerola, and I all have Ride Pagers, so we’ll all head up there ourselves. Shall we?”

Moon frowned. Wait, why did Olivia know her mother’s name? Jewellery raised a hand to her chest, mock aghast.

“Moon?!” The fake shock Moon’s mother put on was more than familiar enough for Moon to not be put off. “I’m not allowed to go out and make friends on my own? I’ll have you know I’ve been to all the islands of Alola too!” Moon questioned that. When had her mother ever gone to Poni Island? Jewellery smiled wide. “Right now!”

Amongst laughter the six gathered set off upon three Ride Tauros, Hala with Hau, Olivia with Jewellery, and Acerola with Moon. The Captain of Tapu Village took the lead, their Ride Tauros lightest loaded of the three. Pulled ahead on the path heading up to the main plateau of Poni Island.

“Two weeks ago it was a Mudsdale, now it’s a Tauros!” the Captain called back to Moon, keeping her eye on the path ahead. “It’s been a time!”
More than, Moon agreed, turning to look back at the two Tauros behind them, one with Hala and Hau, the other Olivia and Jewellery. It felt so strange to have come back home and just... not done things. She didn’t quite know how to feel. Acerola spent a moment in thought.

“Are you happy?” Moon didn’t have an answer to that. “Are you sad?”...sometimes. Acerola kept her eyes forward. “I know how that feels.” Because of Tapu Village? A much longer pause hung between them as they continued on the path.

“...yeah.”

An unusual sight was to be found at the crossroads of southern Poni Island, where the way west Moon and the others had come from led back down to Seafolk Village, north to the farming community Hapu was part of and the Vast Poni Canyon beyond, east to the Poni Grove and then wide Poni Plains, and south the Poni Breaker Coast and their destination, the Ruins of Hope. While vehicles were still seen across much of Alola, they tended to gather in cities and the long roads between such. Poni Island was notable in having no paved roads at all. More than anywhere else in Alola it was somewhere you travelled with Pokemon alongside you.

Unless, for example, you had a helicopter.

The sight of the Aether Foundation helicopter, sitting plainly in an open field alongside the crossroads the six had come to, immediately made Moon’s heart leap. She knew as sure as could be it was the same as the one to have taken her, Lillie, Lusamine, and Guzma from the Altar of the Dawne before. Which meant! Which meant!

“Moon!” Hau called out to her from behind Hala, as he and Olivia pulled up their Ride Tauros behind Acerola, “Is Lillie here?”

Moon called back with real excitement in her voice.

She thought so!

The path through the Poni Breaker Coast was one to be admired, black stone sloping down to the sea, geysers sending towers of water up far above their heads. Jewellery and Hau especially, who for both this was their first time here, admired openly. Moon tried, especially knowing she had so quickly passed through this location once already before, but her mind was too focused forward. She wanted to see Lillie again. To know that she was alright. Perhaps sensing that focus, Acerola maintained the pace of the Ride Tauros she controlled to keep ahead of the others. To travel through this black stone terrain to the caverns that spiralled down deep into the earth.

To the Ruins of Hope where Kahuna Hapu awaited.

Hapu and two more.

“Ah Moon!” Hapu was dressed in an outfit Moon had never seen before, something quite unlike the rough tans the young girl usually wore. It was a dress of white and blue that fanned out around the Kahuna of Poni Island, a headdress resembling blue fins set atop her head. A pendant rested across her forehead, with a larger one hanging from her neck. An outfit of ceremony.

It reminded Moon of Tapu Fini.

“I am very thankful,” the short-statured girl approached Moon with a smile, “to see that you have come here today.” Moon nodded, greeting Hapu, commenting with a smile of her own that Hapu looked nice. Hapu ran her hands over her dress. “It is a traditional dress for the coronation ceremony – each Kahuna is required to wear such.”
Turning around, Moon watched as the two Tauros behind her carrying Hala, Hau, Olivia, and Jewellery, came to a stop as well. Watched as Olivia dismounted. Moon could imagine that.

Watched as Hala did the same.

Turned back to Hapu and raised an eyebrow.

“And I looked quite good doing so!” The booming voice of Kahuna Hala made Moon flinch, her subtle expression not nearly as much as she’d thought. Hapu moved to greet Acerola, Hala, Jewellery, and Hau, Olivia having been here and helping Hapu prepare since early that morning.

Moon moved to join Lillie and Wicke.

“Moon,” Wicke was the one to address her, “how are you?”

She was fine, Moon said simply, attention unable to be wrenched from the one unspeaking. How was Lillie?

A long moment passed before Lillie spoke. “I’m... alright, thank you Moon. I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch.”

No, Moon shook her head, it was okay if Lillie needed the time. How was... everything?

“Miss Lusamine’s recovery is continuing,” Wicke took care of reading exactly what Moon’s question really meant, “though she has yet to wake from her coma. The internal damage she has suffered is significant, and recovery will take quite some time. When she is awake and lucid, I will specifically ask her what she remembers of the partner Pokemon she took from you.”

Caught between trying to thank Wicke and being embarrassed that the woman had picked up on Moon’s true interest – a thing Moon struggled with feeling was quite selfish given she was waiting to demand answers of Lillie’s own mother while Lusamine remained unconscious – Moon stammered out a few mixed words at best. Lillie didn’t seem to show much reaction. Moon stopped trying to speak and focused on her.

Lillie didn’t seem to show much at all.

“Hey Lillie!” Bounding up to the group Hau was all energy and smiles. “It’s been ages, ya? Last time was before you two went to Poni Island!”

Quickly Lillie apologised for that, realising that since she had not left her mother’s side between returning from Ultra Space and Moon leaving the Aether Paradise, she’d completely missed seeing Hau as well. Hau waved it off.

“It’s all good, I’m just happy to see you out and about! And hey, Kahuna Hapu, how about that?”

“Did you know?” Lillie asked, Hau’s remark seemingly unsurprised, “about Hapu’s intent?”

“Nah,” Hau answered easily, pushing back against his own hands linked behind his head, “I mean, yeah she had something she really wanted to do but becoming Kahuna, that’s super big! Hapu you’re really cool you know that?” Having turned to Hapu approaching them, with Hala, Olivia, Jewellery, and Acerola behind, Hau succeeded in embarrassing her. Hapu glanced away.

“I was simply trying to take on my grandfather’s will. It was selfish, if anything.”

“No way!” Hau shook his head. “You wanted to do your best for Alola! Nothing selfish about
wanting to be your best self! And hey I’m gonna be a Kahuna one day too y’know! Just not as fast, my gramps is still going strong!”

“And will be for a good while longer!” Hala loudly intervened, Moon watching Hapu laugh at Hau’s jump with a smile. Then glancing over to check if Lillie showed the same.

Little emotion could be seen on her face.

“Alright, everything’s ready to- oh everyone’s here.”

Emerging from the path leading down to the Ruins of Hope, the altar to Tapu Fini within, Captain Mina of Poni Island gave an alolan wave. “Hallo hallo, the coronation ceremony for Kahuna Hapu is about to begin. Could I please have the Kahuna accompany me to start?” Turning and heading back inside, Mina soon had Hapu, Hala, Olivia, and Acerola – stand-in for Kahuna Nanu – following after. Left Wicke, Jewellery, Moon, Lillie, and Hau outside.

Wicke and Jewellery quickly began a conversation.

Mina’s return came far too slow for Moon, caught at the peripheral of a discussion between her mother and the acting head of the Aether Foundation, which somehow swung rapidly between agreeing on how wonderful the friendship between Moon and Lillie was, to Jewellery leaving unsubtle comments regarding the amount of danger Moon had been able to throw herself into regarding the Aether Foundation.

Wicke’s supplications for Jewellery’s forgiveness of their failure to properly care for Moon were accepted with a smile, but still a little too much tension remained.

“Those acting as witness for Kahuna Hapu, could I please have you come next?” Mina turned around as soon as she was done speaking, not slowing down as Moon and the others followed after. Down through the spiralling path around the outside of the large cave the Ruins of Hope were buried within. Along the way Hau, Jewellery, and Wicke admired the paintings spread across the black stone walls.

“Did you paint these, Captain Mina?”

“Yup,” the Captain responded to Jewellery, a bag of sketchbooks and paints still slung over her back. “Tapu Fini keeps pointing out new places for me to work, but it doesn’t seem to mind what I do so at least there’s that.”

Perhaps the reason the others flock to you is to try and steal you to decorate their own altars,” Wicke mused with a slight smile. Mina didn’t give that one a response.

When Moon had been here last, she, Lillie, and Mina had waited outside the Ruins of Hope proper. Inside Hapu and Tapu Fini had been resting, in the wake of their first use of the Z-Move Guardian of Alola. Once awake Hapu had emerged, and from there the group had left. So this, passing through the threshold and into the Ruins themselves, where the altar to Tapu Fini was to be found, was new. It was well kept, clean of any dust or damage, completely unlike the Ruins of Abundance on Ula’ula.

Moon wondered if Nanu had made any effort in having a coronation ceremony at all.

Stairs led up to this altar, wood unlike the stone of that of Tapu Bulu’s. At the platform at its peak stood Hapu, facing the altar, back to those below. She’d removed her shoes and set them aside, standing now in position. This dance she’d learned long ago, absorbing everything her grandfather could teach her. Olivia’s guidance had refreshed Hapu on what she needed to do. And so now...
At one side of the entrance to this room stood two Kahuna and two Captains, representatives of the four islands of Alola. At the other three children and two adults, three friends Hapu treasured and two guardians ensuring those they cared for were safe on their journey here.

Slowly, with a step taken full of intent, Hapu moved into the ancient dance of a new Kahuna, the offering to the Tapu with which she now shared a Bond, and the acceptance of her duty of guardianship over this island of Alola.

The coronation of Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island had begun.

It was silent, but for the bare footsteps of Hapu upon the wooden platform, but for the rhythmic claps of her palms against one another. The presence behind it, it was of ancient tradition, and those witness felt it fully. Kept their silence and watched, as Hapu announced herself as the ceremony required.

Held their breath as the Tapu to which she was bound responded.

From a pool of water at the back of the room it emerged, rising up enshelled, opening the blue casing that wrapped it at the sound of the dance it had heard from one century to the next. Tapu Fini, Land Spirit Pokemon, Guardian Deity of Poni Island, arose, higher and higher, over the altar to its name, to witness its next partner in the dance.

Then moved to join her.

The dance of Kahuna and Tapu was something that evoked powerful memories in Hala and Olivia, each having performed their own with Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele before. Neither had known of Hapu’s intent, her struggle to gain the necessary strength to bear this Bond a secret the Captains had kept – one of many the seven no doubt guarded, an act they seemed to undertake with conspiratorial glee. But neither would either reject her will. Hapu had given her all to take on her grandfather’s mantle and she had done so with amazing aplomb. In this moment, watching Kahuna and Tapu dance as one, both Hala and Olivia felt only pride to call Hapu their fellow.

One who would see the future of Alola be a bright one indeed.

Lillie fled the room.

The sudden burst of movement, her breaking away from where she was standing and dashing out through the altar’s entrance, all eyes flickered to her, only Hapu and Tapu Fini in their dance unaware. Moon followed after, not pausing for a second, Hau’s attempt to do the same caught by Wicke and Jewellery both. He sulked but didn’t make any further motions to go.

Hala, Olivia, Acerola, and Mina, all knowing as well what had taken place, kept their silence and turned their eyes back to the Kahuna’s dance.

Outside Lillie rested her forehead against the cold stone walls of the cavern, trying to calm the rapid pulse of her heart. She’d thought she’d been ready but... knowing Hapu and Tapu Fini were connected in that moment, seeing a connection so strong, she’d felt a moment’s jealousy and then so much self-loathing she’d nearly screeched at her own self. She’d had to get away.

She hadn’t been ready.

Moon’s call of her name she was even less prepared for.

“Moon,” whirling around Lillie took a step back, Moon close and reaching out letting her hand drop seeing the distance Lillie created. Even that felt bad to Lillie. “I... needed air.”
It was such a poor lie Moon did not even address it. Asked if Lillie was alright despite both knowing the answer. Lillie glanced away. Tightened the grip of her fingers into her palm, wishing her heartbeat would slow. Moon stepped closer.

What was wrong?

“I-” she stumbled on the thought. D...did Moon... “Moon...” she closed her eyes hard before being able to raise her head. Tried and failed to open them many times before finally looking Moon in the eyes. “Do you... have the nightmares too?”

The rush of understanding on Moon’s face was too much. The feeling of Moon’s arms wrapping around her only drove Lillie’s tears further, dropping to her knees with Moon holding on, sobbing and calling Nebby’s name. Moon cried too, her own tears and Lillie’s both, for the wall between them couldn’t resist this. Nebby connected them together and that connection still lingered, even though Lillie had pushed hard upon it to resist the sensations it sent them. Now she could no longer hold back.

And so she and Moon together felt their grief.

The caves around the Ruins of Hope were large and empty things, there was no way their cries had not echoed. Yet after what felt like so long, just holding on and feeling the torrent of emotion washing through them, when Moon and Lillie returned to the inner sanctum of the Ruins none made mention of their leaving or their state. Jewellery and Wicke each passed a cloth to their young care.

With the completion of the coronation ceremony of Kahuna Hapu, Hala and Olivia moved to take her aside and instruct her on what would come next. Wicke stepped forward first, mentioning that she and Lillie would be returning to the Aether Paradise. Hapu went to Lillie to bid her farewell.

“Thank you for coming,” Hapu smiled at Lillie, both her hands wrapped around one of Lillie’s own. “I hope that when next you visit Poni Island, I am able to greet you again.”

“I... hope so too,” Lillie nodded, giving a smile of her own, the expression lighter for the amount of emotion she had released just moments ago. “Thank you for inviting me, Hapu. I know you will be an amazing Kahuna.”

To Moon Lillie promised to speak to again soon, but that for the moment she wished to remain close to the Aether Paradise. Moon nodded, understanding. But made sure Lillie knew she’d promised to talk to Moon soon. That insistence, it made Lillie smile.

“Okay, Moon. You’ll hear from me soon.”

Then Wicke and Lillie were off, heading back to the helicopter that would take them home. Hala and Olivia took charge of speaking to Hapu after.

Mina wandered over to Moon and Jewellery with a smile.

“Hallo,” a one-handed wave this time, “while the Kahuna chat, can I borrow you two for a bit?” Acerola, who was kind of left sitting around while the Kahuna spoke, made a show of huffing at being left alone but didn’t move to stand up as Moon glanced at her. Mina made her way outside with Jewellery and Moon following behind.

“So Moon,” Mina leaned against a cave wall once outside the Ruins of Hope, “you evolved the rest of your Pokemon.” Moon’s question as to how Mina knew that specifically the Captain brushed off. “We hear things. What are you thinking about for your seventh Trial?”
Moon glanced at her mother. She... hadn’t been thinking about it yet. Would it take long?

“Do you still want to go to the League?” The question from Mina Moon paused on. Then nodded. She did. Mina nodded back. “It’s next year, just at the start of the Spring. Cause it’s an exhibition tournament, it’s chosen participants. So the Captains and Kahuna are in. Then some famous Alolan Trainers. Then some League Trainers from other regions. And finally some Trainers the Kahuna nominate. So if you want in you’ve gotta be in that last group. Cut-off is pretty tight, thirty days before the League, so you have to finish your Final Trials before then. And your seventh Trial and fourth Grand Trial before that.”

Oh... Moon frowned. That was a lot to do. But, looking up, Moon stayed positive, she was confident in her strength.

She’d do well.

“Not like that.” The immediate response of Mina was a crushing blow to Moon’s esteem. She deflated. Mina grinned at the obvious reaction. “Your Pokemon evolved super-fast, but that’s a problem actually. Without spending a long time learning about themselves before evolving, they don’t know their own strength or how to use it. Even if it takes a lot longer for other people to evolve a Pokemon, that just means they’ll have way more experience and understanding of themselves than yours. Plenty of people with Dartrix will be able to beat you and your Decidueye. Stuff like that. If you go to the League right now, you’ll get beat bad in the first round.”

That... was pretty harsh to hear. Jewellery, invited to this conversation, glanced at Moon. Nothing Mina said was really incorrect, Jewellery having her own experience with a Pokemon League. The Captain smiled still.

“That’s why we need to get you ready.”

Looking up with surprise, Moon was rewarded with a relaxed expression from Mina. “We really want you to get there too, Moon, but you’ve gotta be able to give it your all. If you just go and get beat immediately without even fighting back, that’s not going to feel good for you or for anyone. So you and your team need to learn quick how to really use all that power you’ve got. That’s why the other Captains and I have been talking about what your seventh Trial’s gotta be. And we’ve got our idea.”

Moon questioned what it was. Mina enjoyed the dramatic tension of her delivery.

“Moon, if you wanna see the League, you’ve gotta prove you’re ready for it. So become one of the strongest Trainers on Poni Island. If you can do that in time for the League, I’ll say you’ve passed and you’re ready to go. But if you can’t, then you don’t get to, and someone else’ll get in. That fair?”

That was... a lot. And very loosely defined. Mina gave a wide smile, happy with the unstructured solution she’d come up with for her last big Trial. Then turned her attention over to the slightly apprehensive Jewellery.

“I’d like to do one week on one off. So one week Moon stays out on Poni Island with me and the other she’s back home. How’s that sound?”

“Oh!” Surprised by the Captain’s words, Jewellery stood there for a moment in thought. She’d been nervous, she’d admit it, about seeing Moon go back out again. After everything that had happened, could you blame her? But Moon, her daughter... she’d want to do this. To keep going forward. And Jewellery would never allow herself to be the kind of person to hold her daughter back from becoming the person she wanted to be.
And honestly, every other week was far more than she’d had so far.

“Yes!” Jewellery nodded, Moon’s wide smile convincing her mother that this was the right thing to do. “Please, Captain Mina, take good care of my daughter under your watch.”

“Oh of course,” Mina nodded back, “let’s start in a couple of days?” Moon agreed to that, the thought of returning to training, under Captain Mina’s care, pleasing her greatly. Something to do with herself and focus on... she needed that now, she realised.

It was time to continue on.

Though Moon had been to the crossroads of southern Poni Island what felt like many times now, not once had she taken the path east. She didn’t even know what was out there. Seated behind Captain Mina, on the back of a Ride Tauros the Captain had manifested at the outskirts of Seafolk Village where she met Moon, Moon couldn’t help but look every which way. She loved exploring Alola, and seeing new places around it.

And few places in Alola were as lush and verdant as this, bar those with those literal descriptors in their names.

“A lot of Pokemon nest around the trees here,” Mina explained as she guided the Tauros they were riding along a defined path, never getting too close to the thick greenery surrounding them, “and then when they get bigger they head out to the Poni Plains and live there. So it’s usually pretty calm around here because the Pokemon are all young.” Moon nodded, paying no attention to the fact Mina couldn’t see the motion behind her. Mallow had mentioned similar about the Lush Jungle, that the denser an environment the more younger Pokemon that could traverse it lived within. Though the Lush Jungle’s extremely high Bug Pokemon population skewed how things worked there a little. Mina grinned.

“Yeah yeah, Lush Jungle’s great, great scenery. All the Trial Sites of Alola are. Though I don’t get to visit them very often. We all like to take pics and share them though so that’s cool.”

Was there a specific Trial Site on Poni Island? Besides the one in the Vast Poni Canyon, Moon meant. Mina shook her head.

“No, that’s all we have. I never really found the exact kind of Trial I wanted to have so... most of the time I just let the Totem Kommo-o handle it.”

That Totem... Moon pulled the Dragonium-Z Ryuki had given her from her bag. She... wanted to return it. It wasn’t hers and she hadn’t earned it. If the Trial Mina was giving Moon was to become truly strong then... she’d earn this Z-Crystal properly from the Totem, and take it with her and her Pokemon’s own strength. Mina smiled, still facing forward. Good.

That took care of the victory condition she’d needed to set.

“To be able to stand a chance against our Totem, you and your Pokemon will need to learn way more about how to use their full power. It knows when someone’s giving their all, so don’t expect it to make things easy for you. Chances are you’ll have to fight it plenty of times before you meet its standards.”

Moon nodded again. Good. That was just what she wanted.
To be made sure she was ready to stand on the League’s stage.

Beyond the thick treeline of the Poni Grove the path continued on and, behind Mina on the Ride Tauros, Moon softly gasped as they emerged out into the wide stretching territory of the great Poni Plains.

Distant stone rises gave definition to the edges of what Moon believed might be one of her most favourite sights across all of Alola. The view from the top of Wela Volcano had been amazing. The territory around Lush Jungle engrossing. The high climb to the peak of Mount Hokulani awe-inspiring. But this, this view out across these flat plains, trees spread about in rare groups, fields of dense and swaying grass in the winds blowing from the sea, herds of Pokemon of all kinds – Tauros and Miltank, Mudsdale and Mudbray, Pyroar and Litteo – all punctuated by other Pokemon between, from solitary Hariyama and Primeape engaging in battle to flocks of whirling Fearow and Trumpbeak overhead, or lone Braviary and Mandibuzz descending from the western mountains to hunt, it was stunning. Emolga glided out from trees, spread arms extending flaps to catch the air and carry them to others, disrupting swinging Aipom while loudly chattering Gumshoos gave chase. It was a picture of true wildness, preserved with care by the people of Alola to remain as it had for centuries. Mina turned and grinned at the enraptured expression on Moon’s face.

“Welcome to the Poni Plains.”

Despite the grand introduction, the journey did not stop here, Mina continuing the Tauros on, curving west towards the mountains that divided the Vast Poni Canyon and these wide Poni Plains. A path led upwards, into an opening between two canyon walls, and through it they pushed on, a thin mist spilling upwards, into an opening between two canyon walls, and through it they pushed on, a thin mist spilling out and vaporising immediately under the sun’s light. Inside of the enclosed location the mist hung thicker, not enough to obscure vision but enough to be felt all the same. Moon ran a hand over the red shawl she wore, the gift from the Dragon Tamers something she intended to keep with her at all times. Mina continued the tour.

“This one’s the Poni Meadow, the mist comes off an underground river that breaks out into the plains, water vapour gets sprayed out between cracks in the rocks, like the geysers at the Breaker Coast, just smaller.” Moon nodded, that making enough sense to her. Looking around, she witnessed thick tree growth overhead, long branches tangled together, hanging chains of purple flowers dangling from them. There was a Pokemon, a purple bird, hanging on to one such chain just above. Rotom-dex happily took the chance to explain.

“Oricorio, zzt, Sensu-style! The form the Dancing Pokemon Oricorio becomes upon consuming the unique purple flower nectar of Poni Island! Flying and Ghost-type, zzt!”

Ghost, huh. Moon continued to watch the Oricorio, which seemed happy enough with the meal it was making. She’d caught both Pom-pom and Pa’u-style Oricorio on her journey, and seen a Baile-style partnered to Kahili Hano. Being one of Alola’s more famous Pokemon known abroad, Moon was happy now to have seen one of each.

It was nice.

“Here we are.”

To a campsite prepared Mina brought Moon, each dismounting from the Ride Tauros and stowing their bags before Mina returned the Pokemon through the Ride Pager to the storage system Ride Pokemon used. Now they were set up, where they could really get started. The Captain gave the other half of the tour.

“The areas around here are all protected, so as Captain it’s part of my job to keep an eye on them.
Now that she’s Kahuna, Hapu will do the same. It’s not a specific rule but, pretty much no-one who hasn’t done their Island Challenge is allowed out here. You’re fine cause you’re with me though.” Moon nodded, understanding Mina’s point. Was there more than the Poni Grove, Plains, and Meadow? The Captain nodded back.

“At the back of the Meadow there’s an entrance to what we call Resolution Cave. It’s a big cave system that’s just as active as the plains, just for completely different types of Pokemon. It goes really deep, the Pokemon Rangers go through every once in a while to make sure the paths and markers they set up are good, but I still wouldn’t go wandering alone.”

Moon quickly shook her head. Once underground alone had been more than enough for her. Mina remembered Ilima’s despondency in their chat after finding out Moon had been able to go through that. She agreed.

“If you go north of the Poni Plains though, that’s where it gets interesting. Way at the north of the island is the Battle Tree, do you know about it?” The response from Moon was a clear no. Mina smiled. “So without a big League, it’s pretty hard for a lot of the Trainers in Alola to go all out. So we set up the Battle Tree a while back where people could go and do challenges; there’s usually something on at least once a week where a bunch of Trainers gather up and have a tournament of their own. Nothing official official, but basically: everyone who’s passed their Island Challenge and still wants to test themselves goes there sooner or later to battle one another. All the Captains have been, though some of us a lot more than others.”

Mina didn’t mention which side of that divide she fell on.

“We might get to see the Battle Tree sooner or later, but that’s only after you’ve got tough enough for it. You’ve not passed your Island Challenge, after all.”

Moon grinned. They’d best start on that then. Mina smiled back.

“Hope you’re ready.”

Training by Captain Mina of Poni Island began immediately. In spite of the easy-going nature she showed at all times, and even at least outwardly expressed when giving directions, her approach was still surprisingly strict. First no Mega Evolution. Moon nodded. Second no Z-Moves. Moon took a little longer to agree to that. Then, one by one, Mina tested each of Moon’s Pokemon with her own, exploring the limits of their abilities to a degree that left them exhausted and completely unable to continue. Five of them at least.

“Is that going to be your sixth?” Mina’s question came as Moon manifested Nihilego from the Beast Ball she carried, not for battle but simply to allow the Ultra Beast out and about. Moon considered. She... wasn’t sure.

“You’ll need to decide soon, unless you intend to only use five. All of your Pokemon should be raised with all the effort you can give them. I’m not letting you go if you hold back.”

Moon frowned. She... if she could pick any Pokemon at all to be her sixth she’d rather just have Poipole with her. Or Nebby. Mina laughed.

“You’d take a Legendary Pokemon to the League?”

Was that... not allowed?
“I wouldn’t say that, there’s no rules against bringing one, or an Ultra Beast. If you’re able to form a Bond then you’ve earned that right. But it’d certainly make a splash.”

It didn’t matter anyway, Nebby and Poipole both weren’t here.

“If you believe in the Bond you share, you’ll find your way together again. I’ll believe that, at least. But you should really think about what your team is going to be.”

Honestly she just kept Nihilego with her so it could feel safe, as she’d promised, but... Moon wondered. Was it willing to battle? They might as well find out.

A swarming Pokemon that did not possess the same strength as the more individually titan-like Ultra Beasts, the Nihilego still took some of the most effort from Mina – comparable to the venerable and experienced Bisharp Moon had partnered with – to push down. Its nature alone made it a difficult foe. Choosing to go forward with it would put a real challenge to Moon’s opponents. But...

Moon considered the feeling of the battle, and the Nihilego’s approach to it. It was... unemotional. Simply acting as Moon asked of it. The Ultra Beast expressed little will of its own in a way that... felt off. Maybe battling with it wasn’t the way. She’d think. Mina nodded, understanding.

Hoped this was the only Ultra Beast encounter they’d have in Moon’s time here.

Thankfully for the moment it was.

Though Moon’s status as a Faller was known, and Mina was prepared for an errant Ultra Beast not dispatched by Solgaleo to appear before the two – the UB Task Force’s number on speed-dial – she also understood that the Ultra Beasts to appear recently in Alola were different. Avoided the signs of the Ultra Wormhole. Didn’t appear interested at all in going home. Combined with the story Moon told of UB-Black – was it really the Beast That Ate Light from legend? – Mina got a pretty good idea why. Despite being a Faller, it seemed that Moon was more Ultra Beast repellent than bait right now. Only the Nihilego she shared a Bond with approached her.

Mina still jumped slightly each time she saw the Parasite Pokemon floating about.

On the third day of Moon’s first week with Captain Mina of Poni Island, she returned the Dragonium-Z to its rightful place. The journey through the Vast Poni Canyon was far more active than Moon’s last, with wild Pokemon out and about everywhere, her and Mina’s own taking part in combat as a natural act of greeting shared between them all. The only place it was really quiet was a solitary stone basin, curving path circling around it leading upwards, where once a crystal-clear pool of water had been.

Now the stone that made it up was scorched black by great heat, the water evaporated away to nothing, and no life willing to approach. Moon described the Ultra Beast she and Lillie had seen, the Celesteela as Rotom-dex identified from the updated UB Task Force information, and Mina felt her heart pulse thinking how being even a little closer to the Launch Pokemon’s ascent Moon and Lillie would have encountered disaster.

The decision to allow the two free-roam on their quest to call the Legendary Pokemon may have resulted in success, but even still it might have been a little too flighty as well. At that time... Mina had been out on the Poni Plains. She remembered seeing that Ultra Beast disappearing into the sky in a blaze of fire as well.

Scary.

The Totem Kommo-o of Poni Island was not in combat at the time Moon and Mina approached,
instead resting just behind the pillar where the Dragonium-Z it guarded was kept. Mina knew the Totem restocked the pillar from its hidden hoard of the Z-Crystals each time one was taken, but as they approached noted the plinth that should hold the crystal remained empty.

Moon, without a word, closed the distance and placed the Dragonium-Z back where it should be.

With slow movement the Totem rose to its feet, Mina noting the slightest limp in its step. Pokemon healed easy, that would be gone in no time at all but... oh that was a pretty big scar along its side too. What the heck had it gotten into a fight with that could do that? Some super Ultra Beast? She couldn’t imagine.

Moon made her case.

She’d come back for that Dragonium-Z when she was ready. She would take the Z-Crystal to the Pokemon League atop Mount Lanakila, and use it against Alola’s best. And she’d ask the Totem to entrust that she would not let down its expectations after earning them.

The dragon barked a quick command, stretching into a combat-ready position. Surprised, Moon stepped back. Mina smiled.

“It wants to see where you’re at now, so it can watch your growth too!” She’d overseen enough Trainers standing against that Totem – and stood against it herself – to know its true nature by now. It loved seeing Alolan Trainers grow. “Show it who you are right now!”

Choosing a Pokeball, Moon unleashed a Pokemon to face the Totem. Her partner Salamence, recovered fully from the incredible exertion it had undergone within Ultra Space, roared a challenge to the great dragon before it. Let their battle begin.

Only to come to an end mere moments later.

Despite any confidence she might have had that she would at least make some impact, Moon and her partner achieved nothing of the sort, the Totem brushing through the immediate attack of the Salamence to grab and pin it to the ground, applying such intense pressure the smaller dragon cried surrender almost immediately. It was such a wall of strength she’d run into that Moon couldn’t help but stare. She was meant to become worthy of that?

Mina laughed.

“So when you earn that Dragonium-Z, you can look back on how you did now and see how much you’ve grown! Look”, she pointed up at the Totem, who’d released the Salamence and stepped back, eyes staring down at Moon alone, “it likes you. I bet it can’t wait to see how quick you grow, so let’s not fail to meet those expectations, okay?”

Moon slowly nodded, calling Salamence back. Yes, she did have a long way to go but... so that she and her partners could all stand on that stage together, they’d give it all they had. She smiled and promised to the Totem before her that yes, she’d rise to its challenge. A huff and the Pokemon wandering away into the canyons was all the response she got.

Mina promised it was as good an acknowledgement as the Totem would ever give in that situation.

On the sixth day Moon returned the Moon Flute to Exeggutor Island. A few days before she’d left to begin training on Poni Island, Moon had been brought the Sun Flute by Gladion, Lillie not yet ready to make the attempt, and so Moon and Hau, along with a collection of notable Trainers including Kahuna Hala and, reluctantly, Kahuna Nanu, had gathered at the Lake of the Duske on Ula’ula Island. After everything that had happened, it was best for Moon not to get up to anything involving
such actions without supervision, and so upon the remnants of the stone disc at the lake’s centre she
and Hau attempted to play the flutes and call the Legendary Pokemon Solgaleo.

It didn’t work.

Ultimately that was what everyone had expected, the situation that led to Nebby’s evolution before
having far more weight behind it. But still Moon had needed to try. If she hadn’t made the call to
Solgaleo, if she had been left always wondering, she’d never have been able to rest. But it didn’t
work and that was okay! At least they’d tried. They left the Sun Flute there, in its original resting
place, and Moon kept the Moon Flute to return to Exeggutor Island herself. All dispersed back to
their homes that day.

Moon didn’t cry her frustration until she was out of everyone’s sight. Her mother still knew and
embraced her after.

Walking Exeggutor Island felt strange to Moon, the island in its heat cycle where the Alolan
Exeggutor kept the sunlight overhead magnified to an intense degree. Sylveon provided a barrier
coating that reduced those effects for Moon and Mina, the Captain commenting on Moon’s Fairy-
type partner. Mina was a Fairy-type expert herself, and the Z-Crystal she kept was the Fairium-Z.
She wouldn’t give Moon one yet, but would before the seventh Trial was over. When Moon was
ready for it, the Captain smiled.

Moon’s focus, on not letting any memories of Exeggutor Island take her as she journeyed across it to
return the Moon Flute, meant she forgot that almost immediately after being told.

And so at the end of the next day Moon’s first week with Captain Mina came to an end. Returning
by ferry from Seafolk Village to Hau’oli City, Moon made her way back to her home and her
mother’s care. Spent another week in study and rest, with her mother, with Hau, and learned to live
slowly. To relax, and not push herself to do everything she felt needed to be done. She spoke with
Lillie, over the phone, Lillie professing that the nightmares came to her less often since she’d
confessed them to Moon. Moon noted the same. Still once in a while, but not nearly as common.
They wondered what that meant.

But chose not to think too far on the possibilities.

So too did this week pass easily, and once again Moon returned to Poni Island. Once again to the
training of Captain Mina. More days of her Pokemon being tested, of Moon studying them to learn
their true strengths and how to make use of them. Hapu visited their training site, revealing a new
Pokemon she had captured and begun raising as well, Moon pleased to help her test and strengthen it
in battle. These days passed quickly by.

And then the four Tapu descended from the sky.

Moon hadn’t found a way to broach the topic. Mina didn’t specifically mention the Tapu, and it felt
strange to just say that Moon didn’t like them from out of nowhere so she could ask what Mina’s
own feelings were. But now that moment appeared to have come to the forefront. Moon remembered
being told about Mina, that the Tapu seemed to enjoy being around her. So it seemed indeed.

This was each of the four, a sight Moon hadn’t seen but then how many had? For Mina it was rote.
For anyone else it would be miraculous. One by one the four deities of Alola settled, floating just
above the ground. Mina, who’d been in the middle of a test battle with Moon’s partner Sylveon,
sighed and called her Pokemon back.

Wandered over to the floating four with irreverent casualness.
“No Ultra Beasts left to chase down?” Her question received no real answer, the four floating about Mina without any change. Moon, unsure of what this was or why this was happening at all, wandered up to Mina’s side.

That prompted a reaction.

As Moon passed her eyes from one Tapu to the next she considered them. Considered the golden-shelled Tapu Koko and remembered it saving her and Nebby the day Moon’s journey began, only to challenge Moon without a care less than two weeks later. The vibrant pink hair and pale aqua eyes of Tapu Lele, who had attacked Poipole, buried one of Plumeria’s Pokémon, and carried Moon off from the situation it had found her in. The many blues of Tapu Fini, who had shown Moon the Guardian of Alola Z-Move and its terrifying power, and danced with Hapu in a display of joy at their Bond. Confusing feelings. Confusing confusing confusing feelings.

Moon’s eyes slid to Tapu Bulu.

The response of Tapu Bulu came first, meeting her eyes then glancing away, floating back the slightest space. But in a moment two more reacted too, Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele each immediately pressing against each of Tapu Bulu’s sides, each's head close enough to stare into the Guardian Deity of Ula'ula Island’s eyes no matter which way it looked. Then a moment later Tapu Lele quickly moved away, waving both of its hands for the attention of another, Tapu Koko moving to a position opposite. Raising both of its mighty clawed hands, Tapu Koko held them out alongside its head to resemble horns, before waving back and forth while moving towards Tapu Lele, making strange deep calling cries.

Tapu Lele, stretching an arm back, swung it forward just as Tapu Koko got within range and made a high-pitched sound to mime an impact as Tapu Koko first fell backwards, floating on its back in the air, before then thrashing its arms and making a faked crying sound. At this display Tapu Lele burst into giggling noises of its own, clutching at its stomach. Tapu Fini, quietly observing, still raised a hand to where its mouth would be and made its own laugh. Mina turned to Moon with a wide-eyed expression.

“Did you really?”

Any chance for Moon to respond at all, realising that her actions at the Ruins of Abundance were somehow known by the other three Tapu – did they talk about her? – was blocked off by Tapu Bulu slamming into Tapu Koko, who flew slightly through the air before zooming right back at it, the two clashing their hooves and claws together strong enough to create a burst of wind that pushed Moon back. Mina, loudly, interrupted.

“Hey!” Walking right up to the two struggling Tapu she put a hand on each of their arms and pushed them down, “We’re still here!” It was the fiercest Moon had ever heard the light and airy Captain speak before, surprising her immensely. What surprised her more was how the Tapu reacted.

Quickly did Tapu Koko and Tapu Bulu break apart, Mina standing there with her hands on her hips apparently enough to put their quarrel to rest. The Captain didn’t budge. “If you’re just going to fight you can do it elsewhere, I’m helping Moon get stronger so don’t make a mess!” Apparently taking Mina’s side, Tapu Fini made a commenting noise that drew complaining responses from Tapu Koko and Tapu Bulu, Tapu Lele, watching this unfold without being at fault in any way, taking glee in seeing the other two Tapu be lectured. Until Mina rounded on it as well.

“Go on,” she waved her hands, “go back to your islands already.” Complaining from each of the Tapu didn’t land, especially with Tapu Fini moving to leave and instructing them to follow. It seemed that on some level, the Tapu of a specific island held command over the others visiting it.
Mina watched the four disappear into the sky again.

Breathed out a huff then turned to Moon.

“That’s pretty much how you handle them, you just have to be stern. Though I don’t think I’d ever actually strike one that’s... really something. Probably don’t make a habit of that though.”

Moon shook her head rapidly, suddenly seeing Mina in an entirely new light. The Captain sat down on the ground, letting some of the tension in her shoulders go. Having the Tapu around was always stressful. Moon went and sat with her.

And asked.

“The thing about the Tapu,” the Captain of Poni Island observed, “is they don’t think like we do. They don’t feel like we do. They don’t have the morals we do and they don’t parse our morals either. Unless you’re their partner Kahuna, it’s pretty hard to tell at all what they’re thinking. They’ll look like siblings when they play with one another, but when they get into their moods they... they’re really not like anything else.”

Moon nodded quickly. Asked to hear more.

“Captains are Captains until they’re twenty,” Mina continued, “and mine’s before the League. I’m taking part in the League as an invited Trainer, but I won’t be a Captain by it. You’ll meet my successor sooner or later, he’s been overseas for a bit while we didn’t have a Kahuna, but I bet he’ll be back soon.”

Did that mean Moon’s seventh Trial would change?

“Well if you finish it before he gets back no problem. Otherwise... I think he’d be happy to have you be his first official Trial-goer. He’ll do right by you. He’s excitable and energetic but... a good kid. He’ll be a good Captain. That’s what I think.”

Back to the Tapu. How did Mina feel about them?

“Once the League’s done,” the Captain continued, “I think I’ll go on a holiday of my own. Maybe back to Kanto, I went there once years ago, you know?” Moon shook her head. She didn’t. “It was nice, very... I wouldn’t say as relaxed as Alola? But quieter.” That Moon did understand. She got that. “I could do with some quiet.”

The Captain of Poni Island leaned back entirely, her paint-streaked and dusty blonde hair splayed out beneath her on the soft earth of the Poni Plains. “While I’m Captain I have to stay in Alola, and put up with the Tapu wanting to just hang around me. Not having to wonder when they’ll next show up and need me to keep an eye on them will be... nice. That’s why I didn’t want to be Kahuna. Kahuna have to stay in Alola, and most of the time on their island near the Tapu. I didn’t want to stay here. I didn’t want to stay with them.”

Moon would never, ever, want to be a Kahuna. Mina smiled from where she was lying on the ground, staring up at the blue and cloud-streaked sky overhead. “Yeah I get that. They’re so strong and so weird but sometimes they’re just... really bratty. Who wants to live with that, right?”

But the Kahuna did. Mina closed her eyes to just feel the sun’s warmth upon her.

“The Tapu are part of Alola too. If danger ever comes up they get involved to stop it. The Ultra Beasts... if the Tapu hadn’t acted, how many more people would have been hurt?”
But they also destroyed Tapu Village. And banned Guzma and Professor Kukui from returning. And Holei...

A long silence hung as Mina stayed like that, eyes closed, the sun on her skin. Yeah. “That’s the problem, isn’t it?”

Moon didn’t care if they had their own strange morals they shouldn’t be allowed to do that!

“But then who will stop them?”

The question was... stark. Moon paused on it. She... couldn’t stop the Tapu from doing what they wanted. Mina sat up.

“The Tapu are wild pieces of nature, expelling what they don’t like from Alola. People built huge cities that still stand. I’m not going to say I really know what happened at Tapu Village. Or what Kahuna Holei said and did. I’m not going to say the Tapu have a free pass to do whatever they want but... there’s not many people they’ll listen to. Only their partner Kahuna, really.”

Then why did Holei die?

“...I don’t know.”

It wasn’t a satisfying answer.

Mina sighed and returned to her feet. “I don’t think you should be a Kahuna either. It wouldn’t make you happy.” She held out a hand to help Moon up. “But I won’t say don’t consider being a Captain if you’d like. Ilima and Kiawe are both retiring soon enough too. Either would love you to succeed them.”

That... Moon thought on, accepting Mina’s help. For Ilima... she’d rather Hau become the Captain of Melemele Island. He wanted to be Kahuna too, and that island was his home. He should get that chance. Mina tilted her head.

“Wouldn’t he rather earn that then be given it?” He should have the chance to earn it. The Captain smiled. Not bad. “And Kiawe?”

On that... Moon gave a small grimace. She just really didn’t like Wela Volcano at all.

“Hahaha!” The laughter of Mina relieved Moon, after the depth of the conversation they’d just had. The Captain ruffled Moon’s short-cut hair. “That’s fair, I won’t fault you that. Can’t have a Captain of a Trial Site they don’t like!” Pulling her hand back as Moon ran her own over her head to sort out her slowly regrowing hair, Mina considered.

“When I leave Alola the Tapu are probably going to approach you next.”

Silence Moon’s response. The Captain continued.

“I think they just like having someone to slack off around. Where it doesn’t matter. They’ve approached you before already anyway, haven’t they?” Moon nodded, still silent. Mina understood.

“Well, keep an eye on how I handle them, so you can do that too, alright? Just... maybe don’t give them a slap unless they really annoy you, okay?”

Moon gave a small smile that quickly gained an edge.

Well... no promises.
The last days of Alola’s summer had finally passed, the first of autumn bringing little difference immediately, but all knew as the weeks passed by the little changes would come. Moon wore the same as ever, vibrant flower patterns of reds and yellows, purples and oranges, and almost always wore the shawl given to her by the Dragon Tamers, at least when it wasn’t in the wash. Her black hair was slowly regrowing, not yet long enough to be comfortable with her favourite hat, but soon enough she was sure. If it kept up she might even be able to style a small ponytail again for the League.

She’d very much like to do that if she could.

It came soon after her return home from her second week with Mina. A knock at Moon’s door and a visitor that stunned her to see. But immediately Moon’s look of surprise changed to a smile of absolute happiness.

She’d never show any less to see Lillie before her.

“How are you, Moon?”

She was good! The training with Mina was going well, and when she wasn’t on Poni Island she was spending time with Hau, or other friends she’d made through the Pokemon School. It... realising they were both still standing in the doorway to her home, Moon moved to invite Lillie in. Lillie shook her head.

“Would you like to go for a walk?”

There were still bad nights, Moon admitted as the two walked, down the path that led to the beach where the lab of Professor Kukui could be found. Kukui was continuing to be busy at an accelerated pace, sometimes at his lab working, other times atop Mount Lanakila. He visited Moon and Jewellery once or twice, mostly to check in on how Moon was doing, but admitted to being a little run off his feet. There was a lot of management to setting up a League, even if they were only doing the bare minimum right now to run the exhibition tournament as planned.

It all sounded very exhausting.

For Moon there were still the nightmares. Perhaps once or twice a week now, compared to the more often once a night at the beginning but... she missed Poipole. And Nebby. Saying that to Lillie was probably rude though.

“No,” Lillie shook her head in response, “Nebby... we’re both connected to. We’re both allowed to feel the same things. We both do, after all.”

Tenuously, now. Moon still knew, on some level, that the connection was there, the distant thread between her and Nebby remaining, and the same holding on to Lillie too. It surprised Moon, slightly, that Lillie had not been disconnected, unsure of how her Bond was paid. But she was happy it hadn’t broken. Was happy for the faint lines of feeling the two could still share.

Though compared to when Nebby was with them, so much of the vibrancy they had felt from one another was gone.

“I think...” Lillie gave her own thoughts on it, “you’re holding on for the both of us. The Bond between me and Nebby... you’re covering that as well, Moon.”

Was she? Moon looked at Lillie in surprise. She really couldn’t tell.
“Yes,” Lillie nodded, “there’s no... demand upon me. Our feelings helped Nebby evolve but... you were the one who paid the cost to do it. Helping Nebby evolve like that... isn’t something I could have done alone.”

It wasn’t something Moon could have done alone either! It was only because of the both of them! Lillie smiled to be told that in no uncertain terms. It helped.

The waves of Alola’s sea continued to flow, back and forth, along the sandy beaches of eastern Melemele. Standing there at its edge, the sea breeze washing over them, Moon and Lillie remained in silence, sharing this moment together.

Lillie breathed out.

“Moon. I’m leaving Alola.”

Even through the muted Bond between them Lillie felt the sudden stop in Moon, the sense of all Moon’s thoughts crashing around her. Staring widely at Lillie, Moon’s mouth hung open. Giving the best smile she could, despite the feelings she felt as well, Lillie raised a hand to Moon’s chin and pressed her mouth closed.

“My mother, she still hasn’t regained consciousness. The work the Aether Foundation’s doctors have done, we believe parts of the Nihilego my mother was connected to are still within her. There’s no way she’ll recover as long as that’s true. So...” Lillie breathed in and out again, steadying herself despite the heavy beating of not only her heart but Moon’s as well, “we looked for help. And found a man named Bill, from Kanto. I think you’d know of him.”

Everyone did, Moon spoke slowly, Bill being the creator of the Pokemon Storage System that had essentially changed the world. Lillie nodded and continued.

“There was a record of Bill being involved in an accident, a fusion with a Pokemon as well. The cure for him was performed through the technology behind the Storage System. So, if he can do the same for my mother...”

They could cure Lusamine. Moon understood. So Lillie would go with her mother and whoever else to Kanto to fix her, and then when she was better could come back to-

“No.” Lillie shook her head. Moon’s moment of recovery fell apart. “Professor Kukui... he, Professor Burnet, and Professor Samson Oak have all helped make arrangements for me. In Kanto I’ll be an assistant researcher to Professor Samuel Oak. And...” another moment for Lillie to steel herself, “I’m going to go on a Pokemon Journey there.”

...what?

Moon shook her head. Why couldn’t Lillie go on the Pokemon Journey in Alola?

“It’s... important to me. That I go out on that journey the same way you did, going to a new place, meeting new people, seeing a new world. So much of my life was spent being kept in one place. Moon, you inspired me. So I’ll do what you did and become a strong Pokemon Trainer. And then when I come back, I’ll hold up my Bond with Nebby too. We’ll both hold on together.”

But... what about Lillie being a Faller? And Lusamine? What if an Ultra Beast appeared?

“I checked with Chief Anabel, there haven’t been any Ultra Beast encounters in Kanto even by the UB Task Force. And I’ll be staying with many people on my journey. I’ll be safe.”
But...

...she’d miss her.

“Oh Moon,” turning to Moon, Lillie held out her arms. Wrapped them around Moon and held on to her as Moon raised her arms to do the same. “I will miss you too. But... this is something that I want to do. I’ve spent so much of my life being told to be a certain way, expected to do what was asked of me. This... this is the start of me deciding who I’m going to be. And that journey, it’s going to be about finding out who I really am. Please, let me go on it?”

She’d never, ever, try to hold Lillie back. Never stop her from being who she wanted to be. Even if it hurt.

“I’ll come back.” The words were whispered into Moon’s ear, their heads side-by-side. “No matter what, Alola is still my home. No matter what, I’ll come back when my journey is done. So Moon, please wait for me. Please be there to welcome me home. For me?”

Moon’s sniffle didn’t stop her from making that promise. She’d be there, no matter what. Not just her. Hau and Professor Kukui and Professor Burnet. Moon would make sure they were there too. And... and Nebby. No matter what Moon would do everything she could to find a way to bring them back. So they could all be together again.

“I know you will,” Lillie closed her eyes with a smile. “And if you can’t, we’ll go together to find them. I’ll make sure I become strong enough. I’m going to stand beside you and we’re both going to reach out to hold Nebby up.”

Okay, Moon agreed, that was a promise then. If she couldn’t find Nebby before Lillie came back, they’d have to go together to find them. So Lillie... she’d better have the best Pokemon Journey she possibly could! So she could tell Moon and Nebby both all about it! She’d better!

“I will,” Lillie made her own promise. Relaxed her hold so she and Moon might step apart. Moon didn’t let go quickly. “I’ll be leaving in three days. Please come and see me off from the Hau’oli docks?”

She would. She’d be there to see Lillie off, and be there when she came back. No matter what.

The touch of Lillie’s hand on her own loosened Moon’s grip. Lillie’s gentle smile shook her heart.

“You were... the first I told. The first I wanted to tell. I need to let the others know.”

Could Moon... come with Lillie while she did?

“Of course. Let’s go together. One last time.”

No, not one last time.

Just until the next.

Many stood together at the docks of Hau’oli City. Wicke and Gladion. Moon and her mother. Hau and Hala. Professor Kukui and Professor Burnet both. Acerola and Hapu, each having made fast friends with Lillie as well, travelling from Ula’ula and Poni Island to be here. All to see her off.

One by one each spent their time, the great ship bound for Kanto, a medical unit already aboard with
Lusamine prepared for travel, soon to depart. Lillie would be boarding it shortly.

Last moments.

“It’s not fair,” Hau had struggled from the moment Lillie had told him, the three of them travelling together the most happiness he’d ever had. He’d wanted that to continue. “I don’t want you to be gone.”

“Hau,” Lillie smiled, “you said it yourself, didn’t you? That as long as we’re friends, and as long as we think of each other, we’ll never be apart? Don’t think I won’t be thinking of all of you all the time. So just don’t forget me until I come back, alright?”

“No way!” Hau shook his head, Lillie smiling. That was better.

Moon stepped forward. Wicke and Gladion had each said their full goodbyes back at the Aether Paradise. Kukui and Burnet in a private moment with Lillie themselves. Moon held out a hand.

She’d keep her promises. All of them. So have the best Pokemon Journey Lillie possibly could, and come back home with a bright smile at the end, alright? Lillie nodded.

Stepped forward and embraced Moon as tightly as she could.

“I’ll see you then.”

And as the great ship pulled away from the shore of Melemele, out onto the open ocean to depart for distant Kanto, waves farewell ended one by one, arms falling to each’s side as the knowledge that was it reached each of them.

A goodbye, for now.

Until the next alola hello.

And so the days passed ever on. Week by week Moon grew, whether time at home or abroad. Slowly she visited other places again, the Battle Royal of Akala, Lush Jungle and Wahiola, and back to the Dragon Tamers of Ula’ula. Pitaya once again embraced Moon's training, helping her and Salamence grow together still. Helped them seek the strength and balance needed to truly harness the power of their Mega Evolution.

Hau grew too. Moon joined him at the top of Mount Hokulani, and cheered for him as he took on and overcame his fifth Trial. Acerola soon whisked the grandson of Kahuna Hala away, intent on preparing him for his sixth as well. Hau wanted to make it to the League stage too.

The Captains seemed intent on helping him get there.

Time spent at home. With family. Time spent with friends. With Pokemon. Time spent learning, and growing, and chasing their dreams, for each of them.

The time since Moon’s return home from the Aether Paradise: ninety-nine Alolan nights.

Chapter End Notes
Looking back, it's so strange to know the events between chapters 32 (Ghost Trial) and 43 (day after Ultra Space) spanned a mere 8 days. So much happened within. In fact, by my kept timeline, the time period between chapter 1 and 43 is a mere 89 days. By contrast we cover 99 here.

This chapter covers a longer period of time than the rest of the fic so far. That's wild.

I say that, but the vast majority of this chapter covers a stretch of only about a third of that time. I came up with this title before going into the chapter and really, it ended up front-loaded on the events. Everything past Lillie heading off is... not stuff we need to focus in on the happening of, so I pressed the accelerate button at the end of the chapter but still needed to acknowledge the passage of time. It feels a little awkward to me, but I had to do it here so we could pass this time to the next chapter. What's next chapter then? Oh you'll find out.

The idea of Hapu's coronation ceremony was lifted wholesale from the anime, her outfit was directly referenced from it and everything. [Here's a gifset of her in the episode](#). The Poni arc in the anime is over now, we'll see what it might give me for the League arc - it's inspired a good bit of this fic as it's gone along, so I'm thankful for it.

Lillie's leaving I think a few people might have suspected. At the end of the Sun/Moon games Lillie left for Kanto because of her mother's injuries - she didn't leave in USUM because Lusamine wasn't struck that way. Of course in the games it was after the League but... the League's still a rough half year away from that point. Little closer by the end of the chapter though. Closer and closer.

Two shoutouts to make at the end of this chapter. One to frequent commenter musicaldaydreamer, who drew [this lovely picture of Moon and Nihilego](#) from the last chapter. Two to this fic hitting 1000 Comments! In truth it's only 500, as I have a personal rule of replying to every comment, but hey that's still a cool number! Here's to more as the story continues on, with four chapters left of the Poni Island arc and then an indeterminate number in the League arc, I'd say we're looking at no more than 20 chapters to the finishline. How about that?

As always, my thanks to all readers. To help Eldritch continue on, please consider leaving a comment, and if you can, sharing this fic using these posts on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#). Helping Eldritch reach more people is really important to me, especially as we close in on the League arc. That's it for this chapter, but of course I'll be back with the next soon enough. I'll see you all then.

Hope you enjoyed.
Moon, Twelve Years Old

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The end of autumn had come. Gone to rest were the highest heats of the summer, cooler winds now blowing across Alola throughout the day. By contrast to the summer, midday was now the most active of times, the hottest point of the day now welcome relief for those outside instead of an oppressive force chasing them away. Leaves had fallen from some trees, while others that remained evergreen persisted. Rain was slightly more common, but only just, not really enough to note. The days were slightly shorter too, but again only just. Winter would begin in the next week, and with it things would grow a little colder still, a little darker still, a little rainier still, but only just a bit. Compared to Kanto, the cooler seasons of Alola were as pleasant as could be.

Moon has lived in Alola for just under two-hundred days, just under seven months. Her Pokemon journey started late for her age, delayed due to the move from Kanto to Alola organised, and began in the last month of the spring. Now it was the last week of the autumn, and another awaited day had come. She’d taken an extra week after her last training with Captain Mina of Poni Island, two weeks spent at home. Still she and Hau spent their time together, the best of friends, someone she was so thankful to have met and travelled alongside in her journey. Still she attended classes at the local Pokemon School, still she played alongside others who’d overcame any senses that Moon was someone too much to be friend to. Her hair was growing back well, after being cut short during her month with the Dragon Tamers, and she wore her red chicken-comb hat often.

In these months Moon had grown, and today was as clear a sign of that as could be.

After all, today she was twelve years old.

Her mother was second to greet Moon that morning, the first Sylveon curled up in a soft bed beside Moon’s own. The house was not fit for any of the rest of Moon’s team to sleep within, and while she’d discussed the possibility of them staying nearby – enough trees around for Decidueye to roost in should it wish for example – the nature of Pokemon was that they felt most comfortable when by their Trainer. Besides, Pokeballs were designed to provide comfort to those resting within. So most days Moon and Sylveon were about the house, sometimes Decidueye or Bisharp manifested, but beyond that to see any of the others they needed to head outside.

Volcarona, especially at first, struggled to control its naturally dispersing scales that quickly ignited into flame at the slightest disturbance.

“Happy birthday Moon!” The words of Moon’s mother brought a smile to Moon’s lips, her birthday something she’d been looking forward to more and more the closer it drew. Hau had complained slightly about the fact Moon would be older than him, giving her a displeased frown when she’d pointed out that was true regardless of whether they were the same age – “it didn’t count like that!” he’d say. His birthday was just inside the spring, soon after when the Pokemon League would be held, and that Moon would be twelve for it and Hau eleven was a very serious sticking point for the young man.

Moon found it quite delightful, as a good friend willing to tease another should.

Lillie’s birthday was in the midst of the winter, putting her almost perfectly between Moon and Hau. A little closer to Moon than Hau. Team “Twelve Years Old” would enjoy just under three months of dominance before it stopped mattering.
Her mother embracing her distracted Moon from thoughts of the others’ birthdays and how they might celebrate them with the distance between. “I’ve made all of your favourites,” Jewellery enjoyed Moon hugging her back before each released, the older woman directing Moon to the spread laid out across the dining table, “go ahead. Then we’ll see to your Pokemon.”

It was a morning much like any other, but somehow just slightly happier all the same. Moon ran a hand through her hair, no longer bristly to the touch, and enjoyed the fresh Alolan fruits available, along with the honey tarts her mother had made. Jewellery had been happily practising Alolan recipes – a number of cookbooks stacked within a bookshelf mounted on a kitchen wall – and enjoyed seeing which Moon took to. Moon still didn’t enjoy spicy foods, but that didn’t curb her mother’s intent to try out everything she could. That was just the type of person she was.

Moon loved her very much indeed.

Each of Moon’s Pokemon preened under Moon and her mother’s care; Sylveon relaxing having shared the morning so far, Decidueye and Salamence vying for Moon’s primary attention, Volcarona and Bisharp more reserved. The Bisharp, being a Pokemon decades old, seemed to share some level of understanding with Jewellery, and stood back as she did while Moon interacted with those younger Pokemon amongst her team. The broken head blade of the Sword Blade Pokemon remained ever so, an injury that could never be healed, but that had not stopped the Bisharp from remaining as powerful as ever. In training with Captain Mina it proved the most difficult to handle for the Captain of all of Moon’s team by far.

An ace Moon could rely upon, even beyond the effects her other team members would have.

Sixth with Moon now was Nihilego, the Ultra Beast having grown content within its Beast Ball, as long as it remained by Moon’s side. Moon had spoken to Jace again, contacted through Ilima, about the Beast Ball, so that a way could be found for Nihilego to exit on its own, but so far the design of the ball to affect Ultra Beasts meant it could not be exited freely from within. It was a complicated thing, that Moon was not entirely comfortable with, but the Ultra Beast seemed happy to remain inside the ball as long as it was within Moon’s reach.

When she spent time at home, away from Mina’s training, Moon always made sure to keep the Beast Ball with her.

Getting the Nihilego to remain calm at a distance had been a slow project: the Ultra Beast following after Moon whenever she moved too far away. Convincing it to remain calm, and to feel Moon by their connection rather than her presence, was difficult, but necessary, for Moon to be able to trust it to remain around her other Pokemon at the Poke Pelago. The Beast Balls were still registered as part of the global Pokeball system, and that meant having an occupied one with her meant an occupied slot of Moon’s team.

Which didn’t work for training as Moon needed the six Pokemon she would be taking to the League with her.

Ultimately, despite its strength, battling with the Nihilego felt too off for Moon to pursue. The Ultra Beast responded to her will smoothly, but without expressing any of its own, and the lack of personality felt more like Moon was wielding a weapon than directing a partner. After a while of effort she’d convinced the Nihilego to remain calm at the Poke Pelago, and switched back to keeping Milotic with her when on Poni Island, the Tender Pokemon receiving an extra portion of training to catch it up to Moon’s other five. Whenever Moon returned home however, she left Milotic to watch over the Poke Pelago – where it seemed happy living amongst the surrounding waters – and returned Nihilego to her side so it might be content as well. A difficult juggling act, but to fulfil her promise to the Nihilego, and her promise to herself, Moon had to do so.
No matter what, she would make it to the First Alolan Pokemon League's stage.

By the time Moon had eaten her breakfast, then given the morning’s care to her Pokemon, it was mid-morning already, she and her mother returning inside for a moment’s rest. They would be travelling to Konikoni City later that day, a lunchtime party for Moon to be held at Captain Mallow’s family’s restaurant, but for now it was their chance to rest. Moon set herself into a seat, Sylveon winding itself around her legs. Her mother toyed about with her phone and a tablet, placing the second before Moon after a few minutes had passed.

“Come Darling,” bending down Jewellery picked up the Meowth she kept, the Pokemon accepting being held by sheer exposure to the act, “let’s go out and enjoy the Alolan sun.” And that was the last Jewellery said before she exited the door of her house. Moon missed the action, too focused on the screen her mother had put before her.

And the one on the other end of the video call she’d started.

“Alola, Moon! Happy birthday!”

Having performed the Alolan wave perfectly, Lillie smiled brightly. She’d only just picked up the motion by the end of her journey with Moon and Hau, and since moving to Kanto been unable to use it. Calls and emails to those she missed, family and friends, were good and all, but there wasn’t a big point in making the motion during them.

She was happy to be able to do so here.

Moon, with a fervent passion from the number of weeks since last they’d spoken by voice, and time since Lillie had left since they’d spoken face to face, immediately asked Lillie all about how she was, whether she’d started her Pokemon Journey, how working with Professor Oak was, and so many other things. Smiling, Lillie recounted, going over how she was doing adapting to living in Kanto, for the moment just focusing on beginning her work as an assistant to Professor Oak at his Pallet Town lab. It was all very different, so she was taking it slow and steady. One day at a time.

Moon paused, the thought finally catching up with her. Wasn’t it very early right now? She wasn’t quite sure of the time-difference but-

“It’s fine, I don’t mind waking up early to be able to see you,” Lillie smiled back, Moon now staring at the screen trying to spot a window or any hint of daylight or night – ultimately unable to see either. A noise Moon didn’t hear caused Lillie to turn to the side.

“Oh,” she stood up, “did I wake you, I’m sorry.” Walking out of frame, Lillie remained absent for a moment to Moon’s view. A voice echoed back to the device she was using on her end of the call. “Come and say hello to Moon, it’s alright.”

And then, returning to Moon’s sight, Lillie walked back into view with an orange reptilian Pokemon supported against her chest, clutching on with its head turned just so to stare into the screen with deep blue eyes, its tail hanging with a small metal lantern frame set around it to keep the flame within safe. Lillie smiled.

“Moon, this is Sunny.”

A Charmander! Moon immediately cooed with delight, seeing Lillie holding the Fire-type starter Pokemon of the Kanto Region. Before the plan to go to Alola had been announced, Moon had struggled long with thoughts of which of Kanto’s starter Pokemon she would have chosen. All of them were good choices in her eyes. She approved of Lillie’s greatly.
“Well,” Lillie’s smile took a slight turn for the bashful, “it was... I thought that, since you and Hau had chosen the Grass and Water-type starters, it was only right that I pick the third.”

The wide smile and delighted noises Moon made in response to that only caused Lillie to reden a little more, her reasoning being powerfully sentimental. Moon’s smile curved slightly as she didn’t question voicing her next thought.

It wasn’t a surprise Lillie’s choice would be the one Moon was weak to.

Now Lillie and her partner even looked alike!

They spent so long in this conversation between them, Moon happily telling Lillie about everything going on around her, Lillie the same in return. The best beginning to her birthday morning Moon could possibly imagine. She promised, with absolute conviction, she would do the same for Lillie’s own when it came around. Lillie made sure Moon knew she’d be held to that promise, the same as all the others.

That was fine though. Moon would never let Lillie down. That was the promise above them all.

Lillie believed her fully.

“They’re saying my mother will wake soon.” Thanks to the efforts of Bill, the remnants of the Nihilego bonded to Lusamine had finally began to be extracted, though the depth of the merger between the two had made for slow progress. But still, progress nonetheless, and with each treatment the outlook for the woman's recovery improved.

Once Lusamine awoke, Lillie reaffirmed her own promise, she'd ask what her mother had done with Poipole. Moon nodded and thanked her, but in her heart a doubt remained. What news could there be? Lusamine had been holding the Beast Ball containing Poipole when she'd disappeared into Ultra Space. And it had not been on her when she’d been retrieved.

Whether in the grip of UB-Black, or simply lost in that void world, Poipole was...

“Moon?” Lillie's call of her name broke Moon from her thoughts, causing her to shake her head to lose them. To smile to relieve Lillie. She was happy to see Lillie and, whatever else might be, that would always be true. Lillie smiled back.

When the time for the call to end came, it was Lillie to request it, knowing that the party for Moon would be held soon, Moon having mentioned it earlier in their talk. It was time for Moon to head out and see everyone else, she and Lillie could talk again soon enough. Moon nodded, and agreed that she’d have to get ready, but it still took some time for either to be willing to end the call between them.

In the end they agreed to disconnect at the same time and each kept that promise to the other. Moon stood up, having been seated before the screen for some time now, and stretched. How long had that been? Checking the clock on the wall surprised her. Oh, she really did need to get ready.

As satisfied as she felt already, the day was not yet done.

There was still far more to do.
City, before, to Mallow’s disappointment she hadn’t been there to cook for Moon at the time. So this arrangement, this party to be shared, was to Mallow’s great delight, and she made sure without question to be there that day, despite the busyness of the Trials – a fair number of folk taking on the Island Challenge with increasing pace over the last few months.

Some of them quite the surprise.

Alongside Mallow were Lana and Kiawe both – the former of the two Akala Captains also living in Konikoni City, the latter visiting for the occasion. Along with them was Kahuna Olivia, another Konikoni resident, who was always delighted to attend any get-together going on. Quite the crowd just starting with them.

But then there were the others too. Hau and Hapu, the two closest of Moon’s friends in Alola, as well as Kukui, Burnet, and Kahili, who’d all been guiding presences along Moon and Hau’s journey. The other Captains, unfortunately busy, had still been in contact, and Moon had received birthday wishes from each of them. And Gladion had left her an invitation to come to the Aether Paradise too, for reasons currently unstated. Moon had chosen to go that afternoon.

She’d see what was on his mind then.

The first gift Moon was given at the party was from Pitaya, left with Moon’s mother beforehand, a collection of more Ula’ula red shawls with various dragon designs. Jewellery had unsubtly mentioned to the Guildmaster how Moon never went without the one shawl she’d been given, and that she definitely needed more to rotate through. The Guildmaster had happily obliged.

Gifts and well wishes given, congratulations on the journey Moon had taken so far and pride from those gathered around her. Moon had taken to the Island Challenge with passionate fervour, and despite the speed she’d gone at still managed to obtain the love of the region the journey was intended to foster. It was hard for anyone who’d taken part in her journey to say they were not proud. Moon just appreciated having people around her who brought such smiles.

Kanto, as Mina had described it perfectly, was a place quieter than Alola, yet far less relaxed as well. It was so much harder to reach out and find people there. Here, here Moon had found people. Look at those around her right now.

“Moon,” Olivia took charge of the next present, a large flat box she held out, “this is from the Kahuna of Alola. Your journey isn’t yet over, but we’d like you to have this to remember it by.”

Opening the box, Moon’s reaction was immediate joy. She quickly lifted the skirt from it and held it up to herself.

It was cream coloured at base, but decorated by the four colours of Alola: Melemele yellow and Akala pink, Ula’ula red and Poni purple. Each colour was found in a flower representing that island, patterns of those flowers spiralling up around the dress. For Moon, who loved bright flower patterns and had taken to Alola with all her heart, it was the most beautiful piece of clothing she’d ever seen. Those gathered all smiled at the clear joy she radiated to receive such. She’d wear it on the League stage, she told them all soon after.

The reminder she was chasing that lofty goal and, in all honesty, likely to reach it.

Food shared was prepared by Captain Mallow, who thanks to Lana and Kiawe’s intervention did not go too far afield of the restaurant’s standard menu in celebration. Those gathered ate and spoke and made merry, and the lunch progressed into afternoon happily together.
Moon and Hau, talking about their training with Captains Mina and Acerola respectively, entertained the Akala Captains, hearing how each of the young Trainers were being put through their paces. Mina, despite a general relaxed attitude to the world around her, could still be frightfully focused when the time came, while Acerola was, in Kiawe’s words, “the strongest of us all at her age”. Moon had never truly experienced the abilities of the Captain of Tapu Village, but the way the Akala Captains spoke, it seemed she was an extremely strong Trainer. Hau confirmed.

“She says I could do the sixth Trial now, but I’d still get my butt kicked by whatever Captain Mina makes the seventh, so I need to keep training.”

“Probably because Captain Mina has Moon under her care,” Kiawe nodded with understanding. “The two are quite determined to see you both pass the Final Trials before the League entrance cut-off. As we all are, but they specifically have claimed your training.”

“They’re keeping how it’s going secret too,” Lana leaned across the table, pushing some cleared dishes out of the way, “‘no spoilers’, Acerola says. I bet your teams have grown though, right?”

“If they have we’ll find out when it’s time,” grabbing the back of Lana’s shirt, Mallow pulled her friend back into her chair. “Unless you want to tell them all about your team now yourself.” In answer Lana stuck out her tongue at Mallow, who rolled her eyes despite her smile. Moon smiled too, the activity of the group entertaining as always. She enjoyed it.

“Hey Moon!” The idea coming to him, Hau turned to her, “We should go surfing with Mr. Grimsley again!”

They’d done so a few times, during the end of summer and hotter days of the autumn, but it had been a while. Moon tilted her head. Was the weather right for it?

“Just use some wetsuits,” Lana, who was almost perpetually in one, didn’t believe in the concept of wrong weather for water. “You surf with your Pokemon anyway, right?”

“Yeah!” Hau nodded, enthused. “Me and Moon surf, and Raichu does too!”

Moon nodded as well. Neither she nor Hau could do the same manoeuvres on the Pokemon they rode as those who took Mantine out onto the waters, but as Grimsley had instructed the two each on their first days, the act of surfing together would tighten the Bond and the focus Trainer and partner could share. Certainly, it had enabled Moon and Milotic to work together in battle far more effectively than ever before.

If Hau had a day in mind, Moon would try and join him for it. But with winter just around the corner, they might need to stop for a while after. Hau nodded and agreed “just one more”. Seemed he’d missed the act.

Or, Moon’s eyes narrowed for a moment, he had something new he wanted to show off.

“Though we are all doing our best to prepare for the League,” returning from a conversation she’d been having with Kahili, Hapu took a spare seat at the table Moon, Hau, and the Captains were at, “it is important to take the time to rest and relax as well. If you would like, I could take the two of you on a tour of the farms we have across Poni Island.” The invitation Hau immediately accepted, Moon following along with interest more at the three going somewhere together than the specific place they’d be. In the month Moon had been with the Dragon Tamers, Hapu had made fast friends with Hau and Lillie, and so when the three spent time together the overlap of each’s consideration of her allowed Lillie’s presence to still be felt.
Beyond that, and this was something all those who knew Hapu agreed, it was good she was able to spend time with those her own age who knew her as just Hapu. And in return knew Moon and Hau as just theirselves as well.

Though Moon had made friends at the Pokemon School, and Hau across eastern and southern Melemele, the knowledge each was a Pokemon Trainer with abilities far beyond their age still caused the slightest gap of distance.

Discussions across the tables of those gathered continued on, Kukui and Burnet commiserating over missing Lillie as well, Kahili on watch to keep either from jumping at the other’s suggestion that they put all their current work – Kukui’s with the League, Burnet’s with Ultra Wormhole study – on hold to go visit Kanto. Jewellery, a former Trainer who had taken part in the Kanto Pokemon League once herself, absorbed readily all the gossip Kahuna Olivia was willing to share about those she knew to be taking part in the Alolan League, so Jewellery herself might go into seeing it with a stronger understanding of the competitors. At some point Jewellery had fully accepted the belief her daughter would be taking part in the League, and spent long discussions with Kahuna Hala and Kahuna Olivia about how to approach the response that would generate from the public towards Moon.

No easy subject, but one they intended to tackle so that Moon herself might not have to.

When the time for the long lunch they were sharing to end finally came, slowly did the gathered group break apart, Kukui moving to take his wife back to her lab in Heahea, while Kiawe took off similarly to return to his own home in Paniola Town. Olivia, Mallow, and Lana, all Konikoni residents, were happy to stay here for the moment, though the latter two Captains would no doubt be back to the region of their Trial Sites soon enough.

No end to the busyness of a good Alolan Captain.

Moon’s intent to travel to the Aether Paradise, to see why Gladion had called her, Kahili volunteered as chauffeur for, allowing Jewellery to head home knowing her daughter was at least under some level of vigilance. Moon and her Pokemon’s growing strength meant more and more she would be safe wherever she went, but for the moment Jewellery still preferred to know her daughter was under the care of someone trustworthy.

On the back of Kahili’s Toucannon, she and Moon took off into the west where the Aether Paradise lay.

It hadn’t been long after Moon’s return home from the Aether Paradise, after bringing the Nihilego there to conclude the long string of events that began with Moon’s departure for Po Town those months ago, that Kahili caught up with Moon to, justifiably, go over the many, many ways that Moon had brought Kahili great stress by her actions.

That things worked out as well as they had, which both understood was still not as well as was wished, was immaterial. Part of Alola was reaching out to others when in need. Moon had, time and time again, taken on a part of the meaning in putting herself out of the way to help others, without ever considering her own needs. Kahili could have helped. Kukui could have helped. So many people could have helped. Though Moon held great ability, that did not make her a singular power. She was part of Alola too, wasn’t she?

So she should ask for help as well.

The lecture was one Moon had expected, in some form, but hearing it had solidified the feelings at last. She nodded, and agreed. She’d run off believing she could do everything on her own. She
should have asked for help.

Exasperated, Kahili acknowledged that at least Moon understood that now.

There hadn’t been many more interactions with the older woman since, Kahili focusing on her training for the League while not shelving her constant daily practise to maintain her golfing skills. She had a tournament not long after the Alolan League, and so had to be prepared for that as well. Every day was full on for her.

Moon pointed out that so many people had told her part of growing strong was taking time where you didn’t focus on growing strong. Kahili laughed at that and agreed. Took to sky-high photography as a way to relax when not focusing on either Pokemon battling or golf.

Allowed Moon to look through her collection of pictures while Kahili guided their way over the sea.

Jace was there to greet Moon and Kahili on arrival, a notification sent prior by the pair leaving Konikoni City that they’d be heading over. One who enjoyed flying greatly, and was comfortable handing Moon over to the Aether Foundation member, Kahili soon disappeared into the skies once more, thanked for the quick ride by Moon.

Flying wasn’t exactly a recreation Moon indulged in, but compared to her first few experiences, she was rather used to it by now.

“Gladion asked me to bring you down to where he is,” Jace took over, leading Moon into the Aether Paradise main building. “Also, happy birthday. Ilima mentioned it to me.”

Moon thanked Jace for saying that. Then asked how he was. In all honesty, he looked a little tired.

“Oh,” surprised at being called out so clearly, Jace attempted to straighten up the slight slouch to his posture, “I’ve just been... very busy.” When prompted with what, Jace motioned to a set of Pokeballs attached to a carrier at his waist. “Ilima... encouraged me to go back to my Island Challenge. I only had my Final Trials left from before so... I’ve been working on preparing a team to attempt that.”

Nodding with rapid interest, Moon asked the question immediately on her mind.

Did Jace want to take part in the upcoming League?

“Oh, uh,” caught off-guard by the question, Jace’s voice dropped a few levels as he spoke. “I suppose... if I’m asked to? If the Kahuna determine I’d be good enough.”

Jace had completed his Trials as fast as Ilima had, Moon remembered, so he definitely had to be a strong Trainer too. She’d hope he was one of the ones the Kahuna nominated. Jace smiled more widely to have that support.

“Thank you. And the same to you.”

Deep within the Aether Paradise they travelled, back to the lower labs Moon had visited only once before, with Hau and Gladion chasing after Lillie and Nebby – misdirected by the former Branch Chief Faba. A different room to the one Moon and Hau had entered before Jace guided Moon inside of now, within which a shocking sight awaited.

Tall stood Silvally, partner of Gladion, who standing behind it watched over a third. Another
Pokemon of chimerical nature, claws and fin tail, dark grey fur and bronze metal bindings. Another Type: Null. A deep growling noise echoed from within its heavy iron mask, the Synthetic Pokemon adopting a defensive posture before the larger and healthier Silvally. The barks from Silvally were far less aggressive, attempting to calm the Type: Null before it.

Gladion turned to Moon and Jace as they entered the lab.

“Moon, happy birthday.”

Was that... Moon paused and thanked Gladion before continuing, the Type: Null Gladion had spoken to her about before? Restored from the suspended animation it had been placed into? Gladion nodded. Turned back to the Pokemon only just kept from lashing out at its surroundings by Silvally before it.

“It’s the same as Silvally was when I first took it from here, aggressive and afraid. It took me... a long time for it to trust me.” A wag of Silvally’s large fin tail showed it listening to Gladion as it kept watch over the Type: Null before it. Moon smiled at Gladion’s own. Then turned to look at the fretful Type: Null.

She’d had luck, reaching out to Pokemon that were afraid. The Eevee she’d partnered to had been a nervous one. And the Nihilego, Moon had been able to offer it peace. She’d try for this Type: Null too.

Try and give it the chance to escape the bindings upon it.

“Silvally,” Gladion directed his partner, “keep watch.” Trusting in Moon, Gladion stepped aside to allow her forward, but kept his own partner aware of the situation. If the Type: Null should lash out, Gladion needed his partner to stop it. Moon took another step forward, placing a hand upon Silvally’s side. That deep rumbling noise the Pokemon made under Moon’s touch echoed again. A part of her blessing that she was able to connect with Pokemon with ease.

It was difficult for Gladion not to envy her, in this moment. Moon, gazing into the Type: Null’s grey eyes, began to speak.

She’d been thinking about this, about meeting this Pokemon, since Gladion had first told her about it. Someone sealed away twice over, created and then treated as too much of a problem. That way it had been treated, she couldn’t stand it. It didn’t deserve it. No-one did.

Gladion and Jace both stayed silent but agreed. The first had acted to save another Null already. Jace, who’d been kept out of this project as he had all the Aether Foundation’s more dubious work, had taken part in the restoration process for this Type: Null alongside the other and all those Pokemon in Madam Lusamine’s collection, and was relieved for effect to have finally taken root. Some were conscious again and under care.

Some.

Moon couldn’t give justice. Or revenge. There was no way for her to bring those guilty of the wrongs they’d done this Pokemon to rights. But there was one thing she could give. One thing she’d given before, to others caught by fear without a place to go.

Freedom.

She’d help it find its place, and the shape of the life it wanted to live, whether in battle or peace. She’d help it grow beyond that metal shell it wore, and find the life it deserved to live. If it wanted to, if it wished for her to, she’d help it. A promise she’d make with confidence.
She never intended to let down any promise made to a friend.

The voice of the Type: Null had lowered as Moon spoke, its eyes flicking between her and the calm Silvally at her side. A noise more questioning than aggressive came from it, and with a smile Moon stepped forward and stretched out her hand.

She would trust it.

Would it trust her?

Slowly, before Gladion and Jace’s eyes, the Type: Null took a step forward, bringing its iron-coated head into Moon’s touch, the younger girl immediately running her hand along the cool metal to brush against the fur around the Pokemon's neck, wrapping her arms around it in a strong hug. Almost as if unsure what to do, the Type: Null looked up at Silvally for aid.

The larger Synthetic Pokemon gave an amused barking sound before turning and walking back to Gladion’s side.

“Once again, you don’t fail to impress.” The sheer amount of power Moon could give, supporting each and every Pokemon connected to her, Gladion imagined it to be like a warm beacon, drawing the Pokemon towards Moon. It was hard to say whether her ability to reach the hearts of other Pokemon was part of her impossible nature or in addition to it, and he struggled to define whether he’d feel better believing it was, or whether he should not deny her way of connecting to Pokemon around her. She always seemed to know just what to say.

Whatever rash of minor jealousy he might feel, watching Moon keeping her embrace of the Type: Null and it accepting her touch, Gladion primarily felt thankfulness. Another of the three the Aether Foundation had created had now found a home and a heart to keep it.

That was good.

“We have Storage PCs available down here,” Jace drew Moon’s attention after a few more moments had passed, “So you’ll be able to place one of your current team into the system and then capture this Type: Null. We can provide a Pokeball for it as well.”

Moon nodded, yes, she’d do that. Then, she smiled, take this Type: Null to the Poke Pelago to meet the rest of her Pokemon. The family it would share. She was sure that would help.

Jace’s eyes went wide.

“Oh shhhhh,” he cut himself off, closing his eyes tight and staring upwards with a strained expression, “I forgot.”

“Jace?” Gladion turned to the member of the Aether Foundation, a quizzical look on his face at the sudden outburst, “what is it? What’s the Poke Pelago?”

“Oh okay okay okay,” holding his hands up, Jace shook his head to force his eyes open, “please don’t be mad?”

“Jace...”

“It’s just! This was back when Branc- when Faba was with us, and he said he’d take care of it and then he put me on all different work so it slipped my mind and-”

“Jace.”
“Okay!” Jace turned to face Gladion properly, Moon looking in confusion between the two. “So Ilima got in contact with me because the Akala Captains had followed up on something strange about Moon, that being that she had a Ride Pager.”

“She wha- you did?” Turning from Jace to Moon, Gladion received a nod. Snapped his attention back to Jace. “Why?”

“Thaaaat’s the thing,” Jace slowly put out the word, “her Ride Pager wasn’t a mass produced model. And didn’t use the Pokemon Storage System to work.” The colour was beginning to drain from Gladion’s face. Jace nodded solemnly. “And what the Captains reported was that Moon was using the Ride Pager to travel to a small archipelago north-east of Akala Island, run by a man by the name of Mohn.”

Something was wrong. Intensely Moon felt that, something not right at all in this room. She nodded and tried to clarify. She’d met Mohn in Heahea City, where he’d been trying to find people to donate Pokemon to develop the Poke Pelago. He’d given her the Ride Pager after she’d said she would, and the Poke Pelago was where the many Pokemon she’d caught stayed. She didn’t talk about it much because of how her Bonds worked but since they knew...

“Stop,” Gladion held up a hand, palm out, towards Moon. “What did he look like?”

Who, Mohn? Moon frowned. Tall, sun-tanned skin, very solidly built, he wore a straw hat a lot of the time but his hair was scruffy blonde, a lot like- Moon’s point slowed down to a stop as an idea for the stress in the room finally came to her.

Wait, no...

Gladion looked like he was barely breathing. Moved slowly, focusing on Moon with razor intent.

“Can you take me there?”

Moon nodded.
She would.

With ease Salamence coursed through the sky, Milotic returned to the Poke Pelago already and Type: Null now residing in a Pokeball in Moon’s care. Another of the gifts Moon had been given, this time by Professors Kukui and Burnet, was a bracer to fit around the tail of the Dragon Pokemon, which would hold the Mega Stone Salamencite in place. Such pieces were used for Pokemon that could Mega Evolve, as they required their Mega Stone on them to perform the action. Moon had attached this bracer, so her partner might grow used to it, but for the moment still kept the Salamencite with her. Under Pitaya’s care they had practised Mega Evolution, and Moon had even began to command Salamence in that state, but it was still something to be done with caution.
A long road to truly master that strength.

Behind Moon on the Dragon Pokemon sat Gladion, whose mind was equally racing and at a standstill, unable to handle all the hundred different things he was trying to process at once. All the evidence said that but... no, then why wouldn’t he... it didn’t make sense!

Circling over the manifold islands that made up the Poke Pelago, the dragon carrying the two young Trainers slowly came in to land, roaring its arrival as it did each time, many of the Pokemon spread
about gathering up to greet it and those it carried. The sight of this many Pokemon that, even without a sense for Trainer’s Bonds, Gladion knew to be connected to Moon was... a lot.

It really did distract him for almost a whole entire moment.

Before his eyes settled on the figure standing behind the group watching over this all.

“Welcome back, Moon!” Mohn’s call echoed over the heads of the gathered Pokemon as she dismounted, interest crossing his face to see another following after. “And I see you’ve brought a friend!” This was the first time Moon had ever come to the Pelago with another, and with interest Mohn stepped forward to extend his hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, my name is Mohn, and this is the Poke Pelago!”

Gladion, blankly, stared at the offered hand.

Moon glanced between the two with distress.

“Hm?” Mohn tilted his head, observing this visitor had made no motions towards him. In fact the young man seemed completely frozen up. “Are you unwell? I recall Moon’s first flights here leaving her feeling queasy, I can prepare a lemon tea if you’d like-” In a snap of movement Gladion reached out and grasped Mohn’s hand.

“Gladion.” He gave his name quickly, as if racing to put the word out. “My name is Gladion.”

“Gladion then!” Mohn smiled wide to be given the name, shaking the young man’s hand up and down. “Thank you for visiting! I don’t mind the company of Pokemon alone out here, but it’s good to know Moon has made friends she can show this place to! Most of the time when she’s here and not interacting with her Pokemon she’s been sulking about another friend of hers moving away.”

Moon, who’d very much only mentioned the once about Lillie specifically being the reason she showed up at the islands to just lay face down on the grass and mope, sputtered something indignant about Mohn talking such. Gladion didn’t let go of Mohn’s hand.

“Lillie, yes, she’s my sister.”

“Ah, yes!” Mohn nodded back, “that was the young girl’s name. Well, I am sure you miss her quite a lot too then. Something in common.”

Extracting his hand from Gladion’s grip, Gladion letting his arm fall to his side, Mohn turned to Moon, who was already being enveloped by a number of her Pokemon gathering around her. It was hard to even see her beneath the number that had piled up, coiled around, and latched onto her. Nihilego, who was still an uncanny presence to Mohn at all times, was floating overhead as well. Gladion glanced up at it.

“The Type: Null may have a problem with that.”

Oh... Moon frowned from within the Pokemon pile, she hadn’t thought of that. But if they were both connected to her, she’d do her best to help them get along! Slowly disentangling herself from the Pokemon always delighted to see her, Moon drew down Nihilego and began to speak to it. Gladion backed up, Mohn joining him watching over the conversation.

“I must admit, even after the amount of time it has stayed at this Poke Pelago, that Pokemon still unnerves me. I suppose such is true for all Ultra Beasts.”
A long moment passed before Gladion managed a single word response.

“Yeah.”

As always the Nihilego partner of Moon showed little emotion and thought of its own, contented and calmed by Moon’s presence and that was it. Sighing, the feeling still strange, Moon directed the Ultra Beast to keep height for the moment and activated the Pokeball she’d been given.

Time to introduce Type: Null to the rest of its family.

She’d already made the decision before this, that this Pokemon wasn’t one she wanted to take to the League. She’d help it gain strength as it desired, help it find freedom from its mask, but to rush it to join the League, she didn't want to do that. And... it was maybe an overly sentimental thing, but if anyone deserved to introduce Silvally to the world, it was Gladion. Not that he was taking part in the League, having never taken the Island Challenge, but even still...

Immediately on manifestation Type: Null was on edge, Moon moving to calm it while it whirled about to face off against everything around it. Looking up to see Nihilego floating overhead, deep booming barking snarls echoed from inside of the Type: Null's iron mask. Moon did her best to calm it down but it was slow going.

“How long have you been here?”

Gladion’s question, asked to Mohn as he was debating moving forward to offer Moon a hand, made Mohn look at the young man beside him. Curiosity wasn’t a trait he would have expected from this quiet-seeming fellow, but everyone had their surprises. “A few years,” Mohn answered simply. “When I first arrived here the islands were mostly empty, but I found myself taken by the location and wanted to do something with them. So I spent the time preparing them for Pokemon to inhabit, and then went out to find Trainers to help me develop these islands. Moon has been instrumental, I must say, even if the original plan was to aid many instead of one.”

“Where were you before you came here?”

A longer pause from Mohn before answering this time. “I can’t recall.”

Gladion held the wrist of one hand with his other to keep the shaking in control. This... wasn’t... fai-

With a loud bark Type: Null leaped high towards the Nihilego, only for Milotic, sent here in advance, to chase after and wrap around the Synthetic Pokemon, dragging it back down to the ground. The vision of his mother’s own doing the same to his partner Null back then broke Gladion’s frustrated train of thought. He shook his head and buried those feelings deep down.

This place, this person, didn’t change how things were now. Didn’t change what had happened or who was gone.

Gladion would accept and shoulder that so his sister and mother didn’t have to.

“Here,” striding forward Gladion manifested Silvally, the larger Pokemon aiding Moon in corralling the on-edge Type: Null. Over the course of the next few hours, until the evening hung heavy over the Alolan sea, Moon, Gladion, and their partners did what they could to reassure and calm the recently revived Type: Null. Moon stated she’d spend the night here with it, to help keep it calm. She’d spent nights out here with her team, now and again, but even with the fairer weather of Alola probably wouldn’t as often over the winter. Mohn made mention about nearby islands with cave systems to escape the elements in, and even a naturally flowing hot spring on another, which the Pokemon used to relax. A whole host of ways for Pokemon to live here.
A place Pokemon could live free, as opposed to a place to keep them locked away. The difference between the two, Gladion...

He didn’t want to think about this.

Moon, on her Salamence, took Gladion back to the Aether Paradise, visited her home to let her mother know she’d be staying out that night, Jewellery aware too of the Poke Pelago, and then used the Ride Pager Mohn had lent her again to ride the Charizard bound to it back, giving Salamence rest from the trip.

Before her next return to Captain Mina’s training, Moon would give her all to help this new Type: Null settle in.

And beyond that her best to help it gain the freedom it deserved.

Training with Mina took place all across Poni Island, from the waters around Seafolk Village to the rocky paths of the Vast Poni Canyon, from the thick Poni Grove and wide Poni Plains to the deep depths of Resolution Cave. Even further north, to the Battle Tree, where Mina had Moon watch battles between visiting Trainers to see the level she was chasing. Clearly could Moon tell just how far beyond her many of them were in skill.

In power her Pokemon were competitive to many others but in ability... they were still so far behind.

But the fact she could tell that so clearly, the Captain of Poni Island told Moon, meant she had everything she needed to gain that strength herself. It would just take time, and effort.

So time and effort they gave.

Late in the first week with Mina after her birthday, a visitor came to see Moon. Across the Poni Plains they walked without concern, heading right to the point just beyond the Poni Meadow where Moon and Mina were training. Mina, seeing the person coming, moved to greet them then gave way so they could talk to Moon.

As the Captain of Tapu Village had warned her.

“You’re doing well.” Plumeria passed her gaze over Moon, Moon herself surprised to see the Team Skull Admin here. Or rather...

Plumeria looked different. No Team Skull regalia left on her, not even the pink symbol of theirs that had been marked across the skin of her stomach. A bandanna with bright pink flames was tied over her hair now, the long pink and yellow styled tails of hair Plumeria kept still poking out from beneath it. And, that was...

“Quick to notice, aren’t you?” Plumeria raised her right arm, the direction of Moon’s gaze obvious. Displayed the Z-Ring clipped around her wrist. “Since Kukui’s been making all those noises about getting older Alolan Trainers to take on the Island Challenge they might have missed, those meddlers Molayne and Nanu suggested I do it, alongside a couple of others. I’d say I got hassled into this but I think you’d call my bluff.”

Moon smiled wide. She was happy, truly genuinely happy, to know Plumeria was taking on the Island Challenge. She didn’t even quite know why it made her feel so pleased. Plumeria glanced away from Moon’s wide grin.
“I’d just turned eleven... back then. Hadn’t even completed my first Trial but, I was working on it. Then, after everything with Tapu Village, I...”

Moon nodded, smile fading. Plumeria turned back and fixed her with steel focus.

“I’ve been doing well enough. Following the song wasn’t hard, I was taught that before I got my first Pokemon. Just that, now, well...” Plumeria spent a silent moment, still looking at Moon, before getting to the point. “My next Trial is my sixth.”

A brief pause for thought before Moon stilled. Oh.

“Acerola told me,” Plumeria spoke again, seeing understanding on Moon’s face, “about what happened during your Trial.”

Slowly Moon nodded. That made sense. Plumeria sighed.

“‘You know, don’t you? About me?’

She did.

“Was that... was the Kahuna Holei you saw... really her?”

She... a long pause now, Moon struggling for an answer she could give the woman before her. But... she didn’t know. Plumeria breathed out a heavier sigh and looked down.

“I suppose it’s hard to tell without knowing her.”

Did Plumeria... have an answer she’d wanted to hear? A non-committal sound and a shrug of Plumeria’s shoulders was the immediate response Moon got.

“I honestly don’t know. You’re the only one this ever happened to anyway, so who’s to say it’ll even happen to me? Probably I’ll just get the same thing everyone else did just... I couldn’t stand going into it not knowing. If I’m really going to somehow see her or... just an illusion made by some ghosts. If you’d said it wasn’t real I... think I really would’ve hoped not to see it. I don’t think I could stand... seeing a fake.”

What... if it had been real?

A longer pause still before Plumeria spoke again in a far quieter voice.

“I don’t know.”

The memories... for Moon they came and went, flashes of remembering that then faded out again. There were parts she couldn’t ever forget, much of everything Holei had done, while others slipped away as quickly as they came back to her. Right now though she remembered the sight of a young girl with pink hair, standing with her grandmother, watching her mother giving a speech.

It had been a good speech.

“I can’t live that again.” Plumeria shook her head. “I can’t go back, not like that. If it’s fake I don’t want to see it but...” Moon waited, silent. Plumeria eventually finished her thought. “If it’s real will she be disappointed in me?”

She wouldn’t! Moon’s loud response startled Plumeria, whose eyes widened quickly at the young girl before her’s outburst. Moon shook her head. Plumeria had lost her home and family! But she’d still helped make another for people who didn’t have one! She’d looked after others! And she still
loved and practised Alola, because look at what she’d done! Maybe acting as Team Skull hadn’t been the best way, but look at Plumeria now, taking her Island Challenge! Not for the Tapu, who Moon didn’t like either, but for Alola, right?

Right?

Plumeria struggled to keep her heart calm.

“I hate it.” She said it in a low voice, Moon only realising what was said after Plumeria continued. “The way you sound just like her, I can’t stand it. How did just one night back then change you so much? If I don’t find her in Tapu Village... is it because she’s with you instead?”

She was... just herself. She was just Moon. Holei... she’d admired from meeting her. Something about her had spoken to Moon. And that night in that weird ghost dream, maybe it had affected her but... she was still herself. She wasn’t...

“I know.” Plumeria didn’t meet Moon’s eyes. “But it still hurts. Ten years and it still hurts.”

Maybe... after the Trial it would be different?

The expression of Plumeria was one exhausted. Tired. She hadn’t found the answers she’d come here for but... maybe she’d found the will to go on. Maybe at least that.

“I hope so.”

In the days to follow Moon did not hear from Plumeria again. Hau she did, who happily reported he’d completed his sixth Trial – had he seen Plumeria? No, not at all – and was now preparing to take his third Grand Trial. Moon’s own training continued, but she took a day to oversee that too. To celebrate Hau’s win, as much as Kahuna Nanu made complaints about all these hyperactive kids running him ragged. The larger celebration at Iki Town, three of the four islands of Alola’s Island Challenge completed no small feat for anyone but especially for Hau’s pace unbelievable, they enjoyed as well.

Chances to relax, and fill their hearts with more life than just the intensity of preparing for the greater challenge yet. For each’s seventh Trial. For each’s fourth Grand Trial.

And for the Final Trials that awaited them at the end of their Island Challenge and Pokemon Journey. The road to the Pokemon League still so far to travel.

But they wouldn’t back down. Just as they’d promised each other from the very beginning, just as they intended to do, they’d keep giving it everything they had and go all the way.

Just as they’d promised.

No holding back.

Chapter End Notes
It says a lot about me that I consider this a small sized chapter and am fretting about not having enough for some of the upcoming ones. I'll be fine, I've got everything laid out I need. It's cool.

Got a lot of feelings about the progression of time this chapter gave us. Writing these characters for so long has me real attached to them, so Moon on the path of growing a little older has me feeling a lot of things. Doing the notes for this chapter involved a lot of cross checking the dates of everything I've said so far to make them work, and doing a kind of "semi real world comparison but not fully". I don't quite want to say the Pokemon world's calendar is an exact match of ours, but I'd say it's very approximate to.

If you're the type to enjoy character zodiacs, Moon's a Sagittarius, Lillie's a Capricorn, and Hau's an Aries. Make of that what you will.

I think this chapter really marks the first time it feels like I'm officially moving in on the conclusion of plot threads. One by one things will be tied up now as we head to the finale. There's a lot to the League arc, as we'll discover, which I think gives me the confidence to go ahead despite tournament arcs involving a lot of battle. It'll come down to how I space out my chapters that it'll work. We'll see.

I struggled for a long while on whether to give Lillie a Bulbasaur, having seen a fantastic art of her with one before, and treat it as her taking after Moon, or having her take on Charmander to put herself as a third part of the three, but in the end when I came up with the name of Sunny I knew it had to be Charmander. Lillie's entire journey here is about defining herself anyway, so it's best for her to strike out on her own path. I believe in her. You should too.

That's it for this chapter, there are three left now to the Poni Island arc. As I'm sure you can believe, that means things are about to get busier and busier, you don't have many more "rest" chapters like this one left. Maybe just one. There's a lot still ahead of us.

A powerful march to the finale.

Thanks to all readers, your company on this journey always welcome. Comments left are delights for me, and I'm always happy to see them so don't hold back from shouting out! And, if you can, consider sharing either this twitter post or this tumblr post to help share this fic with more people. We're getting to the endgame now, so let's do our best to make sure everyone can see it!

That's it for this chapter, but as I'm sure you know, I'll be back soon enough with the next. Look forward to it.

The Seventh Trial awaits.
“Live from Castelia City, it's Eyes on Unova! Tonight we'll be discussing the upcoming first Alolan Pokemon League, and interviewing two recently nominated Trainers to be taking part! Let's introduce our special guests!”

With a flourish to his movements the host at his desk indicated towards a pair of occupied seats across the stage. In the first sat a woman, a flowing midnight-purple gown cascading around her, seated with one leg crossed over the other. Her blue-grey hair curling down at her shoulders, she tilted her head slightly to raise her chin as she was the first addressed.

“First of all, while many of you may know her as Queen Bellelba from the famous Mystery Doors of the Magical Land films, the woman behind the role is none other than the legendary Kantonian Trainer, master psychic and former Gym Leader of Saffron City, may I introduce tonight the most esteemed Sabrina!”

“Thank you for having me.” The woman known as Sabrina spoke with a calm and even tone, more than used to being on stage and before the camera. Her eyes settled easily forward, and even through the screens of all those watching, it felt as if she were knowingly making eye contact with them and them alone.

The second of the two guests had far less grace to his posture, bouncing slightly in his seat, head whipping rapidly from side-to-side, taking in the entire studio: camera setup and behind-the-scenes workers, and live audience even further back. Coughing, the host moved to introduce the young man wearing the rather simple black shorts and white shirt, each with a jagged design to their hems, the vibrant red of his sandals outpaced only by his wild and spiky crop of orange hair. Unlike Sabrina, with no sighting of any Pokeballs on her, a necklace of the red and white balls hung easily around this guest's neck. He smiled wide upon noticing attention was on him.

“Our second guest,” the host intrepidly continued on, “introducing a rising star in the Unova battle circuit no doubt many of you know, winner of the most recent Junior League Tournament and placing in the final sixteen of the last Unovan League, grandson to Unova's own former champion Alder: here tonight is Benga!”

Applause from the crowd paled in comparison to the loud whoop from Benga, the young man pushing down upon the arms of his seat so his next bounce set him resting on his knees. Just looking at the teenaged trainer was enough to make clear the boundless energy racing through him at all times. Enough to exhaust many. Sabrina, in her seat, remained unaffected. Benga wore as wide a smile as he could.

The host of the program continued the introduction.

“All eyes are on the Alola Region, and the first Alolan Pokemon League set to take place in the upcoming spring. That's just three months away, folks! To really set the stage their first League is an exhibition tournament, made up of a host of pow~er~ful Alolan Trainers, and a select number of nominated Trainers from abroad! Keen fans might remember a late summer interview conducted with the former Unovan Elite Four member Grimsley, who's been living in Alola for a few years now, who also received invitation to take part in their League! Joining him will be Sabrina and Benga here, so let's hear from them tonight! Sabrina, if you'd start us off, when were you notified
you’d be taking part?”

As attention focused upon the woman known as Sabrina, the air seemed to still. Like there was nothing else but whatever she’d be saying next. The moment hung, just long enough for people to realise it was there.

Then Sabrina spoke.

“I imagine it will delight many to say I had a vision of my role some years ago.” Her tone was not monotone exactly, but controlled. Little variety, which set her at odds to the rather famously scenery-chewing Queen Bellelba she portrayed on the silver screen. “In specific details, the nomination was actually made by Professor Samuel Oak. He was contacted by the Alolan League organisers seeking a nominee, and contacted me in turn to ask if I would take part. I was happy to accept.”

“Interesting!” The host leaned forward in his seat. “Can you tell us more about your motivation to take part? While you are a famous Trainer from the Kanto Region, your work over the past few years hasn’t involved a lot of Pokemon battling. Do you still have a team prepared to take part in the Alolan League?”

“I am confident.” The direction of Sabrina’s gaze settled firmly on the host. “The Pokemon with me are strong, and there are no movements any Trainer can make that can escape my predictions. But these questions are just a lead-in. Shouldn’t you ask me what you really want to know?”

A long pause settled as the host recollected himself.

“Ahem, well, that's what I get for trying to tangle with a psychic, isn't that right, folks?” A patter of laughter from the watching audience. “Now I know that you, like the rest of us, have kept your eyes on the news out of Alola, and I also know that you, along with Professor Oak – who you just said contacted you about this – were part of the research team working on mapping out Trainer’s Bonds a few years back. So given all of that, can I ask if taking part in the Alolan League is all you're going to Alola to do? After all, everything we've heard about the young Trainer Moon-”

“I've seen the news.” With surprising speed and sharpness Sabrina spoke and cut the host off. “My discussion with Professor Oak was solely based around my taking part in the League. When I do so, I will be focusing entirely upon the opponents I face. That is it.”

A level of finality and force behind her voice, as calm as it seemed to remain, shut this particular conversation down. The host, quick to move on, turned to the second guest.

“Benga, since the last Unovan League, you've been taking part in tournaments and battle circuits across the Region. How were you contacted to take part in the Alolan League?”

“Kinda the same!” With a degree of energy and excitableness not in the least affected by Sabrina’s sharp rebuke of the host, Benga’s natural volume had the audio team check their balance was on point quick. “Prof Juniper got asked to find someun too! So she asked me! And I wanna go to Alola! I've never been! I wanna see a Z-Move! And fight strong Trainers! It's gonna be awesome!”

“Interesting,” the host cleanly ignored the rather piercing stare Sabrina was levelling at him. “Professor Juniper was another of those associated with the Trainer's Bonds study, did she perhaps ask you to investigate the Trainer Mo-”

Jewellery turned off the tv.
“Hey! Mina! I'm back!”

A loud voice broke Moon's focus from her latest battle with Captain Mina, the Fairy-type expert helping Moon learn the timing and applications of the Fairy-type Z-Move Twinkle Tackle. A rush attack similar to the Normal-type Z-Move Breakneck Blitz, it imbued the Pokemon using it with great power to be released in a single blow struck against an opponent. Even with the Captain's Pokemon using a powerful series of barriers, Moon's partner Sylveon still broke through them all and sent the target flying.

An extremely strong attack, but one that required the distance be closed and a direct hit scored before the power built up was lost. Compared to the Z-Moves that detonated into blasts, like the Fire and Ghost-types, or those that hit the entire area around them, such as the Grass and Water-type Z-Moves, this Z-Move was much more difficult to use.

But in return the power granted, once applied with precision, would be a decider like no other.

“Oh, welcome back!”

Racing towards the Pokemon battle at full speed, a boy a few years older than Moon, mid-teens at a glance, pulled up to a halt, smiling wide to see the pair. He wore an evening-sky purple sleeveless shirt, a dark orange vest with white fur trim around the neck over the top of it, similarly sleeveless to expose bare arms of dark and sun-tanned skin. A Pokeball hung from a cord around his neck, which Moon after a moment realised was an imitation, the real deal being a set at the young man's waist. His smile was energetic, eyes bright blue, hair a curly mass of black. Clipped around his left wrist was a Z-Ring, a light-brown Z-Crystal set within.

Mina made introductions.

“Moon, this is Tristan, he'll be taking over as Captain of Poni Island once my twentieth comes.”

“Hey!” Immediately stepping forward and holding out a hand, Tristan's smile didn't budge even a bit. “So you're Moon, huh?” Accepting the offered hand, Moon nodded. Tristan immediately shook her arm up and down with great enthusiasm. “Awesome! Nice to meet ya!”

“I heard you got back a little while ago,” Mina was smiling too, though nothing as powerfully pronounced as Tristan's own. “How did it go?”

With a flourish after releasing Moon's hand, Tristan made a great show of... nothing to Moon's eyes. Mina nodded. “Then congratulations.”

What was... “I finished my Final Trials!” Tristan whirled around back to Moon, “See? No Island Challenge Amulet! When you finish your Island Challenge you give it back, and then it goes on to another Trainer! So I'm done! I'm an Island Challenge Champion!”

With a great flex Tristan showed off his bared arms. Mina raised a hand to push one of them down. “Which means you need to stick around to be as ready to become the next Poni Island Captain as you can.”

“Yep!” Tristan nodded, as pleased as ever. Turned his head from Mina to Moon. “Are you doing your Seventh Trial? How's it going?”

She... it was going well. Mina was making sure she'd be ready to go to the League. Tristan's eyes widened.

“No kidding? You're going to the League? You only started your challenge earlier this year, right?”
“It’s what Moon wants,” Mina reached out another hand to push down Tristan's other arm, which he hadn't lowered either. “It might be strange, completing the Island Challenge at the speed she’s gone, but she has a strong Alolan heart and has already met all our expectations. We Captains believe in her.”

Moon, hearing such praise for the first time, failed to avoid blushing. Tristan nodded happily. “Okay then! I'll believe in you too, since I'm gonna be a Captain real soon myself! So what's your Trial? What's Captain Mina having you do?”

“Moon will battle the Totem Kommo-o when she is ready,” Mina filled Tristan in. “If not before you take over as Captain, you'll need to decide when she is yourself.”

“Right!” Nodding rapidly, Tristan bounced away from the two. “Okay then! Hey Moon! Wanna get started then? Let's have a Pokemon Battle right now!”

Caught off-guard by the spontaneity of the new person to have arrived, Moon glanced at Mina. Mina smiled to reassure her. “He’s high-energy, but a good Trainer. Show him how far you've come.” Nodding in response, Moon moved to a position. Chose Decidueye to start things off. The Pokemon Tristan chose in response was at a disadvantage, but Moon was too distracted by it, and Rotom-dex's sudden exclamations, to wonder why he chose it.

She'd never seen that Pokemon, at least that form of one, before.

It was a Lycanroc, that much was obvious, but unlike either of the Lycanroc Moon had seen before: whether the Midday Form of Professor Kukui or Midnight Form of Kahuna Olivia. It stood on all four legs like a Midday form, yet the colouration of its fur was more orange – like Tristan's vest, Moon realised – and its white mane was far more overgrown similar to a Midnight Form's than Midday's. Bright green eyes stared forward at Moon and Decidueye as the Wolf Pokemon paced before them.

“Lycanroc, zzt, Dusk Form! A unique evolution of Lycanroc far rarer than the Midday and Midnight Forms! Cause of evolution: unknown, zzt!”

Dusk Form... a faint memory rose up in Moon's mind after Rotom-dex's announcement. She'd heard the name of Tristan before, actually. Had Kukui and Olivia spoken about him? She couldn't remember any more.

“Hey Moon!” Tristan bounced on his feet. “Go all out! I wanna see just how strong you are so I'll know when you're ready for your Totem Battle! Plus this is good training for the both of us! I'm going to the League as a Captain you know! So I gotta be in top form too! Let's give it all we’ve got!”

Finding herself smiling at Tristan's enthusiasm, Moon nodded. Alright then.

Let's.

Over the weeks to pass the Trainers of Poni Island continued to sharpen their skills, Moon, Mina, Tristan, and Hapu all testing themselves against one another regularly. While the chance existed that one would meet the other in the Pokemon League, to gain the strength to stand on that stage each had accepted that risk and consented to reveal the fullness of their strength to the others. It was the only way to be prepared for the great challenges ahead.
Especially for Hapu, as a Kahuna, she needed to strengthen herself quickly so she might give an appropriate Grand Trial for the last of the four an Island Challenger would take. So far for the Final Trials run since her coronation, Hapu had appointed a Trainer to act in her name. But she did not wish for that to continue any longer than it must.

To be a proper Kahuna, she still had so far to grow.

As the midpoint of the winter passed them by, a completely temperate period in Moon's Kanto-born opinion, with Mina's birthday and the transfer of her role to Tristan now only a short way away, the Captain watched over yet another battle between the next and the first Trial-goer he would oversee.

Given focus, and training, Moon had grown by leaps and bounds, to be expected of her abilities but surprising all the same. Between the weeks Moon trained on Poni Island, Mina, with Tristan observing, saw to other Trainers passing through, working hard to complete their own Island Challenges and seek a place in the coming Pokemon League. Acerola still had hold of Hau, even after he'd completed his third Grand Trial, but the Captain of Tapu Village would be sending that young man on to Mina and Tristan soon enough as well.

Tristan would do well. As both a Trainer and a Captain, he was more than ready. His vibrant love for Alola, enthusiasm for bettering not only himself but everyone around him, and relentless drive to keep on going would make him an excellent handler for the final stage of the Island Challenge, where Trainers who'd honed their own strength would be sharpened for their final battles.

A blast of power met power, a Moonblast from Sylveon countered by a Stone Edge from Lycanroc, detonating and washing out as a wave of light and sound, Mina's distance enough that the shards of stone sent flying didn't reach her. Moon had very quickly taken to going all out in battles against Tristan, who met her with all his strength as well. They were pushing each other further and further day by day. So that they'd both shine on that stage.

Mina found herself more and more excited to see the sights they'd create.

“I almost feel like I shouldn't be seeing this yet.”

The voice of an older man, walking down the path from the Poni Meadow, made Mina turn and look back, nodding to the Pokemon Ranger Captain Jackson, the dark-skinned and buzzed black-haired leader of the group who took charge of creating paths of safety throughout the wild nature of Alola. He'd come through to check on Resolution Cave, greeting Mina, Moon, and Tristan, but gotten to work shortly after. Seemed that was done now. The Ranger Captain took a stance next to Mina.

“You could close your eyes?”

“And miss this? Not for all the world.”

A smattering of laughter from the two. Jackson considered soon after.

“I've been at this a while, but as a caretaker of the land and rescue operative, not an active battler. I feel like... you youths are going to give me a run for my money.”

“We are.” Mina answered starkly, earning a surprised yet faked noise of hurt from the older man. “I'm not going to reassure you, we all need our own confidence going forward.”

“Well,” laughing, Jackson shook his head, “that's what makes you all ready I suppose. Maybe I can tap Asuka to freshen me up.”

With a howl of victory Tristan's Lycanroc pinned Moon's Sylveon down. The end of that particular
match.

“That’s a strong one,” Jackson observed, watching the Wolf Pokemon square up against the next of Moon's choices – Milotic this time. “Tristan was an early-bloomer, right?”

“Yeah,” Mina nodded, “seven years old as he remembers.”

Pokemon Journeys began at eleven. By that age the vast majority of children of the world had gained the ability to maintain a single Bond, and so were ready to undertake the process of keeping a partner, growing together, and experiencing the world through that lens.

But just as there were those who did not develop that ability by that age, there were also those who did so far earlier. Rare edge cases where young children held a Bond, a connection that allowed their partners to draw strength and grow beyond a Pokemon's own natural pace.

Tristan, a Melemele Island native from Iki Town, and his partner Rockruff, were already so strongly bonded by the start of his Island Challenge. Took to it with delight, and while the pace and the walls came for Tristan too, his signature partner still stood strong.

Took on a form never before seen.

It was in thinking of this, by Jackson's prompt, that a far stranger thought came to Mina's mind, watching the battle between future Captain and her last, and his first, Trial-goer. Moon. Her first Bond had formed with her partner Rowlet, given to her in Iki Town, at roughly eleven and a half years old. That was when this all began.

But why?

Moon held unlimited potential for Trainer's Bonds, it seemed ridiculous that one day such a thing would simply switch 'on'. The idea that she'd avoided forming a Bond all this time until then was... almost impossible. So then what? Mina frowned. Was there something that had triggered that ability? Some event soon after Moon's arrival in Alola? What though? The Captain shook her head.

She didn't know.

“I should get back to work.” Jackson, with a note of regret to his voice, set off. Tourism in Alola, even over the winter season, had picked up with the upcoming League, and so the Pokemon Rangers were going full time ensuring all the designated paths throughout the region were safe and maintained. It was a busy job, but for those who loved this land and region, it was a satisfying one. Jackson would be heading back to the wilder mountains of Melemele next, ensuring the hiking paths were up to scratch.

Busy busy busy.

Another day and another visitor came to greet the three, Kahuna Hapu absent while assisting Professor Samson Oak and his research team on Exeggutor Island – the chill of winter allowing the highest heats of the island to be a little more bearable, though the rainfalls quite a bit less welcoming. Compared to the visitors in the past Mina had been warned for, she'd been unaware of this one’s approach until he came into sight, and immediately moved to question his presence as soon as she noticed him.

Moon, recognising the figure, followed after.

“My greetings to you, Miss Captain of Poni Island. I must admit it is quite the lovely day today – the brisk air reminds me of Unova's cooler climes while still being most welcoming. Alola is truly a
Mina tilted her head slightly to look up at the tall man with the neatly combed blonde hair. Despite the strange modified grey coat he wore, what stood out most was the oddly shaped blue coil of hair that circled over and behind his head. Some form of headpiece? It was unique, that was for sure.

“What brings you out to the Poni Plains?”

“Visitation!” The man announced happily, yellow eyes glancing to the approaching Moon. “I come bearing information for young Moon there, and interest in her development as a Pokemon Trainer! I hope I am not interrupting?”

It had been long enough now that the name of the scientist who'd spoken to her on the northern coast of Akala Island had slipped Moon's mind, but the design of him she remembered clearly. He smiled to be so remembered.

“Wonderful, thank you so much for your consideration. Ah, introductions to you, Miss Captain, my name is Colress, a scientist and researcher of Pokemon strength. Might I borrow a moment of your current trainee's time?”

Mina glanced at Moon, looking for some reassurance that this figure was someone to be trusted. She'd not kept on top of everything going on beyond Poni Island during the Ultra Beast siege, and Colress had avoided a lot of attention despite his role in assisting the Ultra Beast Task Force and Alola at large throughout it.

Moon nodded. Colress hadn't caused her trouble before. Colress clasped his hands happily to be so approved.

“Well then, shall we find somewhere to be seated? There is much I would enjoy discussing with you, and with your Captain overseer as well.” Tristan, who'd been taking a morning run with his Pokemon and was only just returning now, looked with curiosity to Mina at this new arrival. Mina gave her successor a shrug.

“We'll head back to camp.”

And so seated around the campsite in the Poni Meadow that Moon, Mina, and Tristan used when staying in this area, Colress settled happily on a fallen log and began to speak.

“While the majority of my work has been based around studying the growth of Pokemon power, currently focused on the usage of Z-Moves, I have other specialised fields as well. The Ultra Beast Task Force, after the events of the late summer, requested my aid and provided a chunk of recorded Pokemon data to do so. The field, specifically, is in Pokemon fusion – the act of two Pokemon combining into one!”

While Tristan had yet to be told about the events that occurred in Ultra Space, the Captains and Kahuna of Alola all knew, and Mina's gaze shifted completely over to Moon. Moon was sitting stock-still, no reaction shown.

But Mina knew.

They both knew.

“After cross-referencing the details taken by your Rotom-dex,” Colress tilted his hand towards Moon, “alongside the ancient legends of Alola, and deep Ultra Space scans taken by the Dimensional Research Lab here in Alola, I have gained a clear picture of the unknown being titled
UB-Black. Its body is a crystalline structure that is capable of infinitely refracting light caught within it, preventing any it absorbs from escaping! With this degree of information, the Ultra Beast Task Force has accepted my name and classification for this beast. The Prism Pokemon: Necrozma!"

Necrozma... the name evoked memories of hungering, starving nightmares. Moon had flashes of those still, but none as intense as they had been in the days following that monster's theft of Nebby. Rare things now. For as horrible as they had been, the thought they were fading, that the connection between Moon and that creature was disappearing, felt worse. She'd tried to avoid thinking on it as best she could while there was nothing she could do.

Was there... something now she could do?

“Well,” clapping his hands, Colress nodded, “that is the core part of my research! My study on this topic was centred around a Legendary Pokemon from Unova known as Kyurem, which possessed a similar ability to subsume two other Legendary Pokemon for strength. While I would expect the mechanical differences to be vast, on paper the two scan quite similarly, do they not?”

Moon nodded. What else?

“It is my fundamental belief,” Colress continued, “that with access to the Necrozma-subsumed Lunala, I will be able to provide a separation mechanism for the two! I have already prepared, thanks to the information currently gathered, a prototype system using my understanding of Kyurem as a base, and so I feel confident stating that the potential absolutely exists to separate the two apart!”

Through Moon raced a crashing, rushing wave of relief. The dispersal of a tension, a fear, that Nebby was gone forever she'd carried in her heart since that day. Nebby was gone, taken from her and Lillie's side, but there would be a way back. Colress believed it.

And wanting so much to believe it herself, Moon would too.

Lusamine had awoken, Lillie had told Moon during their last call, and been able to respond to others. Though she slept most of each day, her body still ravaged by the effects of the Nihilego that had been bound to her and then forcibly torn away, the danger had passed away. She would recover.

Despite every horrible thing her mother had done, to her and so many others, Lillie still admitted to feeling great relief knowing she would be okay. Moon had called Lillie kind. No, Lillie had formed a rebuke, she wanted her mother to face her actions and the harm she had caused. If anything it was a cruelty. But Lillie wouldn't shy from that decision.

She wouldn't shy from the person she was trying to be.

Because Lusamine had awoken, the question had been asked. And confirmed. The Beast Ball containing Poipole had been inside of the Nihilego, left floating within the Ultra Beast connected to Lusamine, as opposed to the Ultra Balls she'd kept on her of the Pokemon she valued. So UB-Black, Necrozma, had taken the Nihilego, and Poipole within it. And then...

Moon didn't know for sure, but if there was a way to separate Nebby from Necrozma, there would be a way to find Poipole again. She believed that too.

She'd believe in the hope Colress had brought her.

“For now,” continuing after allowing Moon a moment to absorb the news Colress had brought, “the ability to pursue Necrozma remains out of reach. However the Ultra Beast Task Force is investigating that avenue, and you, as the partner of the Legendary Pokemon Lunala, will be kept aware. Likely it will take your efforts to help bring it back.”
Tristan, who'd spent this entire conversation without a shred of context, got extremely stuck on the part where Colress referred to Moon as partner to the Legendary Pokemon Lunala.

“Huh?”

Mina shook her head. “We'll talk.”

“Now then,” standing up, Colress held out a hand, “while this work is on-going, my own personal study I intend to keep as well. In the last year I asked you to continue combining your power with your Pokemon and performing Z-Moves, I believe you have fulfilled that request?”

Moon nodded. Colress had asked her that. But, she'd seen him talking to another person similarly. Had he... known it was her, at the time?

“Why of course!” Colress seemed shocked to be questioned such. “I am not so ignorant as to miss such a fascinating topic as your ability, simply neither so uncouth as to harass you for it! Your growth, and the power your Pokemon gained, needed to take place before my interest would become relevant! Moon or not, at the time you still needed to grow!”

And now what?

“Now?” Colress smiled. “Now I would very much enjoy seeing the fruits of your efforts. The fullness of your ability. I may not be much of a battler myself, but I would be happy to engage you should you accept. And... that Z-Ring...”

Moon glanced at the Z-Ring she wore, the black stone transfigured by the journey through Ultra Space. The same as the one Hau had. Hau who'd been with Solgaleo. Another mystery still unsolved.

“That Z-Ring is unlike any other in the world,” Colress continued eyeing it off, Mina and Tristan, who'd both observed the strange Z-Ring before, growing wary at the degree of interest shown. “I would very much like to analyse it: of course I would never take it from you, I would perform a study using devices in your presence, and do no harm to it. But I do believe understanding it will go a long way to not only furthering my understanding of Pokemon strength, but also provide information that may be vital to the separation of Lunala and Necrozma. Moon, if you would please?”

Moon, within moments of Colress saying that, had unclipped the ring and placed it in his outstretched hand.

“Excellent, fantastic, wonderful!” Returning to his seat, Colress grasped the Z-Ring in one hand, while the other typed rapidly into the computer panel mounted into the clothing of the hand holding the band. Text rapidly flashed across the lenses of the glasses he wore, while a pale green glow emerged from the gloved hand holding the Z-Ring. Moon watched quietly.

Tristan lost his patience.

“Hey, so-”

“I'll fill you in.”

Standing up and indicating he follow, Mina led Tristan away so as not to disturb Colress’s work, though not too far either so she and Tristan could remain watching over the man.

“Apropos of nothing,” Colress suddenly speaking after remaining silent for minutes made Moon
jump, the man still focused on his work, “would you happen to know your Mental Pattern? I must admit, I can only assume it is quite fascinating.”

... Moon did know. Mina had asked her, some months ago, and Moon had said then that Professors Kukui and Burnet hadn’t been able to tell her what it was. From there, unknownest to her, Mina had asked Ilima to follow up, Ilima had secured Kukui’s confession that, not knowing how Moon would take being told her Mental Pattern was completely black, the two had pretended to be unable to determine what it was, and then scolded Kukui quite thoroughly for that poor decision.

Shortly after, Kukui and Burnet had approached Moon and admitted such themselves. The part where the Captains had intervened went unsaid, the Professors apologising for their knee-jerk reaction. In trying to help Moon they’d done the opposite. They were sorry.

A black Mental Pattern... Moon didn’t know what that meant. Neither did Kukui or Burnet, or Professor Juniper who was far more versed in the topic than the both of them combined. But after having come this far, Moon found that knowing that didn’t affect her. It didn’t really matter.

Maybe... she would’ve been upset to hear that before. But more or less than what Kukui and Burnet had done she couldn’t tell. So she’d accept their apology and not tell them it wasn’t needed.

And told Colress now simply that. Her Mental Pattern was completely black. The scientist made an interested noise.

“Well I don’t think there’s much anyone can do with that.”

A few more minutes, Mina and Tristan returning to be seated, Tristan giving Moon a fairly awed glance until she caught it and asked him not to, and Colress returned the black band he was holding to Moon.

“Compared to regular Z-Rings,” the scientist reviewed, “this Z-Ring appears to be building up a store of Z-Power within itself. I cannot say what the effects will be, but it is obvious that each time you perform a Z-Move, this Z-Ring gains energy from it. Not enough to make any difference compared to a regular Z-Move, mind you, but still... I think I will classify this phenomenon as a Z-Power Ring, if you’d permit me?”

Its shape, Moon pointed it out, it let her use a certain Z-Crystal with Lunala. Something shaped differently. Grabbing a stick, Moon drew an outline in the dirt, the Z-Crystal being gone from the Z-Ring, Z-Power Ring, Moon corrected herself, upon her return from Ultra Space. Colress studied the shape Moon drew, his glasses capturing the image. Hmm.

“For now, I do not believe this transfigured Z-Power Ring poses you any harm, or will inconvenience you in any way, but should you observe any strange properties to it at all, please contact me immediately. It is best we take no risks, yes?”

Yes... Moon nodded. Then realised. Oh, Hau had a Z...-Power Ring too. Colress should check in with him as well. The scientist nodded.

“Very well, thank you very much for your cooperation, Moon. I intend to do my utmost to help resolve this Necrozma situation. Now then, before I return to my work, would you be willing to show me the strength you and your Pokemon have currently found?”

When Moon glanced at Mina the Captain nodded, Colress’s intense interest seeming to be benign. Still she and Tristan kept close watch as the scientist proceeded to examine, more than battle, each of Moon’s Pokemon with a surprisingly able team. ‘Not much of a battler’, he’d said.
He’d do more than well enough in the League if he took part.

Beyond this visitation, in the days to follow, Moon’s training continued. The time for Hau’s seventh Trial came and went, handled by Mina, with Tristan observing, in a week Moon was at home. Then the Captain’s birthday passed, and the handing of the Captain’s symbol she wore, the ring marked with a pink petal, over to Tristan came. From one finger to another, and the newest Captain of Alola was named.

And the time for Moon’s Totem Battle came.

“Ahhh I’m so excited! This is my first Trial as a Captain! I’m a Captain! Hey Moon! Mina! I’m a Captain!”

“You are,” Mina walked behind Tristan and Moon as the trio made their way through the Vast Poni Canyon, smiling as much for Tristan’s sake as for the weight gone from her own shoulders. She didn’t regret taking on the role of Captain, even if she felt that she’d never properly lived up to it but... what came with it had always been... a little too much.

Over the course of the past months of Moon’s training, time and time again the Tapu of Alola, sometimes one by one, sometimes in groups, had approached the pair. A regular enough occurrence for Mina, who knew the Island Deities simply enjoyed lazing about around her, but when Moon was there they... tended to get competitive. More than normal. Like they were showing off.

More and more it felt like each of the four was attempting to court Moon’s favour. Ignorant of the knowledge she would never take on the role of Kahuna. And without the coronation ceremony or use of the Guardian of Alola Z-Move, that initial Bond that made a Kahuna would never be forged. The Tapu’s interest would never be fulfilled.

Sometimes Mina wondered how they would react when the day came each realised that was the case.

She’d done her best to prepare Moon. Taught her to approach the Tapu as any other Pokemon, while still being aware they were symbols of Alola’s culture and history. There was a degree of respect for the Tapu ingrained throughout Alola, and while Moon did not have to respect the Tapu herself, she should respect the respect others carried. And though Moon would always doubt the Tapu after what she had seen, she should trust in the Kahuna partnered to them. Once the first Alolan Pokemon League was done, that was it for Mina. She’d be taking a long holiday, where the strain of wondering when the Tapu would appear and whether she’d have to stop them from rough-housing – an act that for the Legendary Pokemon could shatter the landscape around them – would no longer be a threat.

That Moon, who the Tapu were clearly fascinated with, would be subject to their attention instead was... Mina felt bad for Moon, but not so much so that she’d stay to keep carrying this any longer herself. She loved Alola, and would be back but, from the Tapu she needed some time apart.

But with Moon’s strong friendships she’d forged with those she’d journeyed with, Hau and Hapu both, as well as the care of the Captains and Kahuna who’d overseen her, maybe it would be easier for her.

Maybe she’d have better luck by reaching out to those around her.

“You’re still going to be training with us, right Mina?”
“I am.” The question from Tristan Mina nodded in response to. Though he was the Captain now, and would be responsible for guiding the Trial-goers who came to Poni Island to the last of their Trials and Grand Trials, she wouldn’t be going anywhere just yet. And would lend a hand while the newest Captain of Alola found his feet.

Today was the day. The day of Moon’s battle against the Totem Kommo-o of Poni Island. Not since the day Moon had returned the Dragonium-Z given to her by Ryuki had she seen that giant dragon Pokemon, even in the many times she had trained within the Vast Poni Canyon itself. But today, Mina and Tristan had agreed, it was time for Moon to take on the next stage of her training. There was still time to go before Moon would need to take her Grand Trial and Final Trials, and in that time one last thing she needed to learn.

To do so, she needed to take back the Dragonium-Z and master its usage as well. Alone and... Mina shook her head. If such a thing could even be done. But compared to the day it evolved, the body of Moon’s partner Salamence and its control over the power it expressed was so much greater. So maybe this time that combination would not bring it such harm.

Perhaps the combination of Mega Evolution and Z-Move could be properly achieved.

Mina had begun the seventh Trial for Moon. Tristan would see it end. So each was here today to witness this battle, this conflict between Moon and the Totem Pokemon of Poni Island. A battle long-awaited, by more than just the three on their way.

It was when they came to that blackened stone basin, that place the Ultra Beast Celesteela had ascended and scorched through its flight, that they saw it. Still that place repelled the Pokemon of the Vast Poni Canyon, left abandoned and untouched. But today there was one here. Today one was awaiting them.

It was here, in this burned crater, that the Totem Kommo-o had chosen the place of battle to be. Its howling roar and the vicious clanging of its scales as it rattled them filled the basin with sound. An announcement.

It was time.

As Mina and Tristan sought a position to watch over the battle, somewhere higher up the curving path around the basin out of the way, Moon made her descent. For the first time in passing through this place moved down the path instead of up. At the base, where once a pool of water had been, the Totem Kommo-o was waiting, alight with glowing Z-Aura. Even after her months of training, even after the confidence Moon had in herself and her team had increased by leaps and bounds, still she found herself a measure intimidated by the raw presence of this being.

That the time she had seen Ryuki opposing it he had been so relaxed, trusting in his partner Lilith, the Mega Evolved Garchomp, said so much. Time and time again Ryuki had encouraged Moon to make it to the Pokemon League. Time and time again he’d displayed a level of not only strength but confidence in that strength that now, only now, did Moon finally have the slightest understanding of.

Now, for the first time, Moon truly understood just how far she had to go to stand against him.

The roar of the Totem shook Moon from her thoughts, and with a nod of her head she raised a Pokeball up. She’d be trusting in the Totem Kommo-o to make sure she was ready for the League. But she needed the Dragonium-Z to continue on. A barking sound of acknowledgement came from the Totem as Moon chose her first Pokemon, her partner Salamence. Dragon against dragon, just as their first battle had been. But where the first battle had been over in moments, the Totem Kommo-o overpowering Salamence with ease, this time it would be different.
This time, as Moon placed a hand over the rainbow Key Stone hanging from a cord around her neck, they’d give this everything they had.

In answer to the pulse Moon felt, the Mega Stone Salamencite, set within a golden band around the Dragon Pokemon’s tail, began to shine. And then Salamence itself began to shine. Glowing, brighter and brighter still as red energy surrounded it, the Dragon Pokemon began to change once more. Wings fusing together into a great and singular crescent, armour coating its underbelly stretching out to wrap around shoulders as well, shape streamlining into a form that would give even more speed in flight.

Then, in a burst of the red light washing outwards, the Mega Evolved Salamence roared its challenge and the Totem Kommo-o howled its own in answer.

The Seventh Trial began.

In a spiralling corkscrew Salamence soared high into the sky, waves of wind travelling behind it as it arced overhead into a dive. The Totem Kommo-o, remaining at the basin's base, watched with focus as the Mega Evolved Dragon raced down towards it. Set its scales rattling, louder and louder, as the Salamence pulled short its dive to unleash its first attack.

Already having fled back, knowing the power her partner could express, Moon flinched at the burst of loud noise, looking back to see the stream of blue draconic fire Salamence was breathing out blown away by a similarly coloured pulse of force emerging from the basin where the Totem stood. She knew what that was, had studied the Scaly Pokemon Kommo-o in preparation for this fight, and so gave her next command calmly. Though the Totem might use its clanging scales to release waves of draconic force, neither Moon nor her partner would let themselves be cowed by it.

This was the first test of the Totem Kommo-o of Poni Island.

With ferocity Salamence unleashed its next attacks, abilities it had learned and honed thanks to the efforts of the Dragon Tamers. Pitaya had a Kommo-o of her own, and against it Moon and Salamence had fought often. No victories, but as the months went on Moon began to believe that if, instead of ending with Salamence’s defeat, the battle continued with the rest of her partners as well, she might just be able to bring down that one partner of Guildmaster Pitaya.

Just the one.

The next clanging burst of draconic noise from the Totem did not push back the next attack from Salamence, a rain of purple-blue energy, meteors conjured by the pure power the Dragon Pokemon contained. Through the series of blasts Moon’s intent guided Salamence, the dragon flying swiftly between explosions so it might slam into the Totem, the first contact made with the dangerously powerful Pokemon. Yet despite the strength it rained from above, Salamence’s greatest power was expressed up close.

Slashing claws, piercing fangs, the Mega Evolved Pokemon attacked again and again, striking the hardened body of the Totem who had lived with the power that suffused it for decades. That the Kommo-o pushed through this assault to seize Salamence by the throat had been expected, but because of that Moon’s heart did not waver and with confidence the Dragon Pokemon opened wide its mouth to breathe another stream of draconic blue.

Hard did Salamence hit the ground, slammed into it by the Kommo-o who swung with all its might to throw the attacking dragon away. Moon’s call for distance, to regain balance, went acknowledged but the response of the Totem was faster, slamming with an armoured shoulder into Salamence and shoving it into the basin wall. Breathing flame that rebounded from the stone against which its head
was pinned, the Mega Evolved Dragon pushed back with its full might as the Totem shoved it down.

Meeting the Totem Kommo-o in a battle of raw strength was a failed endeavour, even for a Mega Evolved Pokemon, and Moon put her focus on breaking the struggle apart. Thrashing, Salamence launched more attacks, from slams of its head which carried the force of the wind to pulling more meteors of power down upon the two. But the Totem, weathering these blows again and again, did not relent. Not until Moon felt a slip in the focus of her partner, and watched from above the battlefield as its body glowed red and returned back to its regular state.

The end of the first round of this battle.

Calling back Salamence, the next Moon selected was Bisharp, the Sword Blade Pokemon striding confidently forward. Thanks to its age and experience the Bisharp held both great power and technique, yet the Totem was still a level beyond, and being part Fighting-type itself, made for a terrifying threat to the Dark and Steel-type Bisharp. This battle would be over in one single hit from the Totem.

Simple enough, Moon and her partner acknowledged.

Just don’t get hit.

From above Tristan and Mina observed, watching as the second of Moon’s chosen partners evaded, time and time again, the powerful swings and strikes of the Totem, lashing out with its bladed arms in counter each time. That Pokemon of Moon’s was still a strange one, something clearly old and powerful already. Such Pokemon in the world, often they demanded exceptional showings from prospective partners before agreeing to walk beside them. Moon’s story was, she’d found that Pokemon losing a battle against the former Team Skull Boss Guzma, offered it her aid, and then immediately performed a Z-Move together after.

“I know she has a Mega Salamence,” Tristan, who’d found himself learning a lot more about Mega Evolution than most Captains ever needed to over the past few months, was the first to speak, “but it’s that Bisharp that spooks me the most. It’s so quiet.”

“They’re a quiet Pokemon,” Mina answered simply, silently agreeing with Tristan’s point. The Pokemon Moon had raised with her, still young members of their species by age, had already gained so much strength. But the flair of such just how significant that Bisharp was as a partner itself. “It’s going to be rough fighting her in the League.”

“Yeah but...” for a moment considering that, Tristan smiled after, “It’ll be a really great fight too!” A small smile twinged at the corners of Mina’s lips. She couldn’t argue that.

Not at all.

With a powerful downwards slam of both of its arms the Totem Kommo-o sent cracks snaking through the ground around it, stone shifting and jutting up, momentarily disrupting Bisharp’s next charge. Moon called readiness but the Totem moved faster, and imprinted the second partner of Moon into the stone wall of the basin. Moon nodded and sent thankfulness to her partner. Called it back and selected her third.

No stopping yet.

Decidueye was next to join this dance, the Arrow Quill Pokemon immediately displaying its uniqueness in the opening seconds of the third act. Pokemon, as they aged, began to develop traits that set them apart from all others, even those of the same species, and as with all things about Moon,
that development had come for Decidueye far faster than could be believed.

It was a variant on Leafage, Mina had observed, that disrupted strikes against the Pokemon and obscured sight of it, allowing it to quickly dash into a new position. An evasive technique that made it difficult even for the former and current Captains of Poni Island to pin that Pokemon down. Tristan, who was still in the process of helping his longest partner develop its own unique ability, couldn’t help but be awed by the realisation Moon already had.

Because something like that, it took more than just the power Moon could give. That partner of hers, it must be incredible too.

At the Pokemon League, Moon would surely put on quite the show.

Despite its evasive ability, Decidueye maintained less of an assault than Bisharp had – less experience allowing it less prediction of the Totem Kommo-o’s attacks. Though she’d opened with a Mega Evolution, Moon still had yet to use a Z-Move in battle, the Totem not giving her the room for such. No doubt, Mina considered, Moon was looking for the opportunity as best she could, but neither Bisharp nor Decidueye had made the moment before being struck down.

Maybe Milotic, the fourth Pokemon Moon brought to the fight, would have more luck.

The Trial continued on.

Milotic moved with snaking, surging movements, manifesting water around it as it coiled through the shattered stone from the Totem Kommo-o’s assault. Once more, like the two before, it focused on evasive manoeuvres, leading the Totem about while striking it as best it could. The disrupted ground, especially now growing slick with the water the Milotic constantly manifested, proved successful, slowing the Totem enough for the Tender Pokemon to continue to evade. It was actively keeping its distance, using recovery techniques after dodging to restore its stamina as it went. The amount of damage it was doing to the Totem was negligible, but by its continued movements, and Moon’s calm stance watching over the fight, Mina noted the battle was going as the young Trainer intended.

Tristan made a surprised noise.

“What’s your idea?”

“I wanna see if she’s gonna do it before I say it!”

“Guess we’ll see then.”

Thanks to the efforts of those to come before, Mega Salamence dealing great damage, Bisharp and Decidueye less so while working to exhaust the Totem, Milotic drew out the battle the longest yet, its actions only brought to a halt when, seizing hold of the Tender Pokemon’s tail, the Totem Kommo-o swung it with full force overhead and slammed it down upon the stones, the wave of water Milotic launched down to mitigate the blow helping but not nearly enough.

Moon called it back.

Fifth came Volcarona.

As soon as it was manifested the Sun Pokemon lit ablaze, scale powder falling from its wings igniting into a firestorm around it. A beat of its wings blew the powder out across the field, the Volcarona ascending as it did so just as its moniker implied, becoming a radiant sun over the basin below. The second time for it to be scorched by flame.
Tristan nodded rapidly. Yeah! Yeah!

While strong as ever, the battle that had gone on so far showed for the Totem, who spent a moment standing still as the flames baked the stone around it. Then the stone it stood upon shattered as the Scaly Pokemon ascended into the sky with an almighty leap, closing the distance between it and the Sun Pokemon in moments, a clawed hand wrapping around the white scaled and furred body of Moon’s fifth partner in this fight.

More and more fire swirled around the Sun Pokemon even as the Kommo-o dragged it back down to the ground, the intensity behind the Totem clearly increasing. The length of this battle so far, the blows it had taken, it had driven the combative nature of the Scaly Pokemon to a higher level. So let its opponent meet its expectations. Standing upon the cracked stone, muddy dust formed by the waters of Milotic evaporating under Volcarona’s flames, the Totem delivered a pummelling series of blows to the opponent it had pinned down.

Mina’s eyes widened.

“Oh!”

Tristan grinned at her. “Yeah!”

Though Volcarona had been active the least of Moon’s five Pokemon thus far, it had achieved everything she’d asked of it. Calling it back, sixth and finally she chose Sylveon, the Intertwining Pokemon stretching with confidence as it walked lightly over the cracked and upturned stones of the battlefield, moving to stand before its foe.

As the Totem took a menacing step forward, Moon set the pink Fairium-Z into her Z-Power Ring. Smiled as she began her Z-Pose, and the stones beneath the feet of the Totem, shattered by the Kommo-o’s continuous assault, the binding grit between them burned away thanks to Milotic and Volcarona both, shifted under its weight.

Its footing disturbed the Kommo-o slipped.

And Sylveon glowed with radiant light.

A dash of movement, in moments the Fairy-type evolution of Eevee closed the gap between it and the Totem. The slightest noise of surprise from the Kommo-o as it slammed a foot down to regain its stance.

Then Sylveon leaped up and unleashed all the power it contained into the Scaly Pokemon’s gut.

The blow, one of precision delivered to a single point, connected in full. Doubly super-effective, the Fairy-type Z-Move unleashed its full strength upon the Totem, and backwards the Kommo-o flew. Across the field, carried all the way by the Z-Power that struck it, the Pokemon slammed into the rock walls of the Vast Poni Canyon just as it had done to so many challengers over the years. Those few to respond in turn, they were all...

Moon and Sylveon stood tall, even as the Totem fell to a knee, gasping heavily. Such was a Z-Move, even with the difference in power and experience between them. And the effectiveness of that strike, Moon had known from the beginning that of all the Z-Moves she could use, a Twinkle Tackle from Sylveon was required without fail. So this entire fight had been to prepare for that moment. This was who she was right now.

She hoped the Totem approved.
Back to its feet the Scaly Pokemon staggered, taking a heavy step forward that shifted the stones beneath it. Sylveon, experienced enough in Z-Moves over the past months, was still standing and able, but the amount of energy it had given meant it had little stamina left. Enough to hold out a little more but... as with each step the Totem seemed to regain more and more of its composure, Moon nodded and called her sixth partner back. If the battle went on Sylveon would be bested too. So this was the Totem of Poni Island, one of the most powerful Pokemon in Alola.

There was still so far to go.

Before Moon now stood the Totem, its breathing heavy but its stance still strong. Raising a clawed hand upwards Moon watched as it opened, and a blue-green crystal dropped from within.

Stepping forward quickly she held her hands up, the Dragonium-Z she’d been given by Ryuki and returned to the Totem now given to her in full. She’d earned it, and would be expected to show such to the world. As she’d promised. Moon nodded, and repeated that promise.

She wouldn’t disappoint the Totem for the trust it had placed in her. With a muttered sound it turned and made its leave, little more to say. That was simply how it was.

But! Mina and Tristan, descending down now to celebrate, were quick to exclaim, that had been amazing! Moon had done incredibly, and her strategy had worked perfectly! She wouldn’t be able to do similar in the League after all, since she’d be facing full teams there as well, but even then it showed she and her team were so much stronger than they’d been before! And look! The Dragonium-Z!

Mina gave another ruffle of Moon’s hair.

“Now it’s time for you to learn how to use it.”

With a smile, Moon nodded back.

So she could give everything she had on the stage of the Pokemon League.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter introduces three more League competitors, all characters from the games but the third given an entirely different approach. Tristan in the Sumo/Usum games is a youngster class Trainer who shows up as an opponent in the League Title Defence, carrying a team of high power Pokemon. He... would completely break the setting of Eldritch, which relies upon time and growth for people to bear such weights. But I still wanted to acknowledge him, and so this is the answer I found. Meet Tristan, roughly fifteen years old, the next Captain of Poni Island.

He's real happy to be here.

Special shoutouts to Colress in this chapter being the vehicle by which I gave Necrozma its name, as well as titling the Z-Power Rings. Always have a nerd in your character list who you can use to classify unexplained phenomena. Very important.

With that, Moon has now completed the Seven Trials of the Island Challenge! And I successfully put the word "trial" in the chapter title for each of them. good job the both
of us. Next comes the Fourth Grand Trial, and then the Final Trials. Two more chapters of the Poni Arc left, and then, folks, the Pokemon League arc begins. I've got a rough chapter outline for it, which suggests how many more chapters of Eldritch there will be, but I don't wanna announce that just yet. Still a bit more to go before we get into that.

As always, my thanks to all you readers. It's through knowing all of you are enjoying this tale that I've felt the necessary motivation to keep the momentum going on this monster of a fic. It's a big work, but I'm determined to keep at it. How could I not be? There are still so many exciting things to go.

For now, that's this chapter. Consider leaving a comment if you've anything at all to say, for I love all my commentors most dearly, and if you can share either this twitter post or this tumblr post to help bring Eldritch to more people, it would be greatly appreciated. As I approach the League arc, I really need to figure out how to step up my advertising so I can get a whole bunch more readers intrigued. If anyone's got any ideas of other ways I could share Eldritch, please do let me know.

And that's that! I'll return with the next chapter soon enough, so please look forward to it.

Next comes The Final Ascent.
“Go Mudsdale, give it all you’ve got!”

With a hand pressed against the ground Kahuna Hapu sent forth all the Z-Power she could muster, channelled through the Groundium-Z set within her Z-Ring. It was the Z-Ring of her grandfather, passed on to her and, just the same as the Mudsdale he had raised and the title of Kahuna he had carried, Hapu had inherited it too.

Her grandfather Koa, who loved Alola dearly, Hapu had taken on the will of. And so she would not hold back.

The Z-Move Tectonic Rage neatly split the earth of Exeggutor Island, a chasm forming in an instant into which Decidueye, partner Pokemon of Moon, fell – the battle between them, the fourth and final Grand Trial of Moon, deep in its later stages. Already the two other partner Pokemon Hapu had raised since assuming the mantle of Kahuna had been bested, Moon’s team trained both longer and with more intensity. It was a strange feeling to be on the back foot, when Hapu herself was the Kahuna giving this Grand Trial, but that was how it was. That was the reason for now she’d requested a proxy for the Final Trials, so those attempting them would be appropriately challenged.

Worthiness of being a Kahuna took many things, not merely strength, but Hapu still understood that she needed to hone herself and her partners further to appropriately serve those of Alola. For now this was the best she could offer.

But it was still one of the rougher challenges Moon had yet faced.

The Z-Power suffusing Mudsdale enabled the Pokemon to burrow through the ground at unbelievable speed, assaulting Decidueye by bursting from wall to wall of the chasm it had fallen into with incredible ease. Though the Grand Trial between the two had begun with the advantage in Moon’s favour, quickly when Mudsdale was brought out did the situation reverse. An old Pokemon, older than any of Moon’s by far – even Bisharp – it had been raised by the Kahuna to come before Hapu and bequeathed on to her. Even without possessing close to the same strength it had while partnered to Koa, the Mudsdale was still so strong. The Bond between it and Hapu still enough to allow it to channel the great power honed over its many decades of life.

Milotic, Sylveon, Bisharp, and Volcarona were already beaten. Decidueye and Salamence remained. And while Moon knew she could call upon Salamence should Decidueye be bested, channel the power of Mega Evolution or Z-Move – but not both, not yet both – still Moon felt the pressure upon her.

Still Hapu had pushed her to this edge.

Light like sunlight poured up from the chasm splitting the peak plateau of Exeggutor Island in two, Mina and Tristan – overseers for this battle – pulling back even further still. When a battle escalated to Z-Moves it called for further distance. Moon had become more reserved with those techniques over the months of her training, as was necessary to match others in skill, not just power, and so this pair was the first. The Ground-type Z-Move Tectonic Rage from Hapu and Mudsdale.

And in counter the Grass-type Z-Move Bloom Doom from Decidueye and Moon.
High above the battlefield, Tapu Fini watched silently the struggle between its Kahuna and the challenger Moon below.

Gaspings hoots emerged from Decidueye as the Arrow Quill Pokemon rocketed out from the chasm, dust, dirt, and mud covering its form and weighing it down, a slump to its posture as it fought to stand. Only a Z-Move could stop another Z-Move, but even with the elemental advantage grass held over ground, still the raw power of Mudsdale had been too much to bear.

Surfacing as the chasm closed, the Z-Power forcing it open fading away, Mudsdale still stood tall. But Moon had learned over many battles with Hapu, as well as observing her battles against Mina and Tristan, that the Draft Horse Pokemon simply never showed weariness at all. It could be one single attack away from defeat.

It could be just getting warmed up.

The experience of those months, the Z-Moves Moon had ensured her Pokemon could carry the weight of, Decidueye too was now able to continue battling after using one. It couldn’t use another though. Unlike Moon, her partner Pokemon had those limits. It took hours upon hours of rest to recover the energy to perform a Z-Move again. Unless Moon chose to with Salamence, Decidueye’s Z-Move would be the last of this battle.

That was how it was.

But even with being able to bear the weight of a Z-Move alone, having to counter another from a far stronger Pokemon was still too much. Moon could tell, watching how her partner moved, that she had little left to give. There was nothing more Decidueye here could do.

That judgement, honed too by the months in training, allowed Moon to feel nothing but thankfulness as she called this partner back for her last.

“Well Moon? What will be your choice?”

She... Moon focused forward as Salamence stared down Mudsdale and Hapu beyond. There was a point where Moon had begun questioning it. Her ability that made her different, to unleash Z-Moves and Mega Evolution without limit, was wholly her own. Was it fair then, to use that in battle against another? Hapu had been quick to point out that a true Trainer gave everything they had, and that to doubt or limit herself, Moon would be insulting her opponents. Still it felt off. To be able to use this power in a way no other could. And maybe the goal was to surpass that. To one day defeat her opponents in a fair fight, where each wielded the same power and the skill and the training they and their partners had gone through was the deciding factor alone.

But Moon had promised, herself, her partners, and so many people, that she would make her way to the first Alolan Pokemon League. So right now she’d answer that promise with absolutely everything she could.

Raising her hand, Moon placed it over the rainbow Key Stone that hung from her neck. She’d give her all to make it to that stage. And as the light of Mega Evolution washed out across the field, Hapu smiled and steeled herself. Time for their finale.

So the fourth and final Grand Trial of Moon’s Island Challenge came to a close. Their partners called back with one bested by the other, each competitor crossed the field to stand before each other. Hapu held out her hand, Groundium-Z in her palm for Moon to grasp in turn. Though Moon was not the first Island Challenger Hapu had overseen the Grand Trial of – Hau having passed through in the time between Moon’s seventh Trial and mastery of the Dragonium-Z, and others before besides –
this was definitively one of Hapu’s proudest. She’d given absolutely every last thing she had. Met
someone going completely all out without reserve. The feeling of that freedom, that total release, it
was a sensation like no other. This, this must be what drove people to seek the Pokemon League,
time and time again.

Hapu couldn’t wait to ascend to that peak and join the others chasing that bliss once more.

“And with that,” the Kahuna of Poni Island spoke proudly and with a smile, “you have completed
your fourth and final Grand Trial. Congratulations, Moon!”

“Congratulations!”

“Yeah Moon!”

Accompanying the voices of Mina and Captain Tristan as they raced towards Moon and Hapu, a trill
of approval from Tapu Fini echoed overhead. Hapu raised her head to smile at the Tapu as it set off
back across the sea to Poni Island proper. A show even Tapu Fini could approve of.

Who could ask for anything more?

“You did it, Moon!” Tristan was bouncing on his feet, “You completed all seven Trials and four
Grand Trials of the Island Challenge! That’s amazing!”

“Though not a record,” Mina smiled too, amused by the fact. “Hau stole that out from under you
while you were training.”

No, Moon shook her head, Hau earned that. And when they met on the stage of the Pokemon
League, they’d show each other how far they’d come. Their last battle had been in Malie City, in the
last days of Moon’s destructive push of herself to go beyond all limits. The time she'd spent now,
seeking strength that enabled safety of her team to go forward, it wasn’t time wasted. None of this
had been the wrong choice.

She didn’t regret a single second spent on the journey that had brought her this far.

Though the memories of those lost and awaiting rescue still remained within her heart at all times.

“Well then,” Hapu nodded, “what is left is the Final Trials of the Island Challenge. You have just
under two weeks until the final date of announcement for competitors taking part in the first
Pokemon League. The Final Trials involve a pilgrimage, a journey up the sacred mountain Lanakila,
to then face the four Kahuna of Alola at its peak within a single day. Each will pose you a test and
challenge you must overcome, and only by completing each will you be named an Island Challenge
Champion. Only by completing your Island Challenge will you be able to claim a place in the
Pokemon League. It won’t be easy, but then what of your journey to this point has been? I believe in
you. And will see you there. Prepare as best you can, then announce the date of battle to we Kahuna
of Alola. We will answer in turn. I am looking forward to it.”

“It’s been really good training with you, Moon!” Tristan smiled wide, “and I hope we get to meet up
in the Pokemon League too! I’m not gonna go easy though so you better not let me down!”

Moon smiled and nodded. If they crossed paths, she’d give everything she had. Then again the same
was true no matter who would stand before her.

She too had felt what Hapu felt in this battle they shared.

“Very well,” Hapu nodded, feeling Moon’s intent, “that is that. It is time for you to return home to
your mother and prepare. The climb of Mount Lanakila is an intensive one, and those younger Trainers attempting it must call on a guide to lead them. It is up to you to select someone able to walk beside you to that peak.”

A moment’s thought, before Moon smiled. She knew who that would be. She was ready. So yes, it was time to return home.

And prepare for the final ascent.

The docks of Mahihinu were a strange place for Moon, a place she’d been defined so many times. The journey to visit her mother after the sixth Trial, where people had accepted Moon as just another person and acted in no strange ways about her. The battle with Kahuna Nanu, seen, recorded, and used to show her seven Bonds, her dissonant nature from the natural laws of this world. The retrieval of Nihilego, where Moon announced herself once more as someone who existed in a different world to all others. And the times when Hau had led her there, to spend time with Acerola or go surfing with Grimsley, Moon had known she was carrying the attention of many upon her back. The isolation of Poni Island had given her so much freedom, but her absence from the public eye made her a mystery each time she reappeared. And oh how the people loved a mystery.

The battle between sense and curiosity, respect for a young girl who did not deserve this attention against a need to know the answers to this being who defied all known rules of the world, warred ever on in the hearts and minds of those around Moon.

She held her head high and walked forward, as those who cared for her had helped her find the confidence to do.

The path to the peak of Mount Lanakila began at the base of Tapu Village. It had always been this way, and while the construction of the Pokemon League had required new ascents, cargo lifts and the like to be installed on the northern side of the mountain, the southern path for Island Challengers remained. Travel through Tapu Village. Ascend Mount Lanakila. And face the four Island Kahuna at its peak.

That was the Final Trial before Moon.

Into the ruined village overgrown by the will of Tapu Bulu she returned.

It was cold, even for the winter of Alola, and relieved Moon for the warmer clothing she was wearing. To ascend the frigid Mount Lanakila she needed such, and in the larger-than-normal bag she carried was warmer clothing still to layer atop what she already wore. It was a safe enough journey, mapped and cared for by the Pokemon Rangers so that even the youngest Island Challengers might make their ascent, but even still for those young enough it was required they have a guide to ensure their safety all the same. Moon had nominated hers. They’d be waiting just ahead.

Just through Tapu Village to the mountain’s base she had to go.

There was little different. Slightly less plant-growth through the largest paths, cleared as they’d been by the people fleeing the Ultra Beasts just under six months ago, but not that much. The plants consuming Tapu Village regrew quickly, the fury of Tapu Bulu scored into the land. There would never be a Tapu Village here again. That was the punishment the Island Deity had made against those who’d turned against it. Just walking this path was enough to return all Moon’s misgivings and upset. How dare the Tapu?
She hated it.

Every step Moon engraved into her heart. The overgrown paths, thick with vine and root. Buildings split open, trees piercing through roofs, no longer homes. Silence, the Ghost Pokemon absent from sight, a chill still in the air. Cracks that spidered over rubble. The slight howl of the wind through gaps between buildings. Glass misted by winter breath. The cobblestone paths forking from neatly paved roads, flowers not cowed by the cooler season remaining open in planter boxes beneath window sills. The smell of warm food cooking on the breeze, a house fronted by a small store, stitched Pokemon dolls on display, the voices of the people all about as children played and adults spoke, the liveliness of Tapu Village on full-

Moon whipped around and stared back down the path, heart hammering wildly. Just silent ruins and rubble, twisting plantlife overgrowing it all. Nothing. Nothing there.

The gasp of her breathing came in puffs of mist, her eyes wet, threatening tears. Moon shook her head. She wasn’t... turning and staring at the ruined house by her side, the one that had sold Pokemon dolls, Moon stared into the eyes of a dilapidated stuffed Pikachu. No... she reached out a hand, running it along the side of the Mimikyu, who contentedly leaned into Moon’s touch, there was nothing left here but ghosts. Just ghosts whispering to her.

Turning away, she continued on, but kept her focus on the world around her so the one left behind might not sneak up upon her once more.

To the edge of Tapu Village, and the beginning of the path that would lead her to Alola’s peak.

The way forward.

“I’ve been waiting.”

Before Moon stood another at the base of Mount Lanakila, standing before the lift that would bring her to the start of her climb. That was the path awaiting Moon, the way to her Final Trials. The one her guide would join her on.

But this was not her guide.

Gladion held his ground as Moon approached.

“Hau told me you were coming here today.”

Did he? Moon had told Hau about the plan for her Final Trials, but he’d proven cagey about his own. She hadn’t heard from him yesterday at all. Had Gladion? The blonde-haired teen gave no answer on that front.

“You’re heading up, aren’t you?” He kept his position, “To your Final Trials, the end of your Island Challenge. So you can take part in the League. It’s hard to believe.”

Even still, she was going to do it. That got the first real reaction from Gladion. The smallest smile.

“Yeah, you are. Looking at everything you’ve done so far, it’s the least unbelievable part of it all. What you did for Lillie, for our mother, and for me, I... it’s hard to just say thank you. Hard to express how much it means.”
What about... Moon hadn’t seen Gladion very often since the Poke Pelago, was he-

Gladion shook his head. “The things that happened already, the things we’ve been through, are still real. We still have to carry them. Leave it with me and... thank you, for not telling Lillie.”

He’d asked Moon not to. She’d agreed to that promise. Lillie... was facing her own challenges in Kanto. Moon understood it wasn’t her place to change that. Gladion smiled a little more.

“You’ve been good to us. All of us. Been who each of us needed. A friend. A saviour. A partner. You helped each of us find our way back to a better place. Helped us help each other. There’s not a lot I can say as thanks, but there is something I can do. Something we left unfinished, all those months ago.”

The sight of the Pokeball in Gladion’s hand instantly made Moon aware. Did he mean-

“Moon!” With great intensity Gladion took a stance, holding the Pokeball forward, “Let’s complete our Pokemon Battle here and now! I’m going to show you just how far I’ve come in the time since I met you! Get ready!”

Moon pulled out a Pokeball of her own.

She wouldn’t hold back in the least.

“Umbreon, let’s go!”

The second partner of Gladion called loudly its readiness as it manifested, the sleek black-furred with yellow rings across it Moonlight Pokemon Umbreon, evolution of the Eevee Gladion had hatched with Moon and Hau present back in Wahiola. In answer Moon had her own evolution of the Evolution Pokemon, the white and pink-furred Intertwining Pokemon Sylveon. Each of the Pokemon stared one another down, red eyes opposing blue. Moon tilted her head slightly to Gladion, acknowledging the advantage she held. Gladion shook his head.

“It won’t be easy.”

Moon nodded and lowered hers again.

Though it was true in terms of match-up Moon held the advantage in this clash of Eevee Evolutions, Gladion immediately took control of the battle, his partner Umbreon closing the distance between it and Sylveon, cutting off the Fairy-type’s most powerful techniques – each requiring a measure of range to unleash. As it weathered weaker strikes with its strong body, responding with punishing physical attacks that kept Sylveon off-balance, Umbreon kept the pace in its favour, Gladion’s directions keeping their focus strong.

Even with the intense training Moon had gone through with all her partners over the past months, still Gladion was an impressive force. Moon smiled. Good.

She liked that.

“Careful!”

To Gladion’s call Umbreon, in the midst of an attack, responded slowly, Sylveon taking the blow as its body glowed and unleashed a bright pink mist to flow out across the ground. This technique Moon and Sylveon had learned quickly in their training with the Dragon Tamers, mirroring the terrains created by the presence of the Tapu in battle. The aspect of it here, it was the way it obscured sight, Umbreon caught within it no longer visible to Gladion’s eyes. Not that Moon could see
Sylveon herself but... she closed her eyes and focused. Sylveon would feel the moment the distance was right. One perfect Moonblast was all they needed.

Umbreon, answering Gladion’s concern in being unable to see it within the field, dashed backwards.

A great beam of pink light shot out of the mist after it.

That one blow didn’t end the battle. Both Sylveon and Umbreon were happy to continue on after it. But it defined the flow, Sylveon keeping more distance, the initial closeness Umbreon had earned far more difficult to retrieve. In the end, despite its own strength, Umbreon proved unable to go further. With a nod and thanks to his partner, Gladion called it back to his side.

“That’s about it for our warm-up then.” The next Pokeball he held Moon’s eyes fixed upon. Type: Null as a Pokemon had been designed to draw as much strength as possible from its partner through the Bond connecting them, so it might have as much power as it possibly could. But, as confirmed by Gladion studying the notes of its creation before calling upon Moon to take the second back then, the Pokemon still had its own upper limit. Something far too high for most Trainers, and especially a child as he had been when first escaping with it, but for Moon...

She’d spent her time training with the Type: Null Gladion had gifted her, strengthening their Bond, though the Pokemon had yet to overcome the iron bindings that weighed upon it. It wasn’t power that released a Type: Null from its bindings, it was trust. They still had further to grow together. But even just that time together, Moon had fully come to appreciate the power the Pokemon could show.

So to see Silvally, true form of the Synthetic Pokemon and partner to Gladion before her, oh how Moon smiled.

This she’d been waiting for.

“Silvally show her everything we’ve got!”

In seconds the battle was over, the Pokemon more than twice Sylveon’s size crossing the field in a great blitz of speed, slamming into Sylveon with such weight and power that the Intertwining Pokemon flew through the air. Moon’s eyes were wide, the attack having even more power than she’d expected. This Pokemon, this evolution – true form – of Type: Null, it was incredible. There was no way Moon could stand against it without giving her absolute all in return.

So to complete the first battle they’d shared, result never determined, Moon chose her next Pokeball and first partner. Their rematch at last.

Each had evolved once, in the time since their battle in Heahea City those many months ago, and each had gained great strength in that time. Against Silvally stood Decidueye, evolution of Dartrix. A wilder smile edged its way across Gladion’s face.

This was what he’d been waiting for.

Each Trainer commanded their partner forth.

Every lunge, bite, and claw of Silvally’s Decidueye evaded, leaves dancing through the air as the Arrow Quill Pokemon dove between them, drawing back chain-laden shots its opponent broke free of each time. Much like the Krookodile of Kahuna Nanu, the Silvally of Gladion couldn’t be easily bound. That was fine though, that was what Moon had expected. Her partner continued to weave about the battlefield, each of its shots seeking its foe with perfect precision.

Yet against the pure power of Silvally, it felt like railing against Wela Volcano itself.
The creation of Silvally, the original project behind it, was built around a system resembling an ancient legend. A Pokemon whose type could change as it wished, who contained the power of all Pokemon within its form. The system designed to mimic it was called the RKS System, and dwelled sealed within the three Type: Null created, the power behind it driving them wild. Only by evolution, the full release and control over the sealed power within, could the Pokemon Silvally unleash the power it had been created to control.

Moon’s eyes widened as the Silvally before her glowed red, its eyes, tail, and the shining blades emerging from its crest all changing to that deep burning colour. Flames whipped up around the Pokemon, its posture changing to unleash a different attack altogether. Wait, this was bad, she had to-

“Silvally! Multi-Attack!”

Before this battle had begun Gladion had chosen the drive his partner would carry. This rematch between Silvally and Decidueye, he’d foreseen it, and set the Fire Memory, one of the many discs which unlocked the power of the RKS System, within his partner. Moon had so happily noted the advantage she’d possessed in the match-up between Sylveon and Umbreon. So she shouldn’t begrudge Gladion for taking the same in reverse.

Shouldn’t complain as the power of flame surrounded Silvally and it launched, leaves scattered around it burning to ash, and slammed into Decidueye despite the Arrow Quill Pokemon’s attempt to dodge.

There was little that could be done. The burning aura around Silvally now, manifesting the full power of the RKS System within it, was beyond anything to which Decidueye could compare. The leaves it unleashed to dodge, they burned away before the Arrow Quill Pokemon could even move. The arrows it shot, they weakened and splintered into fragments of black as soon as they touched the flame. The power of the RKS System, the true power of Silvally, made it an opponent that could overcome any foe. As it had been designed to do.

Yet still Decidueye persisted. The sense they shared, the Bond between them, Moon felt clearly her partner’s desire. This battle, this conclusion to their fight that had never come to an end, Decidueye wanted to see it out with all her strength. So Moon stood tall and gave her focus and her will, her vision over this battle and thoughts of movements to make. Whip up the ash into a storm of dust, travel through it to attack with more of the shackling arrows, and drive Silvally into place. The Decidium-Z Moon set within her Z-Power Ring. They wouldn’t let this end without giving everything they had.

So when Silvally lunged forward wreathed in flame, and the arrows scattered amongst the ash lashed out with their chains, Decidueye pulled back just enough to stand just before the Synthetic Pokemon as it was pulled short. As Decidueye lit bright with glowing Z-Aura.

Sinister Arrow Raid.

Twenty points of concentrated Z-Power, twenty arrows fired in a single moment detonating into force across Silvally’s fiery form. Burning red eyes stared out from the assault, the Pokemon taking a clawed step forward, chains binding it shattering, as Decidueye landed from its attack.

Even that much and still Silvally stood strong. Gladion nodded, feeling the sense his partner returned to him. Moon had still landed an incredible blow.

“Multi-Attack.”
The towering surge of flame that erupted as Silvally rammed Decidueye spelled this battle’s end, the Arrow Quill Pokemon falling back, Moon knowing now it had no power left to give. Raising its Pokeball, Moon called her partner back. She’d thought, many times, of battling Gladion again. Testing herself against the power of his partner Pokemon she knew to be incredible. So this was it, this was Silvally, so strong that it remained unshaken even after Moon and Decidueye had given everything they could.

This was everything Moon had imagined.

Another Pokemon, another choice. Moon’s hand skipped over the Net Ball she carried, the Water-type Milotic the correct choice, if Silvally was somehow a master of flame, but... that didn’t feel right either. Another of her Pokeballs. Yes.

Let Salamence test itself against the strength of this great foe.

The resilience and typing of Salamence made this battle completely different to the one between Silvally and Decidueye, dodging eschewed in favour of each combatant attacking the other without relent. Red and blue flame washed across the battlefield at the base of Mount Lanakila, Silvally ramming the Dragon Pokemon with its great weight, yet Salamence lashing back, smashing down upon it with claw and tail, never allowed the Synthetic Pokemon to take any advantage in this fight.

First to understand was Gladion, that only through the efforts of Decidueye had Moon successfully reduced Silvally to a state this battle would be equal. Had this fight begun fresh, that Salamence of hers would already be beaten. But knowing the order to approach her opponents, the effort each member of her team could give to make things work for the one to come after, was one of Moon’s greater strategic gifts. Compared to most Trainers, who had two, maybe three, Pokemon at best for her age, Moon had taken on six already. Had been thinking on entirely different levels from the very beginning.

Signs of the terrifying force she’d grow into with time, no doubt.

This battle each gave their focus and intent to, as each of the powerful Pokemon continued their brawl, any advantage one took quickly broken by the other. Moon did not use another Z-Move, nor did she call upon Mega Evolution, which Gladion soon understood defined how this battle would go. For the equality here, if that Salamence were Mega Evolved, the fight would already be over.

But his complaint, his acknowledgement of that, faded away. Because through the Bond Gladion shared with his partner he felt its joy in this battle. This equal, brutal, struggle between Silvally and Salamence, his partner was enjoying it greatly. No doubt Moon’s was as well.

So Gladion gave his all until neither Pokemon could continue to move.

“So that’s that.” As each took to treating their Pokemon that had taken part in this battle – Pokeballs able to keep Pokemon’s conditions from worsening after battles, but giving initial treatment quickly rather than waiting to reach a Pokemon Center often a wiser decision – Gladion accepted their fight was over. For now. Though Silvally possessed incredible strength, the gap between him and Moon, who had given strength to so many, was that large. He’d need to become much stronger than he was now to catch up with her going forward.

That was fine though. He was fully willing to make that effort.

“I’m not going to the League, obviously.” Gladion’s words drew Moon’s attention from applying a Burn Heal to her Decidueye. “Which is why I had to settle things here. I hope this doesn’t cut into what you’re doing next.”
No, Moon shook her head, the climb to the top of Mount Lanakila was today, and the Final Trials tomorrow. There was a Pokemon Center at the peak she’d be resting at after, she’d been told.

Gladion nodded, appreciating that he hadn’t hindered Moon’s progress. More people than just his sister were eagerly awaiting the sight of Moon at the Pokemon League.

“I say that now, but it won’t be true the next time.” Raising a hand from the pouch at his waist, Gladion revealed the white stone band he’d been given. The Z-Ring. “That old man, he told me to take this and go on the Island Challenge. I’m not going to race through it like you did, I’ve got plenty of time before the next League. But I will meet you there, got it? And don’t expect the battle to go the same way it did this time either.”

Moon nodded with a smile. Alola, which she’d fallen in love with, she was happy to see anyone take on the Island Challenge of, but most especially her friends. Even though Lillie was facing a different Pokemon Journey in Kanto, at least Gladion would be able to...

“Alright, that’s enough,” the blonde-haired teen returned the Z-Ring to his pouch, no Z-Crystals yet earned to wield with it. “You’ve got a big climb to go, get moving. I’m not going to be the one that causes you to miss your window for the League. Go on, get up there.”

Moon smiled wider as Gladion, unprepared for her honest appreciation, set to chasing her off. She nodded. Alright then, calling back her Pokemon, Moon turned to face the elevator at the base of the mountain, the wide metal platform that would run up to the trail’s start. Onwards she went.

Gladion watched her ascent before turning to make his way back through Tapu Village and home to the Aether Paradise. No sense waiting around.

He’d hear news of her victory in no time at all.

“Hey there, Moon! That sure was a heated battle you just had! I bet you’re all fired up for the climb ahead, yeah!”

The lift from the base of Mount Lanakila ascended to the beginning of a path, a curving trail signposted and well-kept, lined with frost and snow, which trailed through frozen caves, alongside vistas over Ula’ula Island’s south, and all the way through a series of more lifts to the mountain’s peak. To the highest point of Alola, where the Pokemon League would be held.

To the place she had promised to go.

Professor Kukui smiled at Moon’s arrival, having been watching over the entrance to Mount Lanakila below. Gladion showing up and taking a waiting position had caught his curiosity, something well rewarded by the battle upon Moon’s arrival. The Pokemon League of Alola, it would draw more people to the Island Challenge, and drive the Trainers of Alola to even further heights. And kids like these, they’d be the ones leading the charge.

Kukui was happy without question to give them a path they could follow to the peak.

Moon bluntly asked if Kukui was cold.

“This?” In comparison to his normal wear – shorts and lab-coat over bare chest – Professor Kukui had... swapped his coat for a winter coat and that was it. He hadn’t even buttoned it up. The Professor laughed. “No problem! My soul burns hot, yeah, and especially so after seeing such an intense fight as that! No problems here!”
Following Professor Burnet’s request, the wife of Kukui visiting Moon’s house after Moon contacted Kukui asking him to be her guide to the peak of Lanakila, Moon retrieved the more appropriate set of winter wear for him from her bag and handed it over.

Kukui managed some half-noises upon being notified his wife had prepared for this eventuality before meekly accepting and quickly donning the warmer wear.

In many strange ways the journey up Mount Lanakila bore similarities to the path Moon had taken to climb Wela Volcano, back in the days of her third Trial. With the heavy clothing she wore to ensure against the elements, no snow falling at the moment but frost still thick across the mountain – especially so in these winter months – Moon grew warm quickly, resisting the desire to loosen the clothing by complaining about it to Kukui instead, much to his enjoyment.

The views from the mountainside, when outside of the twisting caves circling around it, were stunning. Gazes out across Ula'ula Island, many focusing upon its southern side. Moon could stare out across the wide ocean to the south. Then look down and see the ruins of Tapu Village below them.

...she’d never brought that up with Kukui before.

“Huh?” Missing the question Moon asked at first, Kukui moved forward from his casual pace keeping behind her as she made the ascent, noting she was looking back at him with focus. Her question repeated, whether the reason Kukui met her here instead of coming with her from Melemele Island, was because he was still obeying Tapu Bulu’s decree.

“Well,” surprised by the directness of Moon’s question – plus her understanding of the situation – Kukui shrugged, “yeah. Don’t wanna go causing a scene after all.”

He shouldn’t let Tapu Bulu stop him from going back.

Kukui frowned. “It’s a little more than that. If it were just me it’d have a problem with it’d be fine, but if it made a mess for other people, I don’t want that.”

Guzma had gone back.

“Guzma never cared about the trouble he caused for others.”

The response, coming quickly from Kukui, surprised them both. Kukui blinked and shook his head. “Sorry.” He hadn’t meant to use that much sharpness in his tone, especially towards Moon. Ever since he’d caught back up with her after everything with the Ultra Beasts had happened she’d... she’d been different in a way that was truly and genuinely off-putting.

His happiness to be asked by Moon to be her guide up Mount Lanakila had been mixed with worry that hearing her voice, her voice, would be too much to bear.

Moon spoke like a child still, intelligent but young, but the tone and the directness and the accent, they were all slightly different. Still Moon but... similar. Similar to someone Kukui hadn’t heard speak in over ten years now.

Hala hadn’t known. Olivia hadn’t known. Guzma hadn’t told him anything. Captain Acerola had kept silent on the topic too. So Kukui had wondered, in the few encounters he’d had with Moon in the months since then, whether he should ask. It had never been the right moment though. But then, was this...

“Do you-”
She’d met Holei.

Immediately Kukui stilled, Moon on the path ahead turning to look back at him. The slightest elevation between them meaning neither had to look up to the other. She repeated herself.

She’d met Holei. In Tapu Village the ghosts had led her into an illusion of the past, memories of that place. She’d seen Kukui there, younger, along with Molayne and Guzma. Then met Holei. Battled her. And heard the message she passed on.

Don’t be bound to them.

Don’t be their slaves.

A long moment lingered, Kukui silent as he stared at Moon looking back at him. Then slowly voiced a question in return.

“And what do you think that means?”

The response from Kukui surprised Moon. He looked focused, intense, none of the good humour he always wore on his face. It wasn’t something she’d ever wanted to see but... she’d chosen to start this conversation. The meaning of those words? It was to reject the Tapu. Wasn’t it?

“Hmm,” Kukui breathed out a long stream of mist in the mountain’s cold. “That’s what Guzma took from it. But I don’t think so. It’s not about rejecting them. It’s about accepting them.”

What, that didn’t-

“It’s about acknowledging them as our equals. About not letting them be more, or us be less, than the other. It’s about Alola, sharing our lives together. The Tapu are part of Alola too. Just... the way things have gone are a little skewed, is all.”

But... that wasn’t right! The feeling inside Moon’s heart that rejected them, it told her that-

“Isn’t that feeling just your own?”

It... Moon paused, struggling. She... she thought it might be... when Plumeria came to ask her about this, she’d said it felt like Holei was with Moon. And even though Moon had said she was just her she... she knew she’d changed, after that night in Tapu Village. The way Holei had spoken, Moon had started to copy it. And the feelings Moon had... about wanting Guzma to go back to Tapu Village, about being happy that Plumeria was taking her Island Challenge, it almost felt like... Holei was...

“That’s not it.”

Moon’s silence fell heavy. Kukui shook his head.

“Moon, you’ve been through a lot. Seen many things most people never will. The Tapu, most of your experiences with them have been about them being selfish, haven’t they?” Slowly Moon nodded her head. “It’s not a surprise you feel the way you do then. But those aren’t Holei’s feelings you’re carrying. You are just you. I can promise you that.”

How could he?

“Because I knew Holei. And she wasn’t the kind of person who’d do that to another. The feelings you have, they’re not Holei’s, they’re Alola’s. The will of Alola we all share. Hearing Plumeria was
taking the Island Challenge after everything that had happened, it’s hard to say how happy that made me. I felt the same as you, because I too understood. Whatever happened to you in that illusion, what you took out of it was the understanding that let you feel these things. Because you’re a youth of Alola who cares about this region and everyone living within it. Moon, you’ve become a fantastic Alolan Trainer. You should be proud.”

She... Moon struggled. She’d never... remembered anything more than that one night in Tapu Village. It had only been that, and the things she’d been shown. If her heart had understood who Plumeria was, and Moon loved Alola as she did – which had been true from before the days of the sixth Trial – didn’t it make sense that she’d be happy Plumeria was able to continue on?

If the Tapu had distressed Moon as they had, twice over by Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele’s hands before Moon ever came to Ula'ula Island, wasn’t it true she’d want to reject them? Wasn’t encouraging Guzma to do so natural?

Those feelings, they might be the same as Holei’s, but wasn’t that just because Moon and Holei both loved Alola with all their hearts?

If that was all true, then Moon, then she was...

Just her.

She was just her.

Kukui spoke often as the two continued their climb, about the environment, and how work on the League would continue after the first was over to prepare for the next. Because the first had been on such short notice it was designed as an exhibition tournament, but the true goal of Kukui was to create an entire open League, the same as any region’s.

Back when he’d negotiated the timeframe with the Pokemon League World Association he’d been given two options: one year and three. So he’d taken both, the first for their first League, and the second for every four years League after.

So two years after this League fast approaching the first open Pokemon League would be held. And though Kukui was so very excited for this League to light the fire of competition in the hearts of Alola, it was the next coming that he truly wished to see. As Alolans by the hundred rose up to vie for the title of League Champion.

“I hope you’ll take part in that League too.”

Moon nodded. Of course she would. She’d just promised Gladion to meet him there, after all.

And so their journey continued. Icy caverns and snow-dappled fields, steep twisting staircases and scattered elevators bringing those on the climb from one level to the next. It wasn’t a short journey by any measure, but to reach the peak of Alola and face the Final Trials, such was necessary. The final acknowledgement that though the Island Challenge was about becoming part of Alola, Alola itself was still so much greater and larger than any individual alone.

Moon got that now.

She really did.
The lift they were on went longer than all the rest combined. Minutes passed by as the metal platform ascended upwards, Kukui watching out from its edge even as they passed through a layer of cloud. Moon held back a little closer to the mountain’s side. Flying high on Pokemon she’d grown comfortable with, thanks to the level of control and trust she had in her partner, but riding this open platform – railings around it at least – was still a little much.

But then it reached the end and so Moon’s head rose to the sight before her. Of a great building constructed atop the peak of Mount Lanakila, framed by the fading light of the setting sun, drawn to the specifications the Tapu had accepted for this sacred place. Another road led to a much greater series of buildings and lift platforms, the ways material had ascended to construct the League from the north. The journey Moon had gone on, watched over by Kukui, had been that of an Island Challenger.

And so setting her feet forward, Moon completed the final steps on her path. To the entrance of the Pokemon League.

She was here.

“Moon! Hey! You made it!”

Two things hit Moon as she entered the doors of the Pokemon League main building. The first was the warmth, such stark contrast to the cold mountain outside that Moon immediately gasped. The second was Hau’s voice.

Then third was Hau himself running right up to her and lifting Moon up in another bodily hug.

“I knew you would!”

Struggling to exclaim Hau’s name through equal parts laughing and complaining at him for lifting her up yet again, Moon also found herself fighting with the great warmth she now felt, Kukui, having entered after her, already pulling off the shirt his wife had sent with Moon before replacing his coat where it belonged. Ah, much better.

Moon focused on the one holding her up. Was Hau here because...

“The same thing you are!” Hau smiled widely. “My Final Trials! I just finished them!”

Shock raced through Moon to hear Hau had already done so. He grinned. “Well hey, we’re not all as old as you are, y’know? Us youngin’s like to go fast!”

Kahuna Olivia, amongst the number of others gathered in the entrance hall of the League Building, struggled out a coughing laugh. Kahili Hano, another present, patted her firmly on the back.

“Hau!” Stepping forward Kahuna Hala approached his grandson, who quickly stood at attention upon being addressed. “Congratulations, you have completed your Final Trials and thus your Island Challenge as a whole. There will be a celebration after this, but given tomorrow we will be staging another Final Trial, it will need to wait.”

“That’s okay!” Hau nodded happily, Moon finally getting him to relax his grip and let her go free. “I wanna share that with Moon anyway when she finishes hers!”

Warm looks crossed the room, from one occupant to another.

“Moon,” Hala addressed her next, “tomorrow, after we have all rested, your Final Trials will begin. You will be tested by four figures, Kahuna and chosen representatives. Sleep well tonight in
Gazing across the room, Moon took in who was here. Hala and Olivia, Kahili, and Hapu further back, the Poni Island Kahuna in conversation with another younger girl. Acerola, Captain of Tapu Village.

Those who’d be putting Moon to the test.

“There’s a Pokemon Center built into the League, just this way.” Kukui took point. “Let’s get your Pokemon rested up for tomorrow too. Take it easy tonight, Moon, yeah. Tomorrow, your Final Trials await.”

Hau, exhilarated and running on sheer adrenaline from his own Final Trials – soon to collapse into a Pokemon Center lounge and not get up in a hurry – accompanied Moon on the way. Eagerly chatted but revealed nothing about what was to come, as was right.

What came next Moon would face tomorrow. Her Final Trials. And the Elite Four of Alola.

For tonight, she'd rest.

Chapter End Notes

And so we close in upon the finale of the Poni Island arc. One chapter remains before the Pokemon League arc begins. Of course it's a very important chapter indeed, it's Moon's Final Trials! Four battles to determine if she'll make it through! And for me, it'll be a demonstration of how I handle multiple major battles in a single chapter without making it feel overwhelming or uninteresting. Which is something I need to be ready for in the League arc as well.

The battle with Gladion ticks off one more thing from the games I've yet to do, one step closer to filling out as much of the games as I was able to take into this story. I didn't take everything, some things just didn't fit, or didn't work, but I took as much as I felt able. There's some tiny pieces left but, so much now is original. All of my own creation.

I hope that as I draw away from the outlines of the game and into the world I envision instead, I continue to hold you all on this journey. We're on our way to the finale.

Thanks to all readers, Eldritch continues to gain kudos and views, meaning people are continuing to not only find this fic but enjoy it, which means the world to me.

Remember that all comments are super welcome and valued, so don't be shy in yelling out whatever's on your mind! And to help boost this fic further, please consider sharing either or both of this twitter post and this tumblr post. It would help me out a lot. And if you have any thoughts on other ways I can advertise this fic, especially with the League arc fast approaching, please do let me know! I'd love to hear any ideas.

That's it for this chapter. The one year anniversary of Eldritch is just at the end of this month: can I complete the Poni Island arc within that timespan, sealing the four islands within a single, incredible, year, and starting the League arc after? I successfully completed the first three arcs in nine months, began the Poni arc at the start of January, and am close to finishing it at the end of March - we've been super on pace at a rate of three months per arc so far, which is, frankly, wild. But my love for this story, and
appreciation for my readers who have been so good about keeping me motivated to keep at it, has made this happen.

Here's to what comes next, folks.

Here's to the final battles at the Peak of Alola.
At the peak of Mount Lanakila, sacred mountain of Alola, now rests the Pokemon League. In just slightly over a month its doors would open, and through them would march esteemed Trainers of Alola and beyond, each prepared to show their skills to this region and the world beyond. Each prepared to be part of this announcement of Alola to the world.

Construction is finished upon the central stadium and stands, enough done for such a display to be held. The entrance foyer, large Pokemon Center, cafes and boarding lodges for those visiting from afar and not staying down in Malie City below, are all prepared for the numbers that will be heading through. Through to the stands ringing the tournament field, so that the coming battles at the peak of Alola might be seen.

The battles of the first Alolan Pokemon League.

There was more still to do. Additional arena to be constructed, fields to be added so a full League, a tournament of hundreds, might be held. Focus had been poured upon readying the central battlefield in the single year provided. Hence this exhibition League.

The central battlefield is as the final battlefield of a Pokemon League should be. A simple flat environment, densely packed earth, lines marked out across it. Pokemon trained in repairing disrupted earth are kept by those working as part of the League, so as to restore the battlefield between each conflict. At either end of the field will stand a Trainer, and before them a barrier will appear. One that can allow the beam of a Pokeball to pass in and out, but inside of the arena it will be those Pokemon alone. Such that they can release their full power safely without fearing harm of those behind.

A system already well tested by the number of Final Trials to have taken place upon this stage already.

The League buildings were not fully populated yet. The Pokemon Center and a few cafes had opened, servicing the workers of the League and those performing the Final Trials, but the full staffing would commence only in the days leading up to the League’s opening ceremony. Still, there was enough for a large enough group to have a meal.

For those gathered to take part in another Trainer's Final Trials to eat well.

Moon set into her breakfast with vigour, so that she might be ready to face the day before her. Those others with her ate similar, each feeding the hunger worked up the day before. Hau, recovering from his own Final Trials, devoured everything put before him. As soon as the adrenaline high had worn off last night he had crashed hard, and awoken the next morning with a voracious appetite indeed. He had pushed his limits many times in his Island Challenge, but nothing had been like the Final Trials. They really were everything they had been meant to be.

He couldn’t wait for Moon to face her own.

Acerola, with the pair, ate heartily as well. Hapu, fourth of the group eating together – the only youths atop Mount Lanakila at present – had the least appetite for she had not taken part in the Final Trials directly. As intense as overseeing them was, being an active part... was something different
entirely.

She longed for the day she could do so.

Moon, taking a moment’s rest from the amount eaten already, asked Acerola what brought her here.

“Oh, Uncle Nanu didn’t want to come!” Acerola replied chipperly after finishing a long drink of juice. “He says that ‘since that brat Kukui’s making the League’,” Acerola’s awful imitation of Kahuna Nanu’s voice immediately made Hau choke on his breakfast, Hapu dutifully thumping the young boy on the back, “‘if he wants an Elite Four to end the Final Trials, he can settle for whoever wants to do the darn job’! So I came instead! Bringing an old royal touch to the Pokemon League, y’know?”

Moon frowned. She understood Hapu’s reasoning for appointing a proxy for the Final Trials, as Hapu didn’t yet feel confident she had the strength to give an appropriate test alone, but Nanu’s reason was... he really didn’t care at all about being a Kahuna, did he?

Acerola’s wide smile slipped a little. “Well...” she held onto the word, thinking, “he does care! In his own way.”

“Not so much about tradition though,” Hau, recovered from his choking fit, was already eating again. “He pretty much just did a basic strength test for my Grand Trial then passed me on. It was kind of a let-down really.”

“I mean...” struggling to express how Nanu did care about the world in his own way, was just very brusque in approaching it, Acerola teetered off. Moon nodded agreement with Hau. For a Kahuna, Nanu really didn’t act like one at all.

Kukui, approaching the table, struggled to hide a smirk overhearing Moon and Hau’s opinions on the Kahuna of Ula’ula Island.

“Hey there kids, hope you all slept well last night, yeah!” Answers in the affirmative from all of them gave Kukui a good excuse to show his full smile. Not that he wasn’t smiling for that! Just... for other reasons too. “Good to hear! Moon, just so you know, I’m gonna be heading off soon! It’s not my place to watch someone’s Final Trials, and if you’re heading for the League, I shouldn’t get any previews of you going all out anyway! I kinda stole too much of a look yesterday as it is.”

Understanding, Moon nodded. Thanked Kukui for telling her that. He smiled before turning his attention to another at the table. “The same goes for you, Hau! You don’t wanna spoil yourself on Moon before the League either, right? While everyone else is staying here, I can give you a ride back home to Iki Town, if you want-”

“No thanks!” Hau’s shaking of his head interrupted Kukui’s offer. “I don’t wanna see Moon’s Final Trials, no way, we gotta go into the League and see each going all out for the first time there! But I do wanna be here anyway when she finishes her Final Trials, so I can be the first to say congratulations! So I’m gonna stick around!”

Moon, stunned by Hau’s declaration, stared at him with slightly warm cheeks. To be so believed in was... a powerful sensation. Kukui found himself surprised too. Not that he didn’t believe Moon would pass just... yeah, those two, really they only got here because of one another. It wouldn’t be right to separate them now.

Each deserved to congratulate the other.

“You’ll be waiting a long time,” Hapu mentioned matter-of-factly. “Your Final Trials took most of
“That’s fine!” Hau nodded back, “I can wait!” Doubtful looks from everyone, Moon included, settled on Hau’s shoulders. He frowned back at everyone. “I can! Just watch! Hey Moon shouldn’t you be starting your Trials soon?”

“When you are ready.” The deep voice of Kahuna Hala crossed the table as he approached, in step behind him Kahuna Olivia and Kahili Hano. “Moon, the Final Trials will take place over the course of this day: between the point they begin and twelve hours after that time, you must have challenged each of the four who will be administering these trials: whether Kahuna or Kahuna representative. After completing each challenge you are levelled, you and your team may rest and recover, including using the services of the Pokemon Center here, however you must challenge the fourth of us before these twelve hours have expired. The order you challenge us in is yours to decide. Consider that as you prepare.”

Moon nodded, feeling the last of her hunger fade away, replaced with the beginning notes of tension. As Acerola and Hapu moved to stand with the group, Hapu with her representative Kahili, Acerola as Kahuna Nanu’s, Moon stared at those before her. Four incredible challenges she’d need to pass in a single day. The enormity of it before her was staggering. Even after coming this far, even after everything she’d overcome, still she felt the challenge here was so much more. Was she ready? She hoped she was but...

“Moon!” A hand clapping on Moon’s shoulder shook her from her thoughts, Hau smiling as she turned to look at him. “You’ve got this!”

...okay. Moon turned back to the ones before her. None made show of offering, of reaching out to be her first challenge. No, she had to be the one to choose. Kahuna Hala. Kahuna Olivia. Captain Acerola. And Kahili Hano. Moon had no idea which she should face, or the order in which she should do so, so...

The same order as this had begun, at least at first. Moon’s eyes settled on Hala.

Please be her first opponent.

Hala nodded with dutiful acceptance.

“Very well. Moon, please follow after me to the grounds of our Final Trial.”

And breaking from the group, who all spread apart so Moon may follow after, Hala set off across the halls of the League foyer, to the path the competitors would walk, Moon in step behind.

Learning the path she’d follow to the battlefield of the Pokemon League.

“Moon,” Hala spoke again only after the two had reached the entrance to the stage, passing through the waiting room League Trainers would stay within for the bouts ahead. Past that point was the entrance to the battlefield itself, where the Trainers taking part in the League would enter and take their places before the eyes of the stands ringing the arena, the view of Alola, and the attention of the entire world. A powerful yet silent feeling hung in the air, for this place only a month and a few days away from the opening of the League. The battles fought here so far, they were still just preamble.

The greatest battles of Alola lay just ahead.
“Each Kahuna has chosen a test you must overcome in battle with us. Whether or not what you must
do is explained beforehand, or determining it is part of the test, depends on the individual. Please
make your way to the right side of the field.”

With that Kahuna Hala broke away, walking to the left, where one of the two Trainer rings was
waiting. Moon, heart hammering, moved to the right, so the two might stand opposite one another.
At this distance between them, it wasn’t easy to speak, each having to raise their voices mightily.
Hala did so as each took their position, and a faint wall of light shimmered before them.

“Trainer Moon!” Few voices could boom in the way Kahuna Hala’s could, reaching across the field,
“You stand before Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island, and of Alola! Your Final Trials will now begin,
and over the course of this day you will display what you have learned on the Island Challenge you
have taken! Remember the Trials you have overcome, and the Alola of which you have become
part! Now... begin!”

And from the black and yellow Ultra Ball Hala held a beam of red light emerged, passing neatly
through the barrier that enclosed the battlefield of the Pokemon League, and manifested the Arm
Thrust Pokemon Hariyama before him. The first Pokemon of the challenge Hala had levelled for
Moon. Now, to see how she would respond...

Moon thought quickly, staring at the massive Pokemon across the field. Hala used Fighting-type
Pokemon, so Salamence and Sylveon would be the most effective to use in response, and Bisharp
the worst. But should she choose one of them immediately? What was the Final Trial of Hala meant
to be, anyway? She didn't know what the test was. Had to figure it out in battle, apparently. If she
chose one of her best partners to fight Hala immediately and got something wrong, that would be
wasting their strength. She needed to figure out what Hala was doing first. So...

The flash of red from the Pokeball Moon grasped resolved into the shape of Decidueye, Arrow Quill
Pokemon, longest partner of Moon, with her from the very beginning. It had bested Kahuna Hala’s
Hariyama as a Dartrix during Moon’s Grand Trial on Melemele Island all those months ago, but the
difference between how much Hala held back then, and how little he would now, was huge.

A single well-placed Z-Move would mean nothing here, only exhaustion for partners that needed to
maintain their strength for the entire day. And Hala would no doubt be using more than just one
Pokemon too... Moon’s thoughts were surging as the Hariyama before her and Decidueye slammed
an open palm of each hand against its large belly before stomping down heavy with each foot on the
ground, setting a ready position. A call for Moon and Decidueye to answer.

Putting her focus forward, Moon did so and called out her partner’s name.

Immediately Decidueye dove forward, leaves scattering from the hood enshrouding its head and
shoulders, the Arrow Quill Pokemon’s steps quick as it closed the distance between itself and the
Hariyama, who reared back an ominously glowing arm in preparation for a forward thrust. With
Normal and Fighting-type moves useless against the Ghost-type Decidueye, Moon knew Hala knew
only a few of Hariyama’s abilities would have effect.

That didn’t make it any less scary or dangerous.

Arching its body with a springing leap Decidueye curved over the forward thrust of Hariyama’s arm,
the Dark-infused blow popping the air beyond its palm as Decidueye set a foot down upon the larger
Hariyama’s shoulder, launching upwards while drawing an arrow back, sending a sharp quill
speeding towards the Arm Thrust Pokemon below.

As fast as Moon expected the partner of Kahuna Hala to be, the Hariyama spun around and slapped
the arrow aside, its other palm striking up, print glowing red as the air combusted around it. The wave of force, hot air and flame, rippled outwards, Moon’s call to Decidueye to dive and hit the ground travelling faster through their Bond than her voice through the air.

The ground shook as soon as Decidueye landed, heavy stomps of Hariyama’s feet sending waves through the earth, unbalancing Moon’s partner as Hala’s pulled back another flaming palm. An arrow quickly shot pierced the ground by the Hariyama’s feet, chains lashing out from it wrapping around the Pokemon’s arm, slowing the thrust so that Decidueye might dodge. An upswing of Hariyama’s other arm sent pillars of stone erupting from the earth by the power it exuded, a Grass-infused arrow shot through the attack causing it to detonate into flying fragments of stone, mixing with the leaves released for Decidueye to dash through and disappear from sight, dancing through the air around the powerful Pokemon of Kahuna Hala.

A slap from each of its great hands against its belly. A stomp from each leg upon the ground.

A loud exclaim of its name.

“Hari!”

The burst of sound itself was enough, blowing out the leaves and stones scattered throughout the air, Decidueye revealed by it surprised for a moment as another burning palm struck out. Moon called again, but the pace had been Hala and Hariyama’s from the beginning, and the attack struck cleanly and clearly, the force behind it sending Decidueye flying high into the air. Knowing the damage her partner had taken, Moon raised her Pokeball and called Decidueye back. The first battle Hala’s win cleanly.

He’d neither given nor missed an inch.

Which next... Sylveon, or Salamence? Moon still didn’t know what Hala’s test was. Was it just to defeat his Hariyama going all out? It sure felt like the Pokemon was. No, no she was sure there was more to it than that but... Milotic, Moon chose Milotic, the Tender Pokemon uncoiling from the red beam that released it out of the Net Ball that Moon carried.

Next battle.

Again the Hariyama performed the motions. Two slaps against its chest, two stomps of its feet to show readiness. Was there something to that motion? Should Moon strike during it? Or be wary after it? She wasn’t sure, and commanded Milotic to move far more cautiously than she had Decidueye, this Pokemon lacking the typing to avoid the most powerful of Hariyama’s attacks.

Surging and twisting movements from Milotic accompanied the water it manifested, allowing it to flow and move at great speed about the field. Circling the Hariyama, Milotic tested bursts of water, attacks of varying form. Yet despite the changing angles there was little the Tender Pokemon proved able to do, quick and accurate thrusts of the Hariyama’s arms breaking apart the jets of water, the tests Moon and Milotic were releasing revealing nothing. The answer, the solution to this puzzle, Moon still didn't know.

Two heavy slaps upon the Hariyama’s chest. Moon’s focus tightened, Milotic responding with equal will. Two powerful stomps upon the ground. Every time this meant something. Moon still didn’t know what. But the pace of the battle had flowed to Hala’s will this entire time, and this time Moon would disrupt it. The surge of Milotic’s movements. The Hariyama’s own in response. This dance at the peak of Alola, in perfect tune with its song.

In tune with the song!
Hariyama thrust an arm forward and Milotic dived into the attack, twisting around it before coiling across the Arm Thrust Pokemon itself, the water flowing with the Tender Pokemon cooling rapidly into ice as it continued the motion to untangle itself before the Hariyama could respond. A heated surge of water flowed next from Milotic, striking into the Hariyama as it shattered the ice binding it, the hot and cold reacting into an immediate flash of mist. Moon drew her partner back, her heart-rate pulsing at great speed.

She knew what to do.

The song of Alola was the pulse of life, the rhythm of land, sea, sky, and all living beings within it. It was the footsteps of the many which wove into a tune, it was the cries of Pokemon mingling with the breath of the wind. It was the pace and flow of Alola that master Trainers easily danced to alongside their Pokemon, and by that pace reacted faster, cleaner, and with more ability than possible without. Kahuna Hala and his Hariyama, they were moving to the song. Those two slams of the hands, then two of the feet, as the mist around Hariyama was blown away by the Pokémon’s fighting spirit, it was a reset of the song, the combatants as much conductors as conductees. Directing the song, creating the flow of movement that drew others into the pace and led them along, it was an art Moon had seen months ago as well.

Been witness as Ryuki Oda played a tune on his guitar and commanded three of his Pokemon to meet three Captains of Alola with equal strength.

The Hariyama repeated the motions again. Faster this time. Then struck forward an arm that crackled with electricity that jolted and surged out in a wide arcing claw. Crackle jolt, the thrust's attack. Water surge, answer back. Moon grinned. The faster they danced the more command, taking the pace into their hands. So for this Trial just follow the song.

Kahuna Hala please dance along.

From diving twisting Milotic came water flowing coating thick across the stage to change the field and shape this mud by its own will to mire grasping Hariyama stomping down with its own power the waves of force pushing back soft ground into an attack Milotic caught by earthen shell as greater strength upon it fell the Kahuna’s partner without relent unleashing more and more intent to crush its foe within the pace this song this dance between them a race mist and water towering higher Milotic swimming up that spire which shattered by a single blow rained as water down below the Tender Pokemon falling fast Hariyama beneath preparing its blast a clash of surging water flowing into a heavy palm bright glowing this moment between the two come to a head and the burst released of power spread across the field as each fell back each stunned by the strength of their attack yet as one stood to continue their fight the other lay bereft of might.

An aggressive pace, and though Moon had matched it for a moment, the difference in strength between her partner Pokemon and the Hariyama of Kahuna Hala proved still too much. Two of her Pokemon beaten, and not one of the Kahuna’s. What was the answer now? Moon didn’t even know how much she had to do. A flash of red, a Pokeball at her waist activating, answered for her.

Bisharp, Sword Blade Pokemon, set foot onto the stage of the Pokemon League.

Immediately against Moon’s distress at the Pokemon’s manifestation she felt in return a sense of joy. Of happiness to be here, at the peak of Alola, the highest point in the region. The place Moon had promised to go, and take those who’d joined alongside her with. That happiness, for her partner to experience this stage, Moon couldn’t begrudge them that. This Bisharp, a Pokemon older than she was, did it know the song of Alola? Had it commanded through that the many Pokemon it had led over the decades? Was it able to flow well into the motions of a most aggressive pace?
As the Sword Blade Pokemon took a step forward, towards the Hariyama repeating its slap and
stomp motion to announce the pace of the song it would follow, Moon nodded and shelved doubts
about match-ups or strength. She’d trust in her partner who’d wished to stand upon this stage. They
still had a higher place to go to together.

So they couldn’t stop here.

Immediately flowed the movement of Bisharp in a way no other Pokemon of Moon’s could, through
something born of such long experience in battle against so many that the Pokemon possessed an
edge far sharper than even the blades along its arms. The fastest strikes of Hariyama Bisharp wove
within, its metallic arms pushing aside the muscle-thick limbs of the Arm Thrust Pokemon. For the
two standing directly before one another with little more than quick steps taken without ever
breaking apart, the amount of movement between them was extreme. The pace of the song, Moon
lost the ability to track it, having to surrender thinking to feel alone. Through the Bond between her
and her partner, let them share the pace and the sensation of this battle as fast as they could move,
even faster than they could think.

A limitless moment of trance in which the song of Alola was theirs alone to define, by every breath,
movement, and pulse of their hearts.

Taking a heavy blow upon its smoothed head, the blade most Bisharp carried sundered in a manner
that would never heal, Bisharp sunk to a knee for just one moment, the touch upon the earth a
bounce that let it rise up again, and struck with its full power returning everything the Hariyama had
hit it with into the Arm Thrust Pokemon’s chest. Slammed by the immense attack reflecting the
power of its own and more, the partner Pokemon of Kahuna Hala stumbled back and fell. Hala
nodded. Good.

Moon had shown the beginnings of what his test sought to reveal. That she had learned to flow with
the song of Alola, and her Pokemon, to a level beyond anything she could have before. Those Island
Challenge Champions of Alola, they must all be able to synchronise with their partners, and with
Alola, to that degree. Hala demanded it.

But one moment wasn’t enough. If Moon was to continue, she needed to be able to maintain that
flow where thought and instinct mixed into a singular intent that reacted at the speed of the greatest
of Pokemon battles. So choosing a second Pokemon, the large and white-furred Woolly Crab
Pokemon Crabominable, Fighting and Ice-type evolution of Crabrawler, Hala set the battle to
continue. Not until Moon had shown far more would he allow her past this test.

Young Moon, let us continue our dance!

Having taken the powerful attacks of Hariyama, Bisharp soon lost this fight, Volcarona the next to
join with its powerful flaming force. It took time for Moon to regain the pace, that pure moment she
had shared with the Sword Blade Pokemon, but she found it again, and her partner proved well able
to wear down Hala’s own, the Bug and Fire-type Pokemon possessing such a great advantage over
the Woolly Crab that the battle ended in its favour. It had spent a lot of energy to overwhelm the
powerful Pokemon of Hala though, and Hala’s third choice, a Poliwrath, Water and Fighting-type,
rapidly brought Volcarona down to the ground.

Fearing further Ice-type attacks, Moon chose Sylveon next. Yet despite the Intertwining Pokemon’s
best efforts, the Poliwrath, trained to wield a variety of techniques, struck a powerful Poison-infused
blow. Moon’s pace was fluctuating, lost easily when things did not go her way. She was showing
the beginnings of mastery, but still struggling to exert it.

As Salamence emerged, sixth of Moon’s team, Hala made peace with this matchup. It was time for
Moon to demonstrate she had what it took to pass his Final Trial. This one battle would be the last they shared this day. So then, young Moon... overcome!

Moon did not Mega Evolve her partner Salamence. Mega Evolution placed a greater demand upon the body of a Pokemon than a Z-Move did, and though the power it exerted was great, Moon knew the cost would last even beyond the healing a Pokemon Center could give. She had three more battles to face today, she couldn’t freely spend the stamina of those with her.

But such thinking was far too light.

The pace of the battle continued to go faster and faster, Moon and her partner falling in and out of it, focusing at times and lasting in equal battle with the impressively strong and agile Poliwrath, at others pushed back and threatened by devastating Ice-infused attacks, as Moon had feared.

She understood what she had to do. The state she needed to find. But it wasn’t easy, even with the journey she’d taken this far. That level of focus, that level of intent, to activate and maintain it, the demand upon her was... Moon returned her focus, ignoring thoughts of difficulty. Difficulty didn’t matter here. She had to do it. That was all it was.

The battle continued on, the Poliwrath resilient and able to withstand immense punishment, Salamence powered by its own great strength and desire to win. The acceleration of the movements between them, this battle that was a dance, told Moon what was coming. A moment’s forewarning she understood. Quickly made the motion she knew was best. Placed a sky-blue crystal within her Z-Power Ring.

Opposed the orange-red Fightinium-Z Hala set within his own Z-Ring.

Z-Move met Z-Move. Into the waves of force, the countless arm thrusts of Poliwrath performing the Fighting-type Z-Move All-Out Pummelling, flew Salamence, wreathed in Z-Power itself, unleashing the Flying-type Z-Move Supersonic Skystrike.

This was the moment. The absolute instant Moon pushed herself to give her partner everything she could. To see the flow of the strikes, shaped by and shaping the song, and move within them. To use her own Z-Move to pierce through and strike the Poliwrath on the other side. As a test of maintaining the focus, and ability, to master battling with the song of Alola, there could be no better.

So when Salamence succeeded in bursting through, struck Poliwrath with its full force and sent the Tadpole Pokemon flying across the field, Hala in his heart pronounced the first of Moon’s Final Trials done.

Three more to go.

The healing capabilities of Pokemon Centers have only improved since their inception, today recovering Pokemon resting in Pokeballs from minor damages in moments, and even major harm in little time at all. For creatures that lived for combat with one another, such a thing enabled them to engage in more and more, and drove further the growth and evolution of Pokemon and Pokemon Trainers both.

However even with the incredible capabilities of Pokemon Centers, there are still things they cannot cure. As the Bisharp partner of Moon had proved, a piece of one’s body lost will not be restored. The curving head blade of the Pokemon, shattered by the Golisopod of Guzma, would not return. Such injuries were beyond even the miracle of modern medicine.
More insidious in its inability to be healed was the exhaustion great battles could bring.

In the wake of the battle with Kahuna Hala, first of Moon’s Final Trials, her Pokemon were restored at the Pokemon League Center. Their wounds healed, damage sustained undone, the Pokemon were returned to battling condition.

Yet just because Salamence was ready to battle again, it did not mean the body of the Dragon Pokemon was prepared to sustain another Z-Move as soon as healing was done. Recovery would be faster, yes, but it would still take time. And the mental toll, the intense focus of battle, was again an aspect that only time could disperse. Though Moon’s team could battle again as soon as the healing was done, each member would be so much less able than they had been before.

So the best thing to do was to accept the lengthy period of time given to the Final Trials, and rest. Wait patiently, while your Pokemon recovered further on their own.

Waiting with her Pokemon alone, part of the Final Trials being to stand on one’s own, Moon’s patience only lasted so long. If she’d had Hau to talk to, or even the others who’d be overseeing her Final Trials, she was sure she could wait longer. But Hau was in another part of the League building, respecting the traditions of the Final Trials that Moon must face them alone.

So when the first hour had passed and Moon’s need to continue peaked, she had no one to advise her calm before bounding to her feet. And when she sought out Kahuna Olivia, amongst those gathered to test Moon here this day, Moon received no suggestions that she might wait longer first. The Final Trials were not to treat any competitor as a child, or devalue their own will. One must make and accept their own decisions in this moment.

No-one would tell Moon what choices to make. Those were hers alone. Silently she followed Olivia along that same path through the League building, and out onto the stage upon which they’d do battle.

The second of her Final Trials.

Olivia’s presence was strong, and calm. Much like Hala, exerting the focus of a Kahuna serving one of their most sacred duties. It reminded Moon clearly of how much those two were Kahuna in her eyes, and how much respect she’d found for each of them. She wondered if she could ask, past this date, what Olivia felt towards Tapu Lele. Whether she knew about Holei, and what had happened with her.

So many questions.

But now was not the time for that, and Moon focused only on what she needed to do as she once more took position on the right side of the stage, standing opposite Olivia on the left. The same as Hala, Olivia had given Moon no instructions, and so the nature of this Final Trial too would be up to Moon to determine. But she’d find it. And use the greater awareness of the song of Alola Hala had helped her learn to do so.

Though the first of the Final Trials had been an intense thing indeed, from it Moon and her partners had gained a new strength.

Now to put it to the test.

From Kahuna Olivia and the blue Great Ball she held came a beam of red light, passing through the barrier once more raised around the battlefield of the Pokemon League stage, resolving into the shape of a small Pokemon floating in the air. A creature resembling a stone laced with crystals, blue eyes
staring out from a head ringed by white fur, the Jewel Pokemon Carbink Moon had encountered in caverns across Alola. They were a rarely combative Pokemon, and so Moon had rarely battled them. Wondered now just what this partner of Kahuna Olivia could do.

As Olivia was a Rock-type specialist, Moon knew her strongest partners for this fight would be Decidueye, Milotic, and Bisharp, with Volcarona in greatest danger from whichever foe it would face. Aside from this Carbink, Moon also knew Olivia to have both a Midnight Lycanroc – the foe she had faced in Kahuna Olivia's Grand Trial – and a Tyrantrum, a Fossil Pokemon that possessed the Dragon-typing. If anything could compete with that thing, it would be Salamence, though Sylveon held strong potential too. There were a lot of options to facing the team of Olivia, and knowing that allowed Moon a measure of calm. Once more she chose Decidueye to go first, and test the field. Determine what Kahuna Olivia would do, and what this Trial would be.

The determination Moon felt mirrored by her longest partner before her, Decidueye drew back an arrow quill aimed squarely at the floating Jewel Pokemon before it.

And let it fire as the battle began.

The arrow shattered moments later, dispersing into tiny fragments as soon as it neared the serenely floating Carbink. There hadn’t even been a motion of response, the Pokemon showing no changes at all. It had to have incredible defensive powers, Moon noted, to be able to react as such. But if that were the case, it would lack offence in turn. So the pace of the battle was hers alone to define.

Arrows to fire and overwhelm, Grass-aligned attacks to strike, leaves released to approach through the defenses of this Pokemon, Moon considered many options and her partner reacted in turn. Shot arrows and dove through released leaves, changing its positioning to strike from differing angles moment by moment. Sought a break in the guard of this Carbink foe, Moon’s focus taking into account the song. Ways to move with the flow of this battle that would aid the harmony between her and her partner further. Yes, she knew what to do.

They could win this fight.

And fully believing that, Moon’s confidence slipped moment by moment as every attack Decidueye unleashed was smoothly blocked or evaded by the slightest movements of the floating Carbink, and every rising note of the song in her heart broke against the wall of the Jewel Pokemon’s indifference.

Into the moment of questioning doubt how she’d face this foe it reacted, a clear command from Olivia given, and a beam of concentrated light bursting forth from the Pokemon to strike Decidueye cleanly in the moment it landed after its latest failed attack.

Experienced enough now to recover quickly from such a thing, Moon tightened her focus, Decidueye not harmed nearly enough by the blow to be anything but ready to continue the battle. But as soon as her focus and guard were up silence was the only answer the Carbink gave in return. It seemed to have no interest in pursuing that one attack, or maintaining the pressure upon Moon and Decidueye. Moon frowned. She didn’t understand this strategy, or Olivia’s intent, at all. But kept her guard up properly for Decidueye’s next attack.

The arrow quills Decidueye produced were the core of her attacks, whether carrying the ghostly binding chains or infused with Grass-type energy. Yet the defenses of this Carbink, the barriers it seemed to manifest with ease, and the slight movements it made while floating about, easily negated every action Moon and Decidueye tried. This Pokemon was acting as a wall, a sheer force against which Moon and Decidueye's attempts would break. It was frustrating, Moon acknowledged as she raised Decidueye’s Pokeball up, Olivia’s eyes focusing on the action, but there seemed little they could do to stop this Pokemon before them.
So calling Decidueye back Moon chose one she fully trusted to break through this foe. Manifested for battle at this peak of the world once more, Bisharp again experienced that thrill. The response from Moon was that this was only the beginning. They still had much further to go.

So to do that they’d have to overcome this foe before them. With those thoughts shared, the Sword Blade Pokemon focused forward.

Without ceremony Olivia made her own substitution.

**Probopass, Compass Pokemon, Rock and Steel-type.** A larger floating stone Pokemon, its blue main body highlighted by two large red stones, one upon its front resembling a great nose, the other upon its head guarding a pair of eyes. A bush of iron filings gathered beneath the front-facing red rock of the Pokemon completed the resemblance it bore to a statue’s head, appearing not unlike a particularly bushy moustache. Moon had seen this Pokemon rarely in her time, and never battled one directly herself. That Olivia so readily chose to switch her partner in response to Moon’s own, that had to mean something. What was this Trial meant to be? Moon considered that even as she directed Bisharp forward with caution to respond to their opponent’s attack.

Quickly three smaller blue stones flew forth from the Probopass, units under the control of its powerful magnetic pull. Rotom-dex, watching over the battle at Moon’s side, identified the magnetic field as distorting the functionality of Pokeballs, so that Moon wouldn’t be able to call Bisharp back as long as it was in effect. A block then. Moon frowned, before shaking her head. She trusted in Bisharp fully.

They’d dance to the song and bring this opponent down.

Bisharp moved faster than Decidueye, and with far more precision in close quarters. The swinging of its arm blades as it approached the Probopass of Olivia, easily the Sword Blade Pokemon beat back the smaller Mini-Nose units the Compass Pokemon commanded. Yet despite being able to react to them quickly, they did not slow their assault, keeping Bisharp locked in place. When a bright glow took shape before the Probopass’s main body, the powerful magnetic field around it producing an intense electrical blast, Moon was forced to direct her partner to pull back in order to dodge both that blast and the Mini-Noses harassing it. The distance lost the small units controlled by the Probopass punished by maintaining their assault, keeping Bisharp even further back. This entire battle, it was as though it were designed to stop Moon from taking even one step forward. To push her back constantly and leave her and her team at the edge.

Maybe that was the point of it. Moon set her focus forward and sought to push through.

It was a long fight. Slow, made of countless steps forward that were immediately pushed back. The Probopass of Olivia reacted rarely, the smaller floating stones it controlled constantly driving Bisharp back in its stead. Spending so little energy, the Compass Pokemon easily countered each time Bisharp drew too close with more powerful attacks, the entire conflict one extended and intense. Practising the focus of the song, Moon and Bisharp pushed forward still. Forward and back, a step gained and then lost. It was intense, and draining, requiring a consistent focus that went far beyond anything Hala had asked for. The length of the entire battle with him, from start to finish, had passed long before Bisharp scored even one direct hit against the Probopass of Olivia. And even that wasn’t enough to change anything of the attack it unleashed in return.

It was hard to tell how long the battle lasted until it was done, Moon’s unflinching focus upon it causing her to grasp her head as Bisharp, after so many long approaches, finally struck the Probopass hard enough for it to drop to the ground, the magnetic field in the air fading away. That had been rough, the length of this battle a strain Moon hadn’t felt before. Bisharp too was tired, drained by the long and focused assault. This sort of battle, it wasn’t the kind Moon had ever experienced before.
She shook her head. At least they’d won this fight.

Without a single word given Olivia brought another Pokemon to the field.

Once more sporting a full face-covering of iron filings, the Alolan Form of Golem, differed from its more rounded traditional form by the giant rock spines emerging from its back, announced itself as the magnetic field in the air intensified once more. A feeling as if of a long sigh came to Moon as Bisharp’s sole response to this foe. Then the Pokemon raised a bladed arm and strode forward again.

This time the battle ended in Kahuna Olivia’s favour. Still it was long, lasting until Bisharp’s exhaustion, combined with the attacks it had suffered, finally caused it to fall. The magnetic field faded, allowing Moon to call her partner back, and unleash Decidueye to continue the fight. Olivia, without a missed beat, substituted the Golem for another Pokemon, Armaldo, the Rock and Bug-type Plate Pokemon, a Fossil Pokemon much like the Tyrantrum she kept.

And this long battle continued for another cycle the same as it had before.

Without pity or pause Olivia maintained the fight by her own pace. Everything Moon had learned from Hala, about taking the pace of the song of Alola and accelerating it with her partner into a relentless force, proved useless here. Too strong was the wall of strength Olivia raised, her partners keeping a defensive approach that broke every attempt Moon’s Pokémon made to seize the reins of this battle in their own grip.

Moon made progress. Defeated the Armaldo of Olivia, and the Carbink when it returned as well, despite the Z-Move Olivia unleashed to Moon’s own great surprise, the technique used to reshape the battlefield into something even more difficult to move within. But even with those victories, most of Moon’s team were beaten as well, the length of this battle exhaustingly long. So when Olivia unleashed the partner Moon had been both awaiting and fearing the appearance of, the Despot Pokemon Tyrantrum, Rock and Dragon-type Fossil, Moon knew she had only one choice.

With just Salamence left, held in reserve for this moment, and the true form of this Trial still unknown – though the way Olivia approached this battle, so different to her Grand Trial, made Moon suspect that was the point – there really was only one thing Moon could do. Her only answer being to grasp the rainbow pendant that hung from her neck and will the power of Mega Evolution in her partner arise.

If Olivia went all out Moon was sure even her Mega Evolved Salamence could not stop the Tyrantrum against it, but this was all Moon could do now, and so she intended to give it her all. Thus in a great flash of red light the Mega Evolved form of Salamence roared its readiness for battle – a roar answered in turn by the wide open jaws of the Despot Pokemon before it – and the final round of Kahuna Olivia’s Final Trial for Moon began.

Immediately their clash sent waves across the battlefield, the great bulk of Tyrantrum allowing it to contest Salamence in strength, its massive jaws crunching down hard upon the armour wrapping Salamence as it bit back in turn, blue flames spilling from its mouth as similar energy burned across Tyrantrum’s body. Yet for as vicious as this clash was, when it broke apart Moon heard Olivia voice an order, a command for distance and control, and the heavy slam of the Tyrantrum’s foot upon the ground rose jagged rocks from the earth all around it to gain such.

Distance and control. Was that Olivia’s intent? She’d held that this entire battle so far, dragging it out for what felt like an age. Slowing down every fight, Moon’s focus during it so intense her head now felt like it was burning. Was that the test? To be pushed like this? Moon shook her head, the feeling not changing. She was tired, exhausted in truth, and just wanted this to be over. To rest. But...
She’d promised to win.

So despite everything pushing her down, the severe mental exhaustion weighing upon her shoulders, still Moon held her focus. Still she gave her commands, and still Salamence fought. Still the Dragon Pokemon opposed the Despot, each clash of their power shattering the rock-distorted arena around them.

Olivia smiled.

Back during Moon’s Grand Trial, that young child had asked about this Tyrantrum. At the time Olivia had told Moon clearly, even holding back, as Olivia was now to keep Tyrantrum’s pace defensive and draw this battle out, still that Pokemon would have crushed Moon's without mercy. Yet look now, at how she competes. Even after so long, being pushed so far, still Moon stood strong. Carried that intensity, focus, and ability to weather the intense stress and demands of the greatest of battles that those who bore the title of Island Challenge Champion would face. Moon would go on to face far greater battles than this in the life ahead of her, and so Olivia had demanded Moon show she could bear such to go on.

She was strong, her partner Pokemon incredible, but this was something else. Something different from the infinity Moon could give to those partnered to her. This was a testing of Moon’s mind, and that had always had its limit. Moon’s loss, her breakdown on Ula’ula Island after failing the fifth Trial, weighed heavily upon Olivia’s shoulders. As a Kahuna she should have seen it coming. Identified that Moon was running on pure determination for victory, at the expense of everything around her. The failure to see that, the almost casualness with which Olivia allowed Moon to pass her Grand Trial and continue on, never even considering the struggles she was bearing, it stung. It still stung.

But here was someone different. Someone changed. Though pushed down and exhausted by the battle thus far, still Moon’s eyes held that light. Still her focus held care and direction. Still she heard the song of Alola, and moved to keep its pace. She was giving everything she had to win, but it was not consuming her and those who trusted in her. It was everything an Island Challenge Champion should be, and to see that so clearly in someone so young... the only thing that amazed Olivia more was that it was the second time in as many days she’d seen such.

These kids, they really were something else entirely.

And as, mid-roar with Tyrantrum pushed down before it, the Salamence of Moon slipped from its Mega Evolved form, collapsing from exhaustion as Moon herself sat heavily down, Olivia nodded. That showing was exactly what she’d been looking for.

Exactly what it took to pass the Final Trial of Kahuna Olivia of Akala Island.

The sun was already well past midday by the time Moon awoke, blearily coming to consciousness upon a Pokemon Center lounge before jolting to her feet, panic coursing through her body as she called to Rotom-dex for the time. The afternoon; Moon had slept for hours as her Pokemon recovered, the incredible mental demand of Olivia’s Final Trial draining her to such a state. How much longer until the Final Trials were over? Still time, still time to do another, rest, and take the last, but not nearly as much as she’d feel comfortable with.

Calling her partners to her, rapidly consuming a meal for her own recovery as each with her ate as well, Moon soon sought out the third opponent she must face. With only two Trainers left to go,
Moon had to decide which to battle first. When it came down to it, she felt the danger Kahili posed must be far greater than Captain Acerola’s. So Kahili had to be next, with the strength Moon’s team still had – what they’d recovered in the rest they had taken. Approaching Kahili and Hapu, the pair dutifully awaiting Moon’s challenge, Moon called out.

Her third Final Trial.

She was ready.

“Moon,” as the three stood before the battlefield to which they’d soon take Hapu spoke up, Kahili standing behind her as the Kahuna outlined the Final Trial she had chosen for the Island Challenger Moon. “You’ve done incredibly well to come this far, and defeated many powerful opponents. But against both the Totem and myself, your victory was won by numbers. By using the actions of one teammate to the next to create weaknesses you could exploit to win. That’s not wrong, but to go further, that won’t be enough.”

Moon nodded, understanding. She was aware of that too. So many of her greatest victories were won by the numbers she kept. Individually, there was still so much further to go. Hapu smiled to see Moon’s quick acceptance.

“For this Final Trial, you and Kahili will engage in six battles. Each battle will be a single Pokemon against another, and when one is defeated, you will each return your Pokemon and choose another. To pass my Final Trial... win more battles than Kahili does. Four at least. Do you understand?”

She... did but... Moon stared at Kahili, whose expression was one focused. Moon had never actually seen Kahili going all out, or even battling at all now that Moon thought about it, but she knew in her heart that Kahili had to be incredibly strong. To win at least four times against her...

“These are your Final Trials.” Kahili spoke while Moon stared up at her, meeting Moon’s eyes with her own pale blue. “To assert yourself as an Island Challenge Champion, you must overcome incredible odds. Acknowledging the strength of your opponents is wise, but that does not give you the luxury to doubt yourself. I will not go easy on you, as Kahuna Hapu has requested.”

“You must be ready to face this, Moon,” Hapu agreed with Kahili’s words. “Courage against the odds is a core of every great Pokemon Trainer. And you have shown great courage so many times to this point. Now tell me, are you ready for the Final Trial of Kahuna Hapu?”

It... took a moment, for Moon to find herself and nod. But when she did her eyes were focused, and Kahili and Hapu both smiled. Good, that was the look they wanted to see. Turning to take their positions across the battlefield, Kahili in the Trainer’s space, Hapu behind her to watch over this fight, the two waited as Moon took her own position.

To pass the third of her Final Trials, Moon must match up against a Trainer she’d known to be incredible from the day she’d met her. Kahili Hano... the last dregs of the sleep Moon had taken fell away from her mind. She wanted to see just what the Flying-type expert of Alola could do.

“Begin!”

Hapu’s call drove both women to action, Kahili and Moon each choosing a Pokeball, beams of red revealing the first pair to battle. From Moon Sylveon, the Intertwining Pokemon stretching as it emerged for its third fight. In the battle with Hala it had been struck down quickly, and though the fight with Olivia had lasted long, Sylveon had been one of the best suited for that lengthy pace. It was one of the least tired of Moon’s team, and an ideal for Moon to lead with for this fight.
The nervousness Sylveon had carried as an Eevee, even when partnered to Moon, had faded in the presence Moon embraced it with. Her love and care, it was that very affection that had driven the evolution to this Fairy-type form, and from it Sylveon had found peace. A level of caution and guard would always travel with it, but it was a calmer and more observant sort than the jumpiness it had carried before. Moon, understanding this of her partner before her, knew few other of her Pokemon would be as able to tease out the battling style of Kahili Hano.

Kahili and the Toucannon she chose.

Toucannon, Cannon Pokemon, Normal and Flying-type. Evolution of Trumbeak, final form of Pikipek, the sizable bird Pokemon attacked strongest thanks to its giant beak, which could generate intense amounts of heat, whether to strike opponents with, or shoot projectiles using that great energy. Moon had ridden on the back of this Pokemon with Kahili a number of times, and each time felt as if their weight meant nothing to it. It must be strong.

Every Pokemon of Kahili’s must be strong.

Little, as Moon gave her first commands, directing Sylveon’s caution for whatever the Cannon Pokemon facing it might do, could have prepared Moon for just what Kahili’s choice would be. For the Toucannon to beat its wings and send out such a surge of forceful wind that Sylveon was pushed down, and in that space provided for Kahili to raise her right arm, Flyinium-Z in the Z-Ring set around her wrist glowing bright. Wait, Moon’s eyes widened, quickly moving to perform her own Z-Move in counter, this was way too sudden!

Kahili’s aggressive lead was too fast, and even as Moon performed the Z-Pose necessary to activate the Fairium-Z, the Flying-type Z-Move Supersonic Skystrike had already struck Sylveon down.

The first match in Kahili’s favour.

“You can’t expect your opponents to act the same!” In opposition to the Kahuna, Kahili proved quite willing to give her opinion, calling out to Moon across the field as each of them called their Pokemon back. “You weren’t prepared for me to strike at full force from the very beginning, and so I immediately took a win! You start too slow, Moon!”

Second from Kahili was a smaller Pokemon, the yellow feathered Pom-pom style Oricorio, the Electric and Flying-type Melemele variant of the Dancing Pokemon. Considering her partners, and the others Moon remembered Kahili had – a Baile Style Oricorio and a Mandibuzz – Moon made her next choice. Decidueye here, the Arrow Quill Pokemon’s Grass-type weak to Flying, but resistant to Electric. Six one versus one matches… five, Moon grimaced. She had to recover her pace, use what she’d learned from Hala, and maintain her focus the way the fight against Olivia had demanded. Keep control of the song, and her awareness and attentiveness at a level high enough to do so. Kahili had used her Z-Move. She didn’t have another, and Moon could still use them with most of her partners at least. Salamence, having used both a Z-Move and Mega Evolution already, was truly exhausted. The risk that it would lose its fight when it came...

Moon set her eyes forward on the battle before her. She’d win.

Two more Pokemon set to the clash.

The Flying-type techniques of the Pom-pom style Oricorio proved aggressive, Kahili seemingly unconcerned with the restriction Decidueye placed upon the use of electric attacks. Moon and her partner’s focus, reacting at speeds the finest of Trainers would find impressive, kept the battle even, but Kahili’s own intensity was of another kind. Compared to Moon’s loud calls, directions for her partner and constant speech – the most active Hapu had ever seen the girl in battle – Kahili was quiet
and calm. Spoke with purpose, and her Pokemon reacted with such. It was a clear battle displaying the difference between the two. With calm and focused intensity Kahili met the full passion of Moon and her longest held partner before her.

Hapu, who knew the Flying-type expert to be far stronger than she, found it all quite unnerving. Kahili, in the times she had served as Hapu’s proxy for the Final Trials, had time and time again shown this state. This nature of the legendary Alolan Trainer. At the very least, she was doing as Hapu knew was necessary, and only posing enough challenge to test, not destroy.

If Kahili truly wanted to win, there would be nothing Moon could do to stop this battle ending six against zero.

“She’s off-balance.” Kahili drew Hapu’s attention when she spoke up, not loud enough for Moon to hear, before directing her Oricorio to punish Decidueye’s obvious movement. The Arrow Quill Pokemon was too reliant on its evasive techniques, and its positioning had grown stale. Moon needed to handle that or Kahili would knock out this partner of hers too.

She wasn’t going easy.

“Do you think the choice to face you third was the wrong one?” Hapu’s question Kahili didn’t answer immediately. Focused for the moment on her partner as Moon reacted as she should, giving Decidueye new directions on movements to make. Replacing the tired routines Kahili had seen with new ones to keep her off balance in this fight. Moon was talented, and able, but still so young. Even for far weaker Trainers years older than Moon, the experiences they had gained mattered so much.

It almost felt like she shouldn’t pass this test.

“No,” Kahili answered finally after a time. “If she weren’t at least using what those two taught her I would have already won this fight and the next as well.”

Ah, the Ghostium-Z. The new movements Moon had chosen for Decidueye had enabled the space to perform that Z-Move to be opened. Kahili nodded as the Z-Move Never-Ending Nightmare engulfed her partner Oricorio. The first of them at least.

“I see,” Hapu replied with a subdued voice, as Kahili waited for Moon, the victor of this round, to choose her next partner. Salamence, the Dragon, a Pokemon that simply should not exist in that form at that age. Even with the time to rest and healing it had undergone after the last Final Trial, it still looked weary. Kahili chose Mandibuzz to face it.

A Pokemon that excelled at range, to avoid the threat Salamence could pose to those who got too close.

“What... do you think?”

“We’re being too kind.” Kahili answered starkly as Mandibuzz flew beyond Salamence’s attacks, responding with its own bursts of Dark and Flying-type energy that the Dragon Pokemon struggled to evade or negate. “The Final Trials are to acknowledge a Trainer as an Island Challenge Champion. Someone who has become a true part of Alola, and found great strength with the partners beside them. She’s still so young. She still has so much to learn.”

“So do I.”

“And if you were taking your Final Trials, Hapu, I would defeat you as well.”

Hard to say anything in response to that. Hapu stayed silent as Kahili called her Mandibuzz back,
choosing her second Oricorio, the Fire and Flying-type Baile style of Ula’ula Island, to replace the victorious Bone Vulture. Two wins for her and one for Moon. Moon had to win all three of her remaining battles to pass this Final Trial. The pressure upon her, now it was time to see what the true nature of Moon the Trainer was. Whether she’d crumple under it, too young and too immature to face the pressure of Pokemon battling at this level, or focus and overcome.

As Hapu had asked of her, Kahili had provided an appropriate test for an Island Challenger to face at the peak of Alola. The part of her hoping Moon would win Kahili kept silent. To show this young girl proper respect, Kahili’s full intent must remain upon this battle.

Anything less would be an insult for the youth that had struggled and fought to make it this far.

The Baile style Oricorio of Kahili had been Moon’s greatest concern, a threat to Bisharp and best countered by Milotic. So being able to respond to it, it was the best possible situation. Had Kahili known that, Moon wondered. Was making this choice, making Moon’s own easy, part of Kahili’s concession to give Moon a chance? Well she wasn’t going to doubt herself or question Kahili’s mercy. Choosing Milotic, the Tender Pokemon unfurled itself with an airy cry, sharing Moon’s will to continue despite the battles fought so far that day. Moon put her full focus forward.

No holding back.

“Oh!” Hapu’s surprise Kahili did not share, focused upon the battle as she was, but she could not deny agreeing with the happiness in Hapu’s voice at the sight. Moon’s intent had hardened, as this intense pressure was meant to do, and her and Milotic’s actions, their synchronisation in this fight, was perfect. That, that was the kind of Trainer who should pass the Final Trials of Alola and enter the Pokemon League. Acknowledging that for the first time, Kahili let herself smile as she called the beaten Baile Oricorio back. Two to two, very good. But Moon must still hold this state and defeat Kahili twice more before the expert Trainer would be content.

So as Moon chose Bisharp next, Kahili answered with a counter Moon had not known was coming. With the Wrestling Pokemon Hawlucha, a Fighting and Flying-type, the Pokemon one Kahili had partnered with during her time in Kalos. Kahili had been there when Moon had caught that Bisharp, and understood the Pokemon’s age and power. The advantage her Hawlucha held over it in type, the Bisharp held back by the severe difference in age between them.

But that didn’t mean Kahili was going to go easy.

Moon still had to prove herself this day.

Despite suspecting its strength thus far, this was the first time Kahili had truly seen the Bisharp partner of Moon in action. Hapu had experienced it, in their months of training during Moon’s seventh Trial, but Kahili never had. Oh it really was strong, that must be one of Alola’s most powerful wild Pokemon on its own. Partnered to Moon, drawing from her limitless reserve, that Sword Blade Pokemon was a truly impressive being indeed. Even with the immense speed and rapid attacks of Hawlucha, the Bisharp expertly evaded and countered the Wrestling Pokemon’s moves. A combination of the Bisharp’s own instincts and experiences mixed with Moon’s focus and the song of Alola the two shared.

Even if other Pokemon of Moon could display more power – the Salamence especially – that Bisharp Kahili found herself acknowledging as the most impressive of Moon’s team. The way it struck a stunning blow and Moon neatly moved into the motions necessary to unleash the power of the Steelium-Z, it had an elegant beauty the Flying-type expert could not fault. Kahili nodded as the full power of the Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Crash fell upon her Hawlucha and drove it into the ground. Not bad.
Not bad at all.

Three to two.

One more fight to go.

First to enter the battlefield was the Volcarona of Moon, Bug and Fire-type Sun Pokemon, evolution of Larvesta. In answer from Kahili was her sixth, Skarmory, Steel and Flying-type Armour Bird Pokemon. Immediately Moon remembered, she had seen that Pokemon before. Only once from Kahili, and so it had slipped her mind, compared to the Baile Oricorio, Mandibuzz, and Toucannon that had shown far more presence.

But this was as good a chance as could be! Volcarona had been at threat from every single one of Kahili’s Pokemon, but at least this one, this Steel-type Skarmory, would be at threat too. It didn’t make things perfect. It didn’t make this easy.

But it was a chance.

And with her full intent behind every thought she had, Moon commanded her partner in this battle too.

They would not lose.

It was surprising, Hapu considered, the relaxed way Kahili approached this final battle. On some level the Kahuna had expected Kahili to go all out, with full intensity, but Kahili was if anything at peace. Commanding cleanly and clearly, pushing back against every move Moon made but... at ease. Calm and... frankly, easy-going.

In the end, before the battle was over, she had to ask.

“Ms. Kahili-”

“She’s holding her own.” The reply of Kahili came quick, the woman knowing full well what the Kahuna who had asked for her aid was thinking. “Not being thrown out no matter what I do, just focusing on doing what she can and doing it well. The difference between how this battle started and ended, it’s huge, isn’t it?”

Hapu considered. It was true, Moon had shown great intimidation from Kahili at first, but now... now she wasn’t acting with anything but intent. A pure focus, sharpened by pressure and challenge from Alola’s best. The Final Trials of Hala, Olivia, and now herself through Kahili, they’d taught Moon to battle at a level far beyond what she’d been able to do even the day before. As the Final Trials should. Those who passed them were named Island Challenge Champions.

And even without a League before this point, those Alola considered Champions were still expected to carry great strength.

“Then you are content?”

“...” in silence Kahili watched as her Pokemon and Moon’s danced in the sky, flaming scales swirling around them as Volcarona evaded and punished Skarmory’s own strikes. The result was clear if Kahili changed nothing. If she focused, pushed forward all the strength she could give, and commanded at her best, she could still end this in her favour.

Victory was within her grasp.
“...I am.” An explosion of fire, Volcarona unleashing its own full flame, hung in the air as the Sun Pokemon’s title was exerted, from the ball of burning fire Kahili’s partner Skarmory falling to the ground. “She’s passed.”

Despite the need for the Kahuna to show propriety and dignity in the Final Trials they oversaw, Hapu couldn’t help her wide smile hearing that. Something mirrored on Moon’s face, mixed deeply with relief, as she called her partner back. Four wins to two. A victory in her favour.

The passing of the third of her Final Trials.

Moon sat heavily and exhaled long indeed.

She needed another rest.

The Final Trials had begun during the mid-morning. The length of time, between their beginning and when the last Kahuna must be challenged, was twelve hours. So it was dark now, stars studding the night sky, as Moon rose to her feet and sought Captain Acerola out. Moon had let things run almost the full twelve hours through, to rest as best she and her team might after the three Final Trials so far. Now it was time for the fourth. The last.

The Final Trial of Captain Acerola, to be held beneath a star-studded sky, within the transparent-roofed but warmly kept Pokemon League dome. This battlefield at the peak of Aolala warm despite the winter night outside. Lights lit the stands and stage, Moon and Acerola emerging onto the field.

The final Final Trial.

Moon’s heart was pounding.

“Alright!” With a smile Acerola turned to Moon, waving for her attention, before holding out a cloth. “Here you go, Moon!”

Taking the cloth, Moon unfurled it. It wasn’t too large, like a bandanna, purple in colour with black and yellow eye patterns across it. It was a rather unnerving design. What was it for? Moon looked up at the Captain. Acerola grinned wide. “It’s for you, silly! It’s a blindfold!”

...come again?

“You made it all this way, so it’s time for your last Final Trial!” Acerola made her announcement without any concern at all for Moon’s reaction. “Now we’re going to test how strong the Bonds between you and your Pokemon really are! The connections between us, sharing our thoughts and feelings, for the best of Trainers they’re way more important than any other of their senses! So we’re gonna see just how strong those connections for you really are! You’re gonna have to battle with your whole team against mine, a full six against six, and do the entire thing relying on your Bonds, not your eyes! Don’t worry though, I won’t go all out to keep it fair. I won’t go easy either though! You’re gonna have to work!”

...Acerola had six Pokemon? Moon hadn’t known that, and knew for a fact that having that many at Acerola’s age was not an entirely normal thing. Not that she was anything approaching normal herself but...

“Yep yep!” Acerola smiled wide, raising a hand and holding up one of her classic victorious ‘V’s. “So come on, Moon, you challenged me but time’s still a-wastin! Just cause you passed three of your
Final Trials doesn’t mean this one’s a sure thing! You can still lose if you don’t take this seriously, so get over there, get that blindfold on, and let’s go go go! No holding back! Right?"

...no holding back. Moon nodded and moved across the field. Took the right side of the stage again, Acerola standing across from her. Slowly, as the Captain cheered out encouragement, Moon raised and placed the cloth bandanna against her face. Tied it at the back, the fabric dense enough to easily block out the light. She couldn’t see a thing.

...

And so her fourth and final Final Trial began.

The sound of a Pokeball activating and a faint noise, like dry leaves rattling against glass, was all Moon had to go on as she stood there. She didn’t even know which Pokemon of Acerola’s that was. Rotom-dex wasn’t active here, silent so as not to ruin the point of this Final Trial. So it was just Moon and her instincts alone. Her mind whirred.

In the first of the Final Trials Salamence had used a Z-Move. Pushing itself at the end of the second, it had unleashed Mega Evolution. It was a significant feat, one only made possible by a combination of the intense training Moon and her partner had undergone in the months since its evolution, and each’s own determination. Attempts at controlling the combination of Z-Move and Mega Evolution had... likely been part of what allowed this close usage of the acts. But using them together was still too much for now.

Still so much further to go.

But having used those two abilities, even with the time spent over the rest of the day in recovery, still Moon knew that Pokemon would not be able to do so again. There was a drain on Salamence that only a full and long rest would recover. She couldn’t demand it give any more than it already had.

In the battle with Kahili, both Decidueye and Bisharp had used Z-Moves. It had been a little while since that time, and recovery through the League Pokemon Center had taken place, but even still Moon knew the consequence of asking for another was defeat. The drain from that, Decidueye and Bisharp both could likely perform another move, but the cost would be that they could do little more after. True exhaustion lurked over the pair as well.

Sylveon, Volcarona, and Milotic were still the most able. Not one had performed a Z-Move over the course of this day and, even if they had won and lost battles, engaging in long conflicts with those Moon faced before, Moon knew those three were still ready.

Three Z-Moves her partners could likely continue battling after. Two there was no way. One who only had the barest strength left to give. Against six Pokemon of Captain Acerola. While blindfolded. Moon frowned. This was a brutal challenge.

Such the Final Trials of the Island Challenge demanded.

“Moon, you gotta pick a Pokemon you know!” The relaxed sing-song voice of Acerola moved Moon to raise a Pokeball, nominating Sylveon to begin. As the oldest of her partners still at full strength, Moon would be relying on them to help her find her feet in this battle without sight. Relying on the strength of the Bond they shared.

Sylveon was looking up.

If its head was raised its opponent was flying. Moon didn’t know any of Acerola’s’s Pokemon, and had only picked up on the Captain’s speciality – Ghost-type – in passing conversation with others.
Though she’d spent some time with Acerola over the past few months, it wasn’t nearly as much as Hau had, as he’d been training with her while Moon was with Captain Mina. If this were Mina Moon was battling blind, she’d be far more confident going forward. Acerola was a mystery. And solving a mystery while blindfolded wasn’t exactly an easy ask.

Caution, tension, reaction. Senses that mixed with the sound Moon heard, of a howling gust of wind, something striking down from the air to where her Sylveon stood. The Intertwining Pokemon had dodged, and by Moon’s will fired back a beam powerful of energy. That desire to counter-attack, it had been instinctual, a shared feeling between the two. Moon nodded. Alright, she understood that. If that was how it was she...

They’d find the way.

Acerola watched with a relaxed smile as her Drifblim continued to rain attacks down on the battlefield below, Moon’s partner Sylveon dodging around them while launching back its own in return. Both Pokemon had an assortment of ranged abilities, making this first battle one of exchange. But Moon was finding her feet well and fine. The movements were mostly Sylveon’s right now, but it was clear Moon was allowing her partner to lead, providing support to it with her own focus. Ceding control of the dance to her partner and simply following along.

It wasn’t bad, as far as starts went, but it wasn’t what Acerola was looking for either. This wasn’t about Moon simply being support for her partner’s actions, Moon had to be part of this too. It took way more passion and intensity to really make a Pokemon battle shine. Moon was too cautious, too slow, and too reactionary.

She needed to be pushed even further along.

“Oh Moon! I’m speeding up!”

Moon tensed as the howl of the wind in the air intensified, the storm controlled by Sylveon’s opponent rapidly increasing in strength. Still applying caution, Moon directed Sylveon to form protective barriers, so it might gauge what its opponent was doing. But the response she got, the immediate need to move, was overpowering. Sylveon ignored Moon’s command and dodged, but did so slower for Moon’s own attempt to command opposite.

Pokemon and Trainer out of sync.

Well that’s no good at all! Acerola frowned as her Drifblim, wrapped in the Tailwind it had summoned, jetted about the field, far too fast now for Sylveon’s reactions to catch. Without Moon’s support and focus, her Pokemon would never be able to keep up with Acerola’s own. Moon and her partner needed to find true synchronisation even without sight. A sense shared at a deeper level. The mark of a true master Trainer.

Asking that of a girl just twelve years old was a lot. The demands of the Final Trials, even Acerola had faced them freakishly early for her age. Moon and Hau... were both absolute exceptions in the truest of senses. Different, but keeping such equal pace. Hau’s determination, his unflinching focus that had let him and his partners work together, Acerola knew from her time training him that it came from his desire to match up to Moon. Having her as a goal and rival.

Did Moon not see Hau the same way? Was his victory not the absolute drive for her that it should be? Or maybe she just saw things entirely different all the same. After what had happened with her fifth Trial, and the training she’d received since, maybe a part of Moon was still cautious about the absolute and unrelenting drive to win. Still struggled to separate and control those desires, which could give such great strength to her partners, but posed such danger without proper care.
The sort of thing you really, truly, only could learn with age. Moon was so young. Not that Acerola had been that much older when she'd passed her Final Trials but even still...

Should she prompt her? Try and stoke in Moon that fire to win? That wasn’t really what the Kahuna were meant to do though, they barely even spoke in the Final Trials. But Acerola wasn’t a Kahuna, so she could do what she felt was right, right? Argh but should she? She didn’t know! Frustrated by her own musings, Acerola’s own focus drifted a little.

The battlefield before her eyes became obscured in pink mist.

Oho! Was that Sylveon’s perfect timing, creating the misty terrain as soon as it caught Acerola’s focus wavering? That sort of reaction, that was the kind of thing that had to have a Trainer behind it though. A perfect combination of a Pokemon sensing a moment, and a Trainer answering back in that same instant through their shared Bond. Moon was standing there on the other side of the field, showing little motion. What was she thinking? What was she feeling? Who knew. Acerola focused on her partner properly again.

That mist might be useful against some opponents, but for her Drifblim, who exhaled a wave of black wind, it wasn’t anything at all. As soon as the gust of wind hit the ground the mist was blown back, swirling up from the battlefield in a single great cloud.

Not one Pokemon on the ground below.

Wait! Acerola’s eyes bulged for a moment, before she fixated on the cloud rising up. Had Sylveon jumped with the rising cloud? Had Moon swapped the Pokemon for another – one of the fliers – inside of it? So many thoughts racing through Acerola’s head in the time it took the pink cloud of mist to rise. Her Drifblim, sensing Acerola’s concern, blasted a full surge of wind into the mist, breaking it apart.

Revealing nothing within.

Light glinted on the battlefield below, the shape of Sylveon resolving from twisted air as Moon, across the field while Acerola’s eyes had been held high, completed the Fairy-type Z-Pose. Manipulating light to hide... in the time it took Acerola to think that, the technique one a number of Pokemon could use with enough time to shape the light and air around them, Sylveon had launched upwards in a single mighty leap. The Tailwind behind Drifblim had been blown out into the full storm of wind it unleashed into the mist. That much power exerted, it had momentarily weakened the Blimp Pokemon.

No moment, no instant, more perfect than this for a Z-Move to strike against it.

The Fairy-type Z-Move Twinkle Tackle, unleashed by the Sylveon partner of Moon, struck into Acerola’s partner and erupted in a surge of power, sending the Blimp Pokemon sky-rocketing all the way into the transparent dome high overhead. Such a thing wasn’t damaged in the least, designed to take incidental punishment from the most powerful of Pokemon, but that didn’t matter here. This first round was over, Acerola could sense that as clearly as see it.

What a ploy Moon and her partner had managed.

“Nice, Moon! How’re you feeling?”

The question made Moon pause, surprised by how engaged Acerola was in speaking compared to the three before. Moon... still felt uneasy. That had been a plan that only worked because her partner had enacted it so well. Acerola laughed.
“Don’t sell yourself short, that sort of move isn’t anything a Pokemon could do on its own, or even by taking the lead! A Z-Move involves working together equally doesn’t it? Even if just for a moment, you two were perfect even without you being able to see! Just do that five more times, okay? Just five more to go, Moon! Get ready! Here I come!”

Moon didn’t know what the next Pokemon of Acerola’s was. Sylveon was focusing forward, so it was something on the ground, and likely another Ghost-type. Anything beyond that... Moon slowed her thinking, focusing only on the connection she and her partner shared. It didn’t matter what it was. All they had to do was everything they could. This time... Moon and Sylveon would attack first!

The Intertwining Pokemon raced forward and Acerola nodded appreciation as she gave her own command and her partner, the Marionette Pokemon Banette, disappeared into the pool of its own shadow beneath it.

Sylveon’s sense was that the opponent had disappeared. Moon kept her focus. Ghost Pokemon could do that, and Sylveon had made its own vanishing act just moments ago. The battle with Holei, against the Totem Mimikyu, it had moved through the darkness too. So watch below! That sense, that awareness of Moon’s thoughts, it proved enough for Sylveon to dart backwards as the shadows beneath it suddenly exploded into grasping hands, Banette emerging before forming and throwing a ball of shadow energy forward. Sylveon, seeing the attack coming, blasted back with its own, but the drain of the Z-Move it had just performed meant this follow-up attack, without Moon’s full intent behind it, only reduced the incoming blow. The ball still struck and Moon felt her partner shudder from the hit.

To stop the Mimikyu Moon had used Decidueye’s binding arrows... Sylveon didn’t have the same techniques. And it had used a Z-Move. At this point... the choice was simple for her, and raising a Pokeball Moon called her partner back. Making switches was an important part of battle, and Acerola smiled to see Moon keeping her head enough to make those decisions even without sight. From another Pokeball emerged Decidueye. Fantastic. The Captain of Tapu Village kept her grin and her commands. Let’s see what Moon did next.

Quickly Decidueye moved, dodging around Banette each time the Pokemon burst from the shadows, firing its own ghostly arrows in return, each piercing and sticking into the ground, emitting the waving binding chains. Acerola knew the technique, Spirit Shackle, and what Moon was trying to do. It was a fair counter, and leading Banette into a patch of the arrows would definitely tie it up. That wasn’t going to happen though, not with Acerola on guard. Moon would definitely need to push this further if she wanted to get anywhere here.

Moon knew it wasn’t working. The sense of her Decidueye, it told her that each time Acerola’s Pokemon – whichever it was – attacked it was avoiding the arrows. And their power didn’t last for so long Decidueye could cover the arena in such. Something smarter, something more, Moon’s search for an answer in the darkness of the cloth covering her eyes focused on a different technique they’d used against an opponent beneath the earth. The Z-Move Bloom Doom had allowed Moon and Decidueye to control the surfacing of Kahuna Nanu’s Krookodile when the Pokemon had been digging through the earth. But a Z-Move would truly exhaust Decidueye, who had used one today already.

But maybe there was compromise to be had.

The timing had to be exact. Perfect. In the moment the Pokemon of Acerola burst from the earth and attacked, rather than dodging beforehand, Decidueye had to dodge in that exact instant. Use the technique with the leaves, and strike. And it was clean, the way Decidueye released the wave of leaves, Banette slashing through them, the Arrow Quill Pokemon responding with a second, sharper,
wave after. A number of the leaves stuck into Banette, but that follow-up attack from Decidueye allowed one from the Marionette Pokemon as well, who struck a powerful ghostly blow into Decidueye’s chest.

Decidueye stumbled back, pained, as Banette disappeared into the earth once more. But Moon felt the acknowledgement, the sight her partner had seen. The leaves had stuck into that Pokemon's body, unleashed by the power of Decidueye’s own. They’d react.

Once more perfect timing, as Moon set the Grassium-Z into her Z-Power Ring. Acerola saw the motion, Moon unclipping the Z-Crystal from one of the holders on the ring’s side and swapping it with the Fairium-Z. Moon knew precisely where in the slots around her Z-Power Ring each Z-Crystal was. Or could tell them apart by the sense they gave. Either way, Acerola liked that. Okay, if Moon wanted to try another Z-Move, Acerola would be into that! She’d bait it out, use Banette’s shadow traversal to dodge, then strike a finishing blow! As the Marionette Pokemon popped out of the shadows, Decidueye glowed with Z-Power. The partner Pokemon of Acerola moved back into the darkness.

A bolt of Z-Power snagged hold of one of the leaves buried into its form.

The Z-Power unleashed through the Grassium-Z was a wave of pure growth energy, overwhelming force that seared opponents, but also drove plantlife to rapidly grow. It could appear from nothing, grass and flowers all around, but that which was already alive gained power too. Grew further too.

Acerola’s eyes widened as a massive series of vines grew out of the leaves that had struck her partner, binding it tight before the wave of the Z-Move Bloom Doom raced across its form. What? What what what? That sort of move, she’d never even heard of something like that before! Was that what it meant for Moon to perform Z-Moves without limit? That she’d learned things about how to use them that no-one else had ever known?

Hold up, both the Z-Moves that had struck Acerola’s partners, those had been from Moon and her partners totally outplaying her! This was a fight! A real one! Hold on! Forget the Final Trials, this wasn’t fair! If Moon could go this wild even after all the battles she’d had already, what would it mean if she and Acerola went all out fresh? Why didn’t Acerola get to have that fun? No way no way no way! Now she was upset! It felt like she was being robbed here!

Decidueye sunk to a knee and, unable to rise and deal the finishing blow to the stunned Banette slowly coming to, that Pokemon clawing its way out of the plant-growth that had overtaken it, stared grimly. Feeling that grim acceptance, Moon called out for Acerola to wait, that Moon would bring Decidueye back as beaten. Acerola nodded, then realised Moon couldn’t see that. Moon used Decidueye’s Pokeball to return her. One of Moon’s team beaten, and Sylveon way down on strength. Pretty much the same for Acerola though.

She was really upset she had to hold back and not go all out now. Of course if she did, with Moon’s team tired from the battles so far, this Final Trial would be over in a cruel and merciless way but... Acerola wanted to fight! Really fight Moon! She got now why Ilima had so often lamented never having the chance. Not that any time before now Moon would have been able to even come close like this but... there was this presence about her in this moment. Like fighting her would let Acerola enjoy the sort of Pokemon Battles you heard about in the big stories.

Seriously, this wasn’t fair!

Bisharp. Moon closed her eyes, even with the bandanna covering them, and focused on her next partner. She knew what they needed to do. Even having used a Z-Move, Moon knew Bisharp was strong. The first day they’d met, and formed a Bond together, the Sword Blade Pokemon had used a
Z-Moves in both battles against Guzma – once at Po Town and the other at the Aether Paradise. It was old, and strong, and Moon felt its resilience and determination. Trusted in it.

Sought to see as it did.

Somewhat limply, struggling with this fight being test more than battle, Acerola commanded Banette to attack the same as before. Easily, as the Marionette Pokemon burst from the shadows, Bisharp took one step to the side, swung an arm to knock Banette’s claws away, then swung the other with a powerful Dark-infused slash. It was a clean blow, beautiful as well. One direct hit with perfect precision ending this fight. Acerola called back Banette and huffed. She didn’t really know that much about Moon’s team, not that really. Had heard various things, but hearing and seeing were completely different deals. That Bisharp, it really did look crazy strong. Maybe if Acerola went all out against it, at least, she’d get to have some fun. Raising a Great Ball, she chose her Palossand to go next. Of her remaining four Pokemon, it was best equipped to fight that Steel and Dark-type Pokemon of Moon’s.

Moon, without any idea of what foe she faced next, focused on the feelings her partner gave. A measure of acknowledgement, wise caution, and focus. Something backed by the sort of maturity that could only come with age and experience. Moon relied on that feeling to temper her own as well.

They’d make it through.

The rumbling, sweeping sounds of waves of sand washing across the battlefield before her told Moon what she faced. Something Ground-type, she knew, attempting to figure out what it was before realising that thinking on that was wasting time and focus. With clean steps and cuts Bisharp navigated the waves of sand surrounding it, walking through the storm, but the opponent it faced was beyond it for this time. Bisharp couldn’t see it in the sand, and neither could the blindfolded Moon. They couldn’t play this defensively though, they needed to strike! Moon searched for an answer as Bisharp held its own.

Of the Z-Moves Bisharp could unleash, the Dark-type Black Hole Eclipse was the obvious answer. It would easily suck in this mass of sand, and expose the Pokemon of Acerola’s even if it wasn’t caught by the attack itself. And Bisharp, even more than Decidueye, could weather the effects of a second Z-Move. But even still it had received great damage over the course of this day. This wasn’t something Moon could risk. She couldn’t solve every problem she faced with a Z-Move. A lot of them yes, but not every single one.

A switch? If this foe was part Ground-type, Milotic would be ideal. Or Volcarona, who could take to the skies and bake the sand below it with flame. Bisharp may have only been here for a moment, but it had struck a keen finishing blow on one of Acerola’s Pokemon. Why keep it in a disadvantageous situation?

Pride, mostly, Moon felt. The Bisharp, old and venerable, wasn’t the type to back down from a fight easily. She’d have to convince it to, and through their Bond could sense its desire to fight on.

But...

Moon sent a command. The strongest direction she’d ever given this Pokemon partnered to her. Something opposing its pride. To win, in this desperate situation, they had to turn everything to their advantage they could. So come back and wait for your next moment instead. A brief response of complaint. Of desire to continue. Moon almost faltered on it.

Then snapped her intent. The Bisharp had chosen to trust in her as a Trainer and this was her
decision. So return! The sense of surprise from the Sword Blade Pokemon mingled with respect. Moon showing that sort of determination and intent, it seemed to have moved the Pokemon’s heart.

With gallant ease it swung its blade, cut through the raging sands around it, and stepped back to stand before its partner Moon. Made a small noise – one of the rare few it did – for her attention. Moon nodded and raised the Pokemon’s Pokeball. Another switch.

Okay, Acerola frowned, this was getting ridiculous! She’d known that Bisharp was strong, but having it waltz through the sands of her Palossand, dodging the attacks mixed into it with total ease, really rankled her pride! Alright, no more Miss Nice Captain! Whatever Pokemon was coming next, Acerola was gonna go fully mean and get Moon’s energy kicked up to an even higher level! She wanted Moon to be going all out with ferocity! That focus and calm right now was all well and good, and a great sign, but the level beyond that, fighting for everything you could get, that was what Acerola really wanted to see.

And if she had to get mean to push Moon to that state, she totally would!

As always Milotic emerged from the Net Ball Moon carried with a surge of water surrounding it, diving amongst the raging sands which quickly muddied and compacted. Without seeing the Pokemon before her, Moon had no idea that water was an ideal environment for it, the Sand Castle Pokemon Palossand growing denser and harder when wet. It would be difficult for that Milotic to hurt it, and Acerola made sure to direct her Pokemon to channel the water mixing with the sand around.

It was a good fight, the Captain acknowledged, watching the towering mixture of water and sand tug back and forth between the two, Milotic diving through the wet mass searching out the Palossand within it, while the Sand Castle Pokemon struck back with its own attacks. Moon’s approach changed Pokemon to Pokemon, relying on the Bond between them causing her partner’s nature to feed back to her. With Milotic she took a wilder aggression, her and her partner both seeking to overpower their foe. Acerola didn’t dislike that, and really, were this totally fresh, she’d be so into this right now.

But there was still the acknowledgement this wasn’t the fight Acerola wished it could be. She could push Moon further, make her go higher, but in the end to be fair Acerola couldn’t give it her all. In the end, the most fun she could have here was driving Moon to show everything she could.

To go that far at least... the Captain of Tapu Village set a Ghostium-Z into her Z-Ring and raised her own arms, might as well make a show of it.

Even with her eyes covered Moon knew. The Ghost-type Z-Move Never-Ending Nightmare, one she had used with Decidueye just earlier that day, the Captain of Tapu Village was unleashing it. There wasn’t time to try and set the Waterium-Z and strike back here, there wasn’t a counter Moon could unleash. So she focused on what she could do otherwise instead, and had Milotic release an even greater wave of water as the attack fell upon it. Beaten it may be, but the sands of this Pokemon had slowed greatly. It wouldn’t be able to direct them at the same speed as before, and was now clumped tight.

To Acerola’s surprise Moon returned Bisharp immediately after calling Milotic back. A different Pokemon she’d expected but... all too soon it became obvious why Moon had made her choice. A Z-Move had its after-effects, even for those strong, and Palossand was not only slower, but the sands it kept were weighed down by water too. Bisharp strode through the sludgy earth the Sand Castle Pokemon was controlling with that same absolute calm. Step by step, its blades cutting apart the sandy masses that did rise up against it. Palossand, also thickened by the water that had surged across the field, couldn’t so easily disperse within it this time. Though it was far harder, more resilient than
ever against damage, it also couldn’t hide. And severely lacked the speed to escape the Bisharp’s focused steps.

Moon’s trust in this strong partner, and focus upon it, allowed it to remain calm as it stood before the Sand Castle Pokemon it had been forced to flee a moment before. The same as the Banette then. One raised arm.

A quick spin and cut through of the mass of sand rising behind its back.

Then a continuation of the spin to cut through and unleash a wave of dark energy upon its foe. Acerola, struggling not to be impressed by just how crazy that Pokemon was, called her Palossand back. Okay, she had three left, she really needed to step it up here! So choosing her next Pokemon, emerging in a sudden wave of ice, Acerola set her focus forward. She and Froslass, the white-bodied spirit of haunted ice, Ice and Ghost-type Snow Land Pokemon, would make up the difference. If nothing else, that Bisharp was going down!

Just like Hau always said in the times they’d trained together.

No holding back.

Whatever Acerola’s fourth Pokemon was, Moon knew it was a dangerous foe. The air was far colder, but Bisharp within the storm sent a feeling of heat. A ghostly attack had touched it and set a burn upon the Pokemon, the opponent impossible to track through the ice that surrounded it. Bisharp was in the same situation as before, harassed by attacks beyond its reach, and being weakened by them. Moon called it to return again, but unlike the sands it had cut through before, it failed to navigate the ice. It was struggling to see, being redirected by the storm. Moon felt confusion, sapping energy, and the burn upon her partner, all weakening it within the surrounding ice. That Pokemon of Acerola’s, it was frighteningly effective, and Bisharp proved unable to do anything as – making use of the Pokemon’s tiredness from the fights so far, as well as this battle with Acerola included – the Froslass laid low the Sword Blade Pokemon of Moon.

In response to ice Moon chose fire. Volcarona, Sun Pokemon, fluttered into the sky, burning scales already falling from its body, combusting amongst the storm of ice. This was the fourth of Acerola’s six Pokemon, and the Captain had already used her Z-Move. Moon had Volcarona still at full strength, Salamence at most, and Sylveon quite low. Not a great match-up, and if this Ice-type Pokemon of Acerola’s persisted, it would be incredibly dangerous to Salamence after. So Moon would stop this here. Sent her partner power and focus as it continued to blaze, air around it igniting into a storm of fire to hold out against the ice. The Pokemon of Acerola’s had struck best using a blizzard as cover, but Volcarona would not be so easy to reach. The Pokemon one best for wide-reaching attacks, it followed Moon’s directive and unleashed a wave of flame racing outwards, pushing the ice back even further still. There was no sense of acknowledgement of Acerola’s Pokemon, no sighting of it, hidden the same way her previous had been. But Moon kept her focus and intent, and directed her partner to cross the field, spreading fire as it went.

If it had to set the entire battlefield aflame to flush out the partner of Acerola, so be it.

Compared to Moon, Acerola hadn’t called back a partner once. Not that she’d specifically spotted the right opportunity but... this was part of her handicap to be fair to Moon. To provide a test, not a battle for victory. She’d definitely call back Froslass in this situation in a real fight, the Pokemon essentially directly countered by the power of the Sun Pokemon that opposed it. Volcarona was an incredibly powerful Pokemon, famously so, and even with the differences in experience between Froslass and it, still the advantage was in Moon’s partner’s... hands? It didn’t really have hands or claws. Just some cute little feet sticking out of its white mane of fur. Acerola shook her head as the raging firestorm finally successfully cornered and engulfed her partner Froslass.
Okay, number five then, Sableye. The Dark and Ghost-type Darkness Pokemon, a small purple creature studded by jewels – most notably the red jewel in its chest and large blue jewels representing its eyes – was similar to Banette an expert in attacking through shadows. That ability allowed it to move through the flames Volcarona had spread across the field safely, and unleash its attacks at a distance from it. Most notably was a beam from the gem in its chest, which in just one hit made Moon’s eyes widen at the intense blow her partner had just suffered. No, not when she was this close. Moon immediately made substitution. Volcarona for Salamence, a Pokemon that could easily wade through the flames spread across the field. Not with victory within their reach.

This was a test of Moon’s Bonds. That thought, that remembrance, immediately came to Acerola in the wake of the next attack. As her partner Sableye emerged from a shadow across the field, hidden by the flames, and formed another of the Rock-infused beams. This one would hurt too. A moment’s confidence in that, as the beam emerged, was enough for Acerola and Sableye both to be surprised by what came next.

For Salamence, hit by the beam, to take from Moon courage and strength of will, and power through the flames, huge wings launching it across the field, to close in upon Sableye in an instant. Into the shadows the Darkness Pokemon ducked, but a counter to that move, an ability that tore through it, Dark-infused jaws clamped down upon the singular shadow – all others dispersed by the raging flames making Sableye an obvious target – and pulled the Pokemon up into the air, grasped in the Salamence’s jaws.

For as many desperate attacks as Sableye made to break free, it couldn’t escape this powerful hold biting down upon it. Even when Salamence collapsed, exhausted by its battles so far, still its jaws held tight. Struggling didn’t help Sableye escape as the Dark-aligned attack drained the last of its strength. Acerola called that Pokemon back in the same moment Moon did her own.

That was good enough, really. The speed at which that Salamence had caught and taken down her Sableye, something only possible by sharing full awareness and power with Moon, was proof. Moon really had forged Bonds of a degree no twelve year old should possibly carry. She really was incredible in so many more ways than just the most obvious.

Her too.

Acerola’s last Pokemon was a Dhelmise, a Pokemon born from wrecks at sea, shaped like a ship’s wheel bound to an anchor, thick seaweed wrapped around it. Moon chose Volcarona once more, that Pokemon more able to fight still than Sylveon despite the powerful Rock-type attack it had taken. The stadium lit ablaze again in moments, the firestorm Volcarona exuded spreading without pause. Against a part Grass-type Pokemon, this final round was obvious. But Acerola wanted to see it out all the same.

With luck she’d find herself facing Moon in the League as well, but at least to wrap this up, let her have her fun.

Let them go all out for the last moments of Moon’s Final Trial.

One final Z-Move, one well earned by hard effort, brought the battle to a close. As Moon stood there, breathing heavily, stress from the intensity of this fight mixing with everything that had happened that day, the first realisation came to her. That was six.

If that was six that meant she’d beaten Acerola.
If she’d beaten Acerola that meant she’d finished that Final Trial.

And that was her fourth Final Trial.

Which meant.

Which meant.

She’d...

“You did it, Moon!”

The loud voice of Hau crossed the field first of everyone, the young boy racing out from the entrance to the League battlefield as the others – Hala, Olivia, Hapu, and Kahili – followed behind, the Kahuna guarding the entrance and waiting to see Moon's Final Trial complete. Standing there stunned, Moon barely reacted as Hau once more wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up, the blindfold still covering her eyes. She’d... done it?

When Hau set Moon done he moved to undoing the bandanna over her eyes, Moon shutting them tight at the sudden light she was exposed to. Other voices, Acerola, the Kahuna, and Kahili, joined them as well. Notes of congratulation. Appreciation. Her victory.

Moon sat down heavily, thoughts unable to flow. This day, this long day, her struggle within it was over and for the first time, the first time since this challenge began, Moon was able to not think. To just... be.

Hau sat down next to her as the others gathered agreed to let Moon have her moment to rest. There’d be time for congratulations later.

Time for celebration later.

For now... she'd rest.

And so it came, in two days more time, that as night settled across Alola a great celebration was held within the town of Iki on Melemele Island. In attendance were so many: among them the four Kahuna of Alola – one in particular brow-beaten into showing up by a Captain of his island – the seven Captains of Alola – former Captains Mina and Molayne present too – Kahili Hano, Professors Kukui and Burnet, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers Pitaya, and mother of Moon Jewellery.

Here to see the announcement of her daughter and daughter's best friend’s incredible feat.

“Tonight,” Hala stood upon a stage, Hau and Moon before him, “we celebrate two young Trainers, who have completed their Final Trials, the Island Challenge of Alola, and become Island Challenge Champions! Though young, Hau and Moon have both taken Alola fully into their hearts, and shown the light and love of this region to a magnificent degree! As Kahuna to their home island, I would like to offer my congratulations to each. You have done wonderfully, and should be proud. For as long as each of you live, never forget the Alola you have seen and become part of. You are both fine Alolan Trainers!”

Incredible energy coursed amongst the crowd gathered, each member cheering loudly as, one after the other, Hau and Moon returned the Island Challenge Amulets they had been given on this stage,
just under nine months ago. Hala took each with a smile. Let the blessing of Alola carry on with these symbols, to those who would carry them next.

The cycle of the Alolan Pokemon Journey to continue.

“And now,” the Kahuna spoke again, stilling the crowd once more, “I have one more thing to say.” Hau and Moon tensed, looking up at Hala before them. “The role of the Kahuna has expanded over this past year, tasked to nominate a number of Alolan Trainers to take part in the upcoming Pokemon League. We have discussed long those to take part, and extended the invitation to each who has passed our judgement. Hau. Moon. We, the Kahuna of Alola, would like to extend to the two of you an offer to take part in our first Pokemon League, should you wish to-”

The only thing louder than Hau’s immediate “Yes!” interrupting Hala was Moon’s own joining with him. Each child turned to face the other, a smile of pure joy visible on the other’s face. With a grin, Hau raised up a hand, palm outstretched. Moon met it with her own in the way they always did.

Even louder than their acceptance, the crack of their palms meeting one another echoed over the crowd of Iki Town around them.

...ow.

Chapter End Notes

One year and over four-hundred and twenty thousand (nice) words ago, I put the first chapter of Eldritch into the world. A story I'd found the initial seeds of during my playthrough of Pokemon Moon, that stayed with me over the years and grew into the start of this very fic. Now, here, I've completed the first four arcs of Eldritch, the four islands of Alola, and the Pokemon League arc is all that's left before us. It's been an incredible journey, folks.

But we're not nearly done yet.

The mood of this chapter was feeling what Moon felt, the overwhelming challenge and progressive exhaustion as she faced each of the four Final Trials. It's a difficult thing to make work right, because if the sense of reading becomes exhausting, especially in combat-heavy scenes that without good pace and flow bog down readers and make it difficult to progress, the entire chapter can fall apart. The content needs to be engaging, continuously flowing, while still impacting the sense I want it to - of Moon struggling, growing more and more tired, but persevering on pure intent all the same. As the writer it's not really possible for me to evaluate how good a job I did of that, so I'll leave it to you to let me know. With the League arc now literally starting the next chapter (!!!) knowing I've got a good grasp on keeping interest even in combat-heavy scenes is really important to me.

I can't very well go into the last arc of Eldritch without a decent amount of ability in writing a good majority of it, after all!

The League arc starts next chapter. Once the first chapter of that goes up, I'm going to throw my weight behind advertising, to try and draw even more readers into the fic. But even if that starts next chapter, please consider now sharing either this tumblr post or this twitter post to help Eldritch reach a bigger audience. My goal remains to try and get this
fic before everyone who'd want to see it, and the only way to do that is with your help sharing it. So if you have somewhere to share it, please do! It would mean the world to me.

My thanks to all readers who've joined me on this journey, whether you've been reading for a while now, just hopped on, or are reading this chapter long after the fact. You matter a lot to me, and if I've been able to entertain you with my work, that's all the happiness I could ask for. I treasure all comments, so don't feel shy in shouting out, and folks, do look forward to what comes next.

We've really and truly made it here.

Now things can really begin.
Moon stared out from the mirror she was looking into, different, yet the same. The flower patterns she wore still wreathe her, a shirt of faded orange shapes highlighting her brighter dress – the Kahuna's gift for her twelfth birthday – a pale cream garment marked by spiralling Alolan flowers. Cascading over her shoulders and around her back was a shawl of red, gifted by Pitaya of the Dragon Tamers, the Guildmaster who had reached out to bring Moon back from the brink.

Her confidence, mixed with immaturity, had caused Moon to push herself and her Pokemon beyond health once before, and the Guildmaster recognising that – and in part her own complicity in approaching Moon once wrongly already already – called out to her and asked for her trust. Desperate for something to hold on to as her belief in herself crumbled, Moon accepted the woman's offer. A month of training; the teaching of the ways of the Dragon Tamers; and the chance to slow down and see Alola from a further step back. A reframing that helped Moon, with her confidence in herself and her team repaired, go forward from that point. One of the most pivotal moments of her Island Challenge for sure.

Though still only the second most impacting encounter with a leader of Ula'ula Island.

Sandals, of similar pale colour to her dress. That watermelon bag, bought during Moon's first days in Alola. Things from the very beginning. Around her left wrist the black Z-Power Ring, her Z-Ring transfigured – whether by entering Ultra Space, or Lunala's will. At her waist six Pokeballs, those who'd journeyed with her to this peak. Around her neck the Key Stone, rainbow jewel hung from a simple cord, gifted to Moon by Kalosian Researchers come to Alola from afar. Half of the means of Mega Evolution. A power few in Alola would wield, with Z-Moves requiring the same investment to perform.

A difference she alone defined.

Dark brown eyes, staring into themselves by the mirror's aid, colour similar to that of her skin. Her black hair, cut short during her first time with the Dragon Tamers – to free herself of the change she'd accepted to hide from those who'd hound her for her difference – now well regrown. Tied back in a small ponytail, the way she'd been at the beginning. The way her mother had encouraged Moon to try, to match the woman's own image from her own journey.

So many things similar to how she'd begun. So many things different. Herself, but changed too. Grown. Taking in the gifts and spirit of Alola, of those who'd reached out to her, of those she'd reached out to. A little taller. A little older. A little different.

But still her.

Slowly, as the television in the room continued to play news coverage of the day, Moon lifted and placed a hat over her head. Red, with a white pattern on the front, and a strange chicken-comb shape.
The oldest clothing she still wore. A memento from a visit to Johto with her family, both her parents, from a past impossible to go back to.

But Alola had welcomed her. So many had grown to care for her by their side. The number of people she was connected to here... was so many more than Kanto had ever been. Here she'd found her home. Her full family.

And the life she loved as a child of Alola.

As Moon completed dressing in the room she had been given, one of the competitor's suites in the Pokemon League main building at the peak of Mount Lanakila, the television's report repeated.

“The air is chill but spirits hot here at the entrance to the Alolan Pokemon League! Despite a tumultuous year the awaited day has come, with the opening ceremony of the first Alolan Pokemon League due to begin within the hour! Acting as final torchbearer of the League Flame, Kahuna Hapu of Poni Island, newest Kahuna of Alola, is presently en route from Malie City to the lift system that has already carried so many to the peak of Mount Lanakila, where the Pokemon League will be held! The crowds are filling the stands, and the League competitors gathered from across Alola and the world! Once the opening ceremony is complete the first battles of the first Alolan Pokemon League are due to begin, so make sure not to miss a second of our round-the-clock coverage!”

She was ready. Her mother, who had been here with her when the morning began, had already gone to the stands, the special seating for family of those taking part. Moon would go a different path, one that connected the League competitors’ rooms to the waiting room they would stay within before heading out to the stage. It was time to join the others, await Hapu’s arrival with the League Flame, and step out onto the stage of the Pokemon League.

Just as she had, from the very beginning, promised to do.

Across the world all eyes turned to Alola.

Gathered together the Elite Four of Unova, former compatriots of the competing Trainer Grimsley, would watch alongside the former champion Alder, each with a specific Trainer on their mind. Marshal and Shauntal of the Elite Four were each watching for Grimsley, the first to ensure the former Elite Four member would bring no shame to the title, the second to support a missed friend. Of the two others, Alder's focus was upon his grandson Benga, this his first international appearance, while Caitlin held her interest in the Unova-famed actor Sabrina. A famous Trainer of the Psychic-type before that, there had always been an interest from the former to the latter, one never able to be fulfilled.

At least this might be a good chance to get a proper look at just what made Sabrina the legendary Psychic-type Trainer that she was.

In Kalos Professor Sycamore would keep his eyes on the showing whether at home or at work, for with the invited Trainers from abroad the chance of Mega Evolution appearing and clashing with Z-Moves was high. A topic the good professor was always interested in seeing. His assistants, sent to Alola ostensibly as League Competitors, but more focused on researching interactions between Z-Moves and Mega Evolution, were to take part as well, and would hopefully be able to foster such further. They'd achieved some things over the past year but... it still felt as though the two had spent their time in Alola more as holiday than research expedition.
He'd work them hard upon their return to make up for it.

The Oak Institute, famed Pokemon research facility in the town of Pallet, region of Kanto, was always busy. Many Pokemon, many assistants, always things to do. But for a little while their youngest would be spared work, by the permission of Daisy Oak – granddaughter to Samuel and current manager of the laboratory while her grandfather was away – so that whenever she could, Lillie could watch the broadcast that reached to all shores.

So that she could see Moon and Hau fulfil their promise, to her, to each other, and to the world: to stand upon the stage of the first Alolan Pokemon League. Awake early yet again this day, her sleepy partner Charmander Sunny resting across her legs, Lillie waited for the opening ceremony to begin.

For the sight of those she'd cheer for to appear before her eyes.

Notes of music danced from guitar strings plucked by fingers tipped by claws, the gloves worn by the man known as Ryuki Oda the same as the rest of his ensemble – all red leather highlighted by gold and spines of red and black. An outfit of flair and impact by his own description. Few could argue against those specific words.

The song he was playing was one of tension, beginning notes of a grand endeavour. Moon appreciated how easily it mixed into the mood of the staging room the competing Trainers in the Pokemon League were waiting within. Gathered around Ryuki and listening to his song, a handful of Trainers didn't react as Moon entered.

One of the two from Unova: Benga, was seated before Ryuki, greatly enjoying his song and indeed entire aesthetic. Jackson, of the Pokemon Rangers, was there as well, nodding his head along to the tune. As Moon stepped further into the room, her eyes slid across it to take in the others gathered already. Most of those competing, but not yet all. Some still to go.

The Captains of Alola were gathered in a pack, Mina with them, across the room. Lana and Sophocles were still absent, but the rest were happily together. Tristan was wearing a wide smile, gatherings of the seven rare enough for this to be a treat he'd experienced only a few times so far. This was good.

In the centre of the room stood three, two fawning over an unimpressed third. Sabrina, other invited Trainer from Unova, looked past Dexio and Sina – each entranced by the master Psychic-type Trainer – to gaze into the eyes of Moon. Moon held the stare for a moment before the woman nodded her head once and returned to fielding the two most delighted to meet her. Moon stepped further into the room.

Oh. Hidden by Jackson's larger body for a moment, as Moon moved forward she spotted another near to Ryuki, leaning against the wall with eyes closed, considering the music alone. There was Plumeria.

It wasn't a surprise, not too much of one. Plumeria had said she was taking the Island Challenge. Had been up to her sixth Trial more than long enough ago that, with her strength, she would have had no trouble completing them all. It was solely the Final Trials that would test Plumeria, as they did all Trainers.

Seemed she'd passed.

Wait, was that-
Moon stopped, surprised, to see another girl by Plumeria, leaning against the wall attempting to mimic the older woman's pose. She was wearing the same as she had before in Mahihinu – that black and white outfit that evoked but wasn't quite the Team Skull wear. And the way she momentarily met Moon's eyes, then immediately jerked her head to break eye contact, it felt like absolutely nothing had changed about Riley at all.

Stunned, Moon stood there blankly, this particular participant in the League one she'd never seen coming. How had that even-

“Moon.” The voice of Kahili drew Moon's eyes and attention, the sky-blue haired Trainer approaching the younger girl. “Today is the day.” It was, Moon nodded immediately, the day they'd been waiting for. Working towards. Kahili wore a small smile to hear that. “You've done well.” And that, she meant.

Others trickled in slowly, the last of those to join. While the Kahuna awaited Hapu, to accompany her and the League Flame to the Stadium Torch, the rest of the competitors gathered together. Lana and Sophocles, last of the Captains to rise, joined the others. Molayne, another former Captain and best friend of Kukui, strolled in casually after. Asuka, of the schooling system, and Pitaya, of the Dragon Tamers, appeared soon as well. Then came two more, chatting animatedly upon their entry. The first pleased Moon to see, having not yet heard he had made it, though she had to admit it had taken her a moment to recognise him. Never before had Moon seen Jace out of his Aether Foundation wear. This outfit, of dark and light blues, sleeveless top and shorts, was fine wear for an ace Alolan Trainer. Good.

The second, happily talking with Jace, paused at the sight of Moon before a wide smile crossed Hau's face and he raced to join her. Moon smiled back.

They'd made it.

Conversation swirled in the room, Trainers passing from one group to the next to introduce themselves to those needing introduction, Ryuki maintaining his seat and his song the one constant – though he was happy to talk to anyone who approached, and when Moon passed close enough gave her the biggest smile he could.

“Hey there Moon, how're you feeling?”

More excited, and more tense, than ever before in her life.

“Haha, that was me at my first League too! The excitement and the tension, it never goes away, but you get better at it every time! And you've got a lot of times ahead of you, right?”

Moon nodded and Ryuki's smile managed to grow wider still. From a chance meeting on the shores of Kala'e Bay to standing here together on the Pokemon League stage. Well, Ryuki was still sitting right now. Also they weren't quite on the stage together just yet. Just a little longer til then.

But still, his choice to go to Alola, it had been a whim at first. Just a little voice in his head that said this was the way to go. And now look at his reward. Look at the amazing things he'd seen. This stage, there was nowhere better to announce himself.

This was the place he was meant to be.

“Not distracting my student, I hope?” The voice of Guildmaster Pitaya drew Moon to stand at attention, a reaction honed in the time she had spent with the Dragon Tamers. Each of those within that hall had respected and followed Pitaya, and into that pace Moon had stepped. Even now she
thought of the Guildmaster as a teacher of hers.

“That's a little unfair isn't it?” Ryuki didn't stand, or stop playing his guitar, but he did look up and make direct eye contact with the woman before him. “Aren't I the one who pushed little miss Moon onto the path of dragons? You're second-in-line as far as teachers go, Guildmaster.”

For all the feeling of tension in the room, the League's opening just moments away, nothing compared to the ferocity Moon felt as Pitaya and Ryuki smiled calmly at one another. If those two met the resulting battle would be... Moon's skin pricked with goosebumps raising. Pitaya rested a hand upon Moon's shoulder, fingers brushing the fabric of the shawl she had given her. “Moon,” the Guildmaster turned to look at the young girl beside her, “I wish you well. Though we will be opponents from the moment the League begins, I nonetheless have faith in the power and skill you and your Pokemon have honed. I look forward to seeing the fullness of what you together will unleash.”

And as Moon nodded and gave her thanks, the Guildmaster stepped serenely away. Instinctively everyone in her path stepped out of it.

“Phew,” Ryuki, for the first time, stopped playing his song. “I've met a lot of scary Trainers out there, y'know Moon, but this League...” casting his eyes around those gathered, Ryuki couldn't help his smile. “It's going to be amazing.” Still somewhat thrown off by the intensity Pitaya and Ryuki had just expressed, Moon nodded and, without being stopped, drifted back to Kahili and Hau, others around the room still crossing from group to group to greet and speak with one another.

One, remaining at the edges of the room, away from others as best she could, watched silently. And thought.

Long ago Sabrina had accepted the limitations of her psychic power, even as significant compared to the majority as it was. There were things she could not see, or do, with it and that she'd come to terms with. These days, rarely did she even express it. A part of her those powers were, and to many a defining one, but to herself... she was defined by her actions more. As a Trainer, and an actress, she'd better represented herself than ever as a psychic. That was far more who she was.

But just because that was true, it did not mean she had shelved those powers, nor the uses they still had. Today, she looked with sight beyond sight. Cutting off that interviewer with the truth – she hadn't been asked to investigate Moon – was all well and good, but a part of her still longed to know. So she looked.

To try and see the truth.

The Bonds Trainers shared with their Pokemon, to her they were as visible as the Trainers and Pokemon themselves. Many experienced Pokemon Trainers could make approximations, sense more than see the strength of such, but to Sabrina's focused sight they were as clear as could be. Strong Bonds. Not the strongest, other Trainers here holding far more developed, but for Moon's age they were... unreal. But that wasn't what Sabrina was looking for. She wasn't looking for those connections. She was looking for the source. The point of origin. The place they all emerged from. That core, in each individual, that the thread of a Bond reached out to in answer to a Pokemon's call. That point from which the power Trainers gave flowed. That centre each possessed, with as many differences in volume and potency as there were humans in the world. She'd wondered often just what that was, that centre. The soul? That was a strange thing to think. She chose not to.

Some mysteries even psychic powers couldn't reveal.
There it was. An infinity. Something that gave an impression of depth Sabrina had never seen before. But nothing more than that. No greater detail. Just a depth with no end. Was there more? Anything? Her stare, intensifying, broke, as an emotion not her own crossed Sabrina's mind.

She looked away.

People were not pieces stitched together: they were a whole unable to be reduced to parts. To gaze into another was an invasion, and Sabrina's curiosity had earned her an insight into Moon she simply should not have. The degree to which that young girl's heart was defined by missing others, three – no, four – was intense. She'd been through much already. And it was not Sabrina's place to look through such feelings in the heart of another. That invasion of privacy, she'd have to make amends. Despite lecturing others she'd let her own curiosity run rampant all the same.

Ways the power she carried acted as a chain she'd struggled with all her life.

“Looks like everyone's here, yeah!” The loud voice of Professor Kukui echoed into the room as the man made his entrance, coat flaring behind him, bared chest on full display. At the very least inside the Pokemon League dome, heated as it was, there was no lecturing him for his preferred wear. Pleased, the organiser of the League, as well as notable competitor, made a beeline for Kahili, still standing guard over Moon and Hau.

“How's it going, Kahili?”

“It's the moment I've been waiting for.” As the minutes passed by, and the intent of those gathered began to harden, the mood in the air had energised Kahili. The smile she gave Kukui, it was the first of its kind Moon and Hau had ever seen from her. Something vicious, and excited. The look of a Trainer who'd found the battle they'd been searching for. The Flying-type expert's smile didn't drop. “This feeling, the moments before it begins, it's the same as the Kalos League was. It's happening, Kukui. You really did it.”

“Thanks to you, and all of Alola,” Kukui smiled back, his expression nowhere near as dangerous. “We all worked hard for this. Hapu and the others will be here with the Flame soon, and once they come through we'll head out with them. One of the announcers is just heading down to greet us first.”

“Anna?” Kahili asked the name, this conversation one Moon and Hau weren't knowledgeable enough to partake in. Kukui shook his head.

“Not quite, she's still up with our special guest, the one coming through is actually from Kalos. She agreed to join Anna as secondary announcer since she has the experience.”

The expression on Kahili's face, initially curious, rapidly passed from contemplation, to realisation, to light terror. A brief “oh no” made it through her mouth before, with a delighted cry of Kahili's name, a new woman swept into the room.

“Kahili!” Moon and Hau jolted at the loud voice, before turning to see a woman crossing the staging room, a beleaguered cameraman resting at its entrance. Kahili, who'd flinched the moment she'd heard her name announced to all gathered, didn't move as the taller brown-haired woman, a long curl of the hair hanging over her face, rapidly approached and threw an arm over the blue-haired woman's shoulders.

“It's been too long!” She trilled happily, Kukui taking a step back from the high energy display, neatly dodging the dagger Kahili's eyes launched at him for not warning her about this in advance. The taller woman continued without noticing. “Honestly, I haven't heard from you in forever! When
are you coming back to Kalos to make an honest woman of my sister already? You know she misses you!"

“Hello Alexa.” Kahili’s tone wasn’t exactly rejecting the appearance of the happy Kalosian reporter, it was just... Alexa was best experienced in controlled environments. Having her name shouted out in a room filled with those she was about to be competing against wasn't exactly Kahili's preferred situation. “As I’ve said before, once the Alolan League is over, I'll be coming back. And I speak to Viola often. I know.”

“Well as long as you do.” Seemingly pleased with that Alexa lifted her arm, turning to see whose attention she'd caught while Kahili, freed, took one menacing step towards Kukui just to give him the impression of impending doom. Dexio, hanging out in Kahili's peripheral with a wide grin, saved Kukui from further judgement by becoming the target of an intensely withering glare. He backed down. Alexa set her sights on the two by Kahili's side.

“You two are Moon and Hau, yes? Hi, my name's Alexa, I'm a reporter from Kalos and a League Announcer! I'm working with the Alolan League as a consultant and secondary, nice to meet you!”

“Hi!” Hau, naturally high energy himself, bounced back quick from Alexa's enthusiastic entrance. “Alola, Ms. Alexa! I hope you enjoy our Pokemon League!”

“Ooohh aren't you a charmer!” Alexa's wide smile only grew more delighted. “All that stage presence, are you sure you wouldn't like to be a commentator as well?”

“Alexa.” Kahili's blunt use of the woman's name had Alexa immediately stand up straight. No playing here then.

“Sorry sorry,” she gave a wave to the two, “I'm actually here to start checking in with the competing Trainers, finding out who's wanting to be part of our switching third up in the commentary boxes! We've got a special someone for the first match of the day already, but after that Anna and I will be nominating other League competitors to join us there! I should go do that!”

“You should.” Another bluntness from Kahili, which Alexa laughed at – seemingly completely used to the woman's approach to others – before careening off to chat up a batch of Trainers who'd kind of been swept together by her own exerted presence. Kahili breathed out a deep sigh.

“Sorry.” Kukui's voice was much more restrained than usual, as he stepped in back closer to Kahili, Moon and Hau still staying close. “I knew she knew you but that was... a lot more than I saw coming.”

A long pause lasted before Kahili eventually managed an “it happens”. Shortly after she raised her head. It didn't matter. She was here at the Pokemon League. Weird interpersonal stuff wasn't a reason to be thrown off her pace – she could be the very first battler today for all she knew.

She, the same as everyone else, needed to be ready.

Today was their day.

“Hey Professor Kukui?” Hau's questioning voice drew both Kukui and Kahili to look down at him, “Who's the special guest Ms. Alexa said was commentating first?”

“Ahaha,” with a smile, Kukui raised a finger to his lips. “That's a secret, you'll find out really soon though, so just stay excited, yeah! We're really lucky to have them here today though, that's for sure!”
Left to wonder, Moon and Hau observed the room as Alexa, with the cameraman regaining his breath from the pace she’d led him by recovered enough to start taking initial photos, swept from Trainer to Trainer, introducing herself and getting a quick handle on each of them. She was effective. Much like a human whirlwind, in the way she swept into the room then out again once she was done, leaving the League competitors alone once more.

But only for a little bit longer now.

One by one the four Kahuna of Alola entered the room. First Hapu, holding high a torch lit with bright flame, second only to the bright smile on her face at the honour, before Hala, Olivia, and Nanu followed after. Hau whispered to Moon that his grandfather had put his foot down that even if Nanu wasn’t taking part in the Final Trials, or the League, or most of Alola’s traditions he could avoid, he was going to make an appearance for the League’s opening and Hapu’s lighting of the Stadium Torch.

Seemed the Kahuna of Melemele Island had been successful in convincing the Kahuna of Ula‘ula to make the appearance.

And so with Hapu leading the way through the staging grounds, one by one and two by two the competitors of the first Alolan Pokemon League followed after. Out through the entrance into the stadium proper, where the roar of the crowd embraced them, the flash of cameras flickered like stars in a sea of people, and the energy, the tension of before, transfigured into an even higher form. Moon, walking alongside Hau, clenched her fists, fingers pushing into her palms. She was here. She was really, really here.

She was really, really here.

From the nearby stands voices called out, lost in the noise of the arena but the callers not minding in the least. They were still lending their support. Happy to be cheering for her daughter, Jewellery smiled at her neighbour, the similarly to her own daughter blue-haired mother of Captain Lana, who was cheering for that daughter while keeping control of a younger pair, twin girls who shared the family’s striking resemblance. Introduced by Olivia during one of her frequent visits to Konikoni City, Jewellery had been happy to become friends with another mother of a wilful Alolan daughter. The two found themselves having much in common.

It was good to be cheering here today for those they loved.

In the centre of the League battlefield stood Alexa, microphone in hand and a large cylindrical box by her feet, Kukui heading right for her as the other League competitors spread about the field. Hapu, still bearing the League Flame and flanked by her fellow Kahuna of Alola, set off to the steps that would lead up through the stands to where the Stadium Torch was waiting. To light it and signify the League begun.

Just moments away.

Looking over the stadium below, within an observation box at equal and opposite height to the Stadium Torch, two of the three announcers for the first match clutched their own microphones and stared down at the battlefield where their third stood with the League’s organiser and noted competitor, Professor Kukui of Alola himself. Accepting the microphone Alexa offered him Kukui wore a wide smile, the voices of the crowd swirling around him higher and higher. Here they were. Great Trainers of Alola and beyond, gathered at the peak of sacred Lanakila to battle with everything they had. The vision he’d had in his heart made real. He really couldn’t stop smiling at all.

“As begins every Pokemon League around the world,” he spoke clearly, voice radiating from
speakers across the stadium, over the gathered crowd within, and through cameras sending this moment to screens around the world, “I’d like to turn all our eyes to the Stadium Torch up above! Many great Trainers have carried the League Flame, from its Moltres-born source in Kanto all the way across the ocean to Alola, then Alola to this place! As Kahuna Hapu sets the flame, we of Alola announce our taking part in what the Pokemon League means! Here on Alola’s most sacred mountain, with the blessings of the Tapu given, the greatest of Alola and beyond will meet in the greatest of battles! So from the moment that flame lights don’t look away, yeah! This is the Alolan Pokemon League!”

And as Kukui’s proclamation radiated, and the cheers of the people rose with it, Hapu at the peak of the staircase she had climbed lowered the torch that had passed from hand to hand, Trainer to Trainer, on its journey to this place, and ignited the Stadium Torch of Alola. Here was their announcement.

The first Alolan Pokemon League had now begun.

“And with that the opening ceremony of the first Alolan Pokemon League is on!” A woman’s voice burst bright and cheery from the speakers next, its owner, a short green-haired Alolan woman in the announcer’s box at the top of the stands, grasping her microphone with thrill. “I am Anna, your primary announcer, who’ll be covering every battle, every single heart-shaking moment, of this Pokemon League! My co-host down below on the League stage is Alexa, a League Announcer from Kalos, who’ll be joining me for the full length of this tournament! I hope you’ve all prepared yourselves, and cleared the rest of today as the first battles of the League are soon to begin! In just a moment I’m going to pass back over to Alexa and Professor Kukui, but before that it’s time to introduce a special guest! Come to commentate the first match of our first League, all the way from the Kanto Region, may I thank and welcome the famed and esteemed: Professor Samuel Oak!”

The wave of noise that crossed through the crowd peaked to hear this, Hau beside Moon yelling out in shock. Professor Oak occupied the position of most famous Pokemon Professor the world over, a legend who over the length of his life so far had spearheaded countless breakthroughs throughout the world, from aiding in the development of the first Pokedex, to contributing to the expansion of the Starter Pokemon System across Kanto and many regions beyond, to the long worked upon study behind the mechanisms of Trainer’s Bonds. A figure of that level of fame and distinction, to have him here to oversee the first battle of the first Alolan League meant so much. Another manner in which Kukui was thankful to the man, after agreeing to take on Lillie as an assistant. Samson Oak – presently amongst the crowd of the League, though he’d catch up with his cousin after this – had been key in helping everything run smoothly in both arrangements. The price – Kukui’s assistance in Samson’s own research projects across Alola – was more than worth paying. He’d be as busy as ever after the Pokemon League ended as well, but Kukui didn’t mind.

To host the ultimate battles at the peak of Alola, there was little he desired more.

No complaints at all in his heart.

“I am thankful to be here!” The voice of Samuel Oak radiated from the speakers next, Anna ceding speaking to him in the announcer’s box they occupied. “Alola has held a unique place in the world for so long already, to see this wonderful and beautiful region taking this step onto the world stage, I could not be more honoured or delighted to be asked to oversee that first step! For those unaware of what this region’s Pokemon Trainers can offer, you’ll see incredible things over the League’s length, so make sure to keep your eyes on every Pokemon Battle you can! My best wishes to all competing!”

The roar of noise from the crowd broke so high Alexa, standing next to Kukui with the microphone
in her hand, smiled and gave a shrug to him, an obvious sign that they needed to let this energy fall a
moment before going on to what was next.

Eventually, as the Kahuna of Alola finished their descent from the lighting of the Stadium Torch,
three moving to join the gathered Trainers, the fourth disappearing into a corridor off of ground level,
the moment for the Kalosian reporter to interject came.

“To begin!” Alexa's own voice echoed over the crowd, pushing their volume down enough to hear
what she had to say, “We will now determine the tournament order for this Pokemon League! The
structure here will be a single-elimination tournament, with order decided by lottery draw! I have
here:” keeping her voice loud, Alexa took a step to the side as Kukui hefted the cylindrical box that
had been resting by her feet, “the lottery itself! One by one as called, I would like each competing
Trainer to come forth and select a ball from within: the colour and number will signify your block
and position! Now then: could I first have the competing Kahuna of Alola!”

The surging voices of the crowd throughout the stadium continued to wash as waves across all
gathered, as one by one Hala, Olivia, and Hapu stepped forward. As each reached into the lottery
box Kukui held, and each pulled forth a coloured ball, turning it to observe their number before
stepping back. Their places set.

“Next: I call upon the Captains of Alola!”

Ilima, Lana, Kiawe, Mallow, Sophocles, Acerola, Tristan. Each Captain stepped forward, each
Captain claimed their starting position within the League.

“Those Trainers representing Alola!”

First to step forward was Kahili, this crowd, this intensity, not the first of its kind she had faced. But
the power of it, the heartbeat hammering within her chest, it was maybe more than it had ever been
before. To battle here at the peak of the Alola she loved...

It was a feeling like no other.

After came Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers. Asuka, Principal of the Pokemon
Schooling System. Jackson, Captain of the Alolan Pokemon Rangers. Molayne, former Captain of
Alola. Mina, even more recently former Captain. Figures known across the region. All proud to be
here.

All determined to do Alola proud.

“Those invited Trainers from afar!”

Called to join the announcement of Alola on the world stage. To offer their strength for the best of
Alola to prove themselves against. Carrying the determination to battle in a foreign land with
everything they had. Ryuki, nominated by the Hoenn League. Sina and Dexio, nominated by the
Kalos League. Sabrina, nominated by Professor Samuel Oak of Kanto. Benga, by Professor Juniper
of Unova. And Grimsley, former member of the Unova Elite Four and resident of Ula'ula Island,
invited by the Alolan Pokemon League organisers themselves.

All Trainers of note called forth. All Trainers that were known.

Trading the box he held, now slightly lighter, for the microphone Alexa carried, Kukui took over the
last calls.

“Joining us at the peak, I would like to call forth a set of Trainers nominated by the Kahuna to take
part! Each having completed their Island Challenge, each having passed their Final Trials, these Trainers are bright shining stars of Alola, yeah! They gave everything they had to make it this far, and they'll show you the greatest of sights on this stage, the same as the rest of us! Trainers of Alola, please step forward!

The shouts of the crowd stoked to an even higher pitch as, one by one, those who'd sought and earned invitation stepped forward. Plumeria, known as second-in-command to the former Team Skull, a blue bandanna streaked by vibrant pink flames tied over her head, stepped forward and drew forth her place. Quick to follow behind her, shooting a glare at the three others to make sure none of them tried to go next, Riley rapidly shot her arm into then pulled out one of the remaining numbered balls within the box, just as quickly dashing off to follow Plumeria's footsteps.

Jace, spending a moment still, felt Hau nudge his side, looking over to see the young boy and Moon standing nearby. Hau shifted his head again, a request for Jace to go next. Nodding, the once-more Pokemon Trainer stepped forward and drew his starting place.

Just two left.

Moon and Hau stepped forward equally, stopping for a moment to look at the other, then smile and take another step all the same. As they walked Hau raised a hand, quickly flashing a trio of symbols to answer the request for who would take the next. With confidence Moon answered with hand outstretched, then stepped back so the victorious Hau could take his prize. Honestly. Every time.

Then it was her. The voices of the people surrounded her, but at this volume it was just a roar like the ocean – a sound Moon had grown to find comforting with the time she spent close to it – whether at home or abroad. Reaching her hand forward, slipping into the lottery box Alexa held, Moon ran her touch over the balls remaining. More than just one left. Fingers curling around one, Moon pulled it forth. Blue block, number two. She stepped back.

Kukui, nodding at the array of Trainers gathered before him, turned and reached his own hand into the box Alexa held, taking his position in the League as well. Almost done. Almost all the places set, all the players announced. All that was left was...

“Here in Alola,” raising the microphone as he let his hand holding the yellow ball drop, Kukui spoke again, turning as he did so to observe the gathered crowd, “we give tribute to our Island Deities, the Tapu, Land Spirit Pokemon. Guardians of Alola, it was by their permission that we have built this Pokemon League here at the peak of Alola, upon sacred Mount Lanakila. For those Tapu, who each have a true battling heart as well, we will offer the sight of the greatest battles of Alola, and by this offering thank them for their care. And yet,” here Kukui held a moment, a current of curiosity and uncertainty carrying through the crowd, before continuing, “for this first Alolan League, sight was not enough to sate them. And so, as the final competitors of the first Alolan Pokemon League, I would like to invite the four Tapu of Alola to take their places on this stage!”

The boom of noise from the crowd, from across all Alola as watchers shot to their feet in shock, was still not enough to overwhelm the four piercing cries of the Tapu, as each of the four Guardian Deities descended from the sky. Combative Tapu Koko, crackling with electricity, Land Spirit of Melemele. Mercurial Tapu Lele, a pink aura distorting its outline, Land Spirit of Akala. Mighty Tapu Bulu, a patch of grass forming beneath it as it stopped its descent just above the ground, Land Spirit of Ula'ula. Judging Tapu Fini, a stream of water loosely hanging around its shell, Land Spirit of Poni. The four deities of Alola, come to join this battle at its peak.

All eyes upon them.

Hala, one of the few not surprised, kept his sigh internal. In the initial talks with the Tapu, the
Kahuna aiding Kukui in speaking to them, Kukui had not missed a beat in overselling the concept of a League. Promising again and again that it would provide the sight of battles beyond imagination, things the Tapu had never before seen, he’d really gone and gotten their attention with his boasting. And now here the Tapu were. Honestly.

This was going to be one heck of an opening show.

Taking the lottery box from Alexa once more, returning the microphone to her, Kukui held it up as, one by one, the four Tapu moved forward and took their places as well. Electronic boards, set at either end of the League, flickered on, and the tournament structure appeared. Names listed in pairs, thirty-two in total. Sixteen battles to close the first round. Eight for the second. Then four. Then two.

Then one final battle, here at the peak of Alola, to crown the first champion the region would claim.

Some viewed the board with apprehension. Some joy. Some excitement. Some tension. Some determination. Some distress. But whatever the matchups, whatever the feelings, one thing all felt without question. What each knew, deep in their heart, was that the moment had finally come.

The first Alolan Pokemon League had finally, and truly, begun.

The First Alolan Pokemon League
And so the moment has come. This competitor's list, the ENTIRE competitor's list, has been in place since the end of the Melemele arc. The matchups for a similar length. I've been quietly sitting on this for a long time now, and finally it's out in the open. Here's
the tournament, folks. Here's what we're doing.

Let's get to it.

This chapter marks the opening of the Pokemon League arc, the fifth and final arc of Eldritch. We're on the home stretch now. I have a chapter count in my notes that I'm fairly confident I'll stick to, but I'm not QUITE willing to update the chapter count of this fic yet. When I'm 100% sure it's accurate, then I will do so. No sooner.

With the launch of this final arc also comes the launch of my new writing twitter! Follow me here: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites for all fic updates going forward, both of Eldritch, and any future works I do!
Also consider sharing this tweet: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480 to help Eldritch's exposure, as now that we're in the final arc, I want to get this story to as many people as possible. Let there be as much a cheering crowd for these League battles as can be! That's my desire.

You can also, if you're on tumblr, reblog this post as well: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628 I'd deeply appreciate it.

With that, I'm bringing these notes to a close. Please look forward to what comes next, thrilling heights await us as we dive into the Pokemon League! To all my readers I thank you, to all those leaving comments I adore you. If you're able to in any way, please help share Eldritch, and bring it to even more readers. I hope those of you PokemonGO friends out there have/had an excellent Bagon Day - think of Moon and her Salamence when caring for those good good dragons.

That's it for now. Next chapter, the first battles begin.

Who're you cheering for?
The Power of Ultra

Chapter Notes

This chapter uses a custom style - for best readability, please ensure the "Show Creator's Style" button at the top of the page is active.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The First Alolan Pokemon League: Tournament Rules

1) This is a single elimination tournament. Once a Trainer or all of a Trainer's Pokemon are declared unable to continue battling, that Trainer is eliminated from the tournament.

2) With an overseer present, before battle the two competing Trainers must agree on an equal number of Pokemon to use, with a minimum of three and maximum of six. In the case of battle against a Tapu of Alola, a Trainer may use up to a maximum of six Pokemon.

3) In battle, should a Pokemon be declared unable to continue battling by judge, it is considered defeated.

4) After a Pokemon is defeated, there is a maximum of thirty seconds before another Pokemon must be sent out, or the battle is considered forfeit.

5) After switching a Pokemon for another, there is a minimum of sixty seconds that must pass before switching the new Pokemon for another. Should a Trainer call a Pokemon back in less time than that, that Pokemon is considered no longer able to battle.

6) Only a Pokemon manifested from a League Standard Pokeball Variant is allowed within the League Battlefield. Minor items and decorations the Pokemon carries are allowed, but are subject to removal upon judge request. Likewise major items carried by Trainers may be requested to be removed from the Trainer rings when in battle.

7) There are no restrictions upon the usage of any specific Pokemon, Z-Move, or Mega Evolution, by request of League Founder Kukui.

“Well then, Moon, here we are.”

Despite the softness and seeming calm of his voice, inside of Ilima surged a storm of excitement without measure. His was a battling heart, and this he had awaited for so long. Both of these things. Alola's first Pokemon League. And the chance to battle against Moon. It had become something of a running joke amongst the Captains – of how Ilima had never managed to face off against the young girl, to push her to give everything she had and see just what she could do. Well, now the moment was here and his. At long last he and Moon would battle, and he would see everything she could do.

And the best part of it all? At this point it wasn't even a guarantee he would win.

In contrast to Ilima's excitement, Moon was a mixture of nerves and calmness, her youth and understanding of Ilima's strength pushing against the experiences and teaching she had received over the past year. She was trying to remain calm, and focused, so that she might give it her all, but this was... the energy in the air was incredible. Even inside of the League staging room, a scattering of competitors still around, others gone to their seats already – a special block set apart for the competitors alone to watch from – Moon could still hear the roar of the crowd. The first battle of the first Alolan League was close now, and the hunger of the world's eyes upon this stage was peaking.
They longed to see what would come next.

For that to begin with...

“To start with,” Anna was with the two, the Alolan reporter standing at about Ilima's height, “the two of you will need to agree upon an equal number of Pokemon to use in this battle. Do either of you have a number in mind?”

“Honestly,” Ilima smiled, slight motes of his battle-hungry nature sneaking through his mostly calm expression, “it's a rather aggressive opening to the League, but I simply cannot resist. Moon,” the Captain focused his eyes on Moon alone, “would you do me the honour of an all-out battle without restraint, six against six, giving everything we both have?”

Six... Anna slowly considered the two before her. As a reporter of Alola she knew a thing or two about its notable names, and was more than aware of Captain Ilima's reputation as a battle-fiend. He and Captain Acerola were the only two of Alola's Captains known to have six Pokemon. Most of the others with six competing were master Trainers with decades of experience behind them. Most.

Moon, Anna's eyes slid to the young girl, shorter than she, who was slowly nodding and agreeing to Ilima's request. A child who'd rocketed into the spotlight of Alola and the world just nine months ago. Anna remembered receiving directive from on high to investigate Moon, and the subsequent strong words Moon's mother had for the asking reporter. Honestly, words fairly given, Anna had accepted in retrospect. The number of people desperate to chase Moon down and hound her with questions she no doubt couldn't answer was... rather obscene.

But now here Moon was. In nine months she had climbed to the peak where the greatest of Alolan Trainers were to do battle. She and one other. A pair of youths beyond imagination. But here they were. Now to do what was right.

“Very well,” Anna nodded her head, “I'll report to the judges and head up to the announcer's box. The two of you head to the stage upon being called.” Nods from both Ilima and Moon accompanied Anna as she took her leave. Among those still in the staging ground, not yet having left for the stands, Kahili kept watch over Moon while Kiawe and Mallow pulled Ilima aside, both with words for their fellow Captain for setting the precedent of the League being showing everyone's full hands from the very beginning. Ilima just smiled.

How could he not?

But soon there were no more words to be said, as the names of Ilima and Moon were called. Through the path to the stage of the Pokemon League they walked.

And into the embrace of the roaring voice of the crowd they emerged.

“With the first battle of the first Alolan Pokemon League just moments away, excitement is at its peak here in the Alola Pokemon League dome. Before we begin, let's take a moment to review the competitors taking part.” The voice of Anna, practised and smooth, narrated easily every intense second of Alola's first Pokemon League. Projected across the stadium, and to viewers across the world, she outlined just what everyone needed to know of those competing.

Of the first pair to battle: Ilima and Moon.

“On the right side of the stage is Captain Ilima of Melemele Island. Captain is a position of community leadership and environmental responsibility, given to youths who have completed their Island Challenges to carry until their twentieth birthday. In that time a Captain will oversee a Trial of
the Island Challenge, and guide Trainers to those Trials while assisting them in growing to face them. Many of Alola's greatest Trainers have history as Captains of the region, and Ilima, current oldest of the seven Alolan Captains, is no different! An expert Trainer with a strong presence in both the Battle Royal and Battle Tree of Alola, Ilima has established his name and abilities with aplomb. Part of the team that created the Ride Pager, he is an intelligent and thoughtful Trainer who even those older than him would be tested to face. Someone to keep an eye on for sure!"

Finishing her half, Anna made a wave to Alexa, who – seated on the other side of Samuel Oak, who was between the two women in the announcer's box – made her own report.

“Facing Ilima, on the left side of the stage, is Trainer Moon.” A spike of noise. Awareness honed, despite the names of the Trainers taking part being projected on boards around the League. Alexa focused on the best way to say this. “Moon gained global attention around the middle of last year due to a recording of a Pokemon Battle in which she displayed six Pokemon and two Z-Moves. Since that time, Moon has completed her Island Challenge at a near-record pace, second only to one other. Today she will once again be displaying six Pokemon, and we will see just how far she and her Pokemon have come. This battle will be a match of experience against unknown power where anything might happen, so make sure not to blink! Professor, do you have any thoughts?”

Amongst the crowd below, Jewellery focused on the stage, on the sight of her daughter entering the Trainer's circle she would stand within, as the voice of Samuel Oak crossed over the speakers next.

“To begin with, I should establish that although Moon's unknown abilities are an intriguing subject, that does not give anyone the right to disregard respect for her as an individual. As a youth of Alola, no different to any other, Moon deserves the full freedom to live her life as a Pokemon Trainer. It is a horrid thing to deny that to any child.”

Kukui, in the stand for League Competitors, wore a wide grin hearing the Professor Oak giving a speech similar to one he had before. A tiny bit more eloquent though. Kahili, seated nearby, smiled as well.

“For this Pokemon Battle, I am excited to see a demonstration of Z-Moves, which both Ilima and Moon are able to perform. As an Alolan speciality, seeing such wielded by Alolan Trainers will be a true delight. I wish both young Trainers the best. Have a good fight!”

Opposite one another, the League battlefield between them, Ilima and Moon each raised an arm – Ilima's right and Moon's left – to note the white Z-Ring (for Ilima) and black Z-Power Ring (for Moon) they wore. The first time Moon had ever seen a Z-Move it had been performed by Ilima. And the first she had ever used, Ilima had seen that too.

It felt like destiny.

“Trainers at the ready!”

One of the League judges, a number more on standby, stood on one side of the battlefield, halfway between Ilima and Moon. With a hand raised to point at each, the man waited as Ilima and Moon each chose a Pokeball and the seconds, soaked in tension growing deeper and deeper, passed slower and slower.

And then...

“Begin!”

Even beyond the voices of the crowd the boom of noise that came with this moment was extreme.
From the stands ringing the stadium, from those here to watch over family, from those who'd be competing as well. From the four Tapu, each resting atop a pillar mounted at the four corners of the dome. And from every last person watching from around the world. This excitement was everything.

Yet Moon and Ilima, yet Decidueye and Gumshoos, felt nothing of it. Only stared one another down, as the opening battle of the first Alolan Pokemon League began.

Quick to close distance and attack, the Gumshoos partner of Ilima lashed out at Decidueye with clashing jaws, the Arrow Quill Pokemon evading and leaping back from the Dark-infused attacks. Compared to the Totem Gumshoos the partner of Ilima was quite short – not even half the size of Decidueye – yet intensely Moon felt, as the Stakeout Pokemon pursued and harassed Decidueye, that it must possess incredible power. Anything less from Captain Ilima would be a surprise.

She focused.

“And we have the first match of our first battle!” With excitement Anna's voice stoked the crowd's own. “From Ilima the Normal-type Pokemon Gumshoos, from Moon the Grass and Ghost-type Decidueye! This typing clash prevents each Pokemon from using a number of their strongest abilities, but that hasn't stopped Ilima from leading with an aggressive assault! Decidueye is completely on the defensive right now, unable to counter while evading! With the precise movements of this Gumshoos, it will be difficult for Decidueye to break away! Moon and her partner will need to work hard to be able to change this pace!”

Pokemon with age and experience found abilities wholly their own. Things shaped in response to the lives they lived, honed to a shape no other – not even another of their own species – could replicate. For Decidueye, first in its days as a Dartrix, targeted by powers far above it again and again, it had sought a means to escape and evade the most dangerous of attacks. And, together with Moon, honed that ability well.

On the stage it was an elegant dance, each leap, swipe, and gnash of Gumshoos evaded by short and precise movements of its Arrow Quill opponent, Decidueye never able to break away, but never showing pressure in being locked in close all the same. Moon's eyes flicked, for a moment, to Ilima, but saw only calm focus on his face. Returned her own to her partner. This was just the beginning: each of them could give far more at any moment. Right now they were testing one another, and seeing who would reveal something more first. But it was true, the pace was Ilima's.

Moon and Decidueye needed to change that.
“Oh!” Anna's noise of surprise came with the crowd's interest, as Gumshoos leaped into Decidueye only for the Arrow Quill Pokemon to appear to explode in a burst of leaves. This was the technique they had honed: the release of leaves as an opponent drew close and, in the moment of confusion from that, moving with utmost stealth and silence into a more advantageous position. A dangerous green glow emanating from one of the arrow quills Decidueye held, it struck forth against the Gumshoos' back to land an intense first blow.

Staggered, lashing around and out at its attacker, the Stakeout Pokemon now fell into the pace of its opponent, Decidueye once more evading and counter-attacking as Samuel Oak outlined his observations of Decidueye's evasive technique from the announcer's box above.

Never searching for distance, as intent as its opponent was upon preventing it, Decidueye focused on short-range dodges and counters, the heartier Gumshoos proving unable to respond to this form of speed and precision. Ilima, watching, grinned wide. Look at that! Look at what Moon was doing! Wonderful, absolutely wonderful!

It really felt like he could go all out without holding back.

Cracks splintered and spread quickly across the League stage, a heavy stomp of Gumshoos's foot sending a wave of force radiating outwards, the earth buckling and shifting in response to this single act. Decidueye, keeping light on its feet and moving through short and silent bursts of flight, pulled back from the action, distance for the first time gained. But that was fine now, Ilima smiled, as around the Gumshoos, pulsing with the strength he was sending it, a spiral of sand unleashed from the earth arose, hiding the Stakeout Pokemon from sight. Moon's choice of Decidueye had limited the offence Gumshoos could bring.

So it was time to change that.

Quickly the sandstorm raged, becoming an obscuring force around Gumshoos specifically, but pelting Decidueye with fast-whipped particles of sand as well. Moon focused, searching for what Ilima was trying to do, remembering what she could of the various Gumshoos she had seen and battled in her time. They were good at keeping close to targets, not letting them get away. Good at ambushing through patience. So Ilima's was going to come from the sands where it was hidden and be harder to see within it. That made sense. Sending her focus to Decidueye, Moon and her partner both honed their senses for their opponent's next move.

Inside the tornado of sand, not yet having moved, Gumshoos closed its eyes and focused another sense. Whipping sands wasn't nearly enough to blot out the keen sense of smell its kind possessed and, with a Trainer's will strengthening it, that sense was enough to hunt down even ghosts.

To let it harm even ghosts.

Moon's eyes widened as the crowd's voice surged, the partner Gumshoos of Ilima bursting out of the sands with an arcing fist aglow with power. Dodging around it Decidueye cried out as the Stakeout Pokemon leaped with it, slamming its body hard into the Arrow Quill Pokemon before, nostrils flaring and focus honed, heavy jaws seized around Decidueye's midsection and Gumshoos lifted and slammed its opponent against the ground time after time after time, the bursts of leaves Decidueye released not enough to loosen the Gumshoos' heavy bite.

“The use of Sandstorm to create the room to focus Odor Sleuth, allowing for the use of Normal-type techniques upon the Ghost-type Decidueye! Ilima has gained an intense lead through this combination, giving him an advantage by allowing his partner to now hit with its most powerful techniques!”
“Gumshoos took some hits early on, but has just easily evened the score and doesn't appear about to let Decidueye go free! Is this the end of the first match already?”

No. It was not.

With practice and experience Pokemon could be taught techniques they do not innately develop. Moon had been able to teach her Pokemon some, from tutors she'd been guided to over the past months of training, but compared to far more experienced Trainers with years of refining themselves, there was still little her partners could do beyond what they were known for.

But because of that, with so many less abilities to choose from, Moon's choices remained decisive. With only a few options available, those she chose she believed in fully. And such belief lent a strength all of its own.

Decidueye glowed.

There were a collection of these techniques, that burned the body to unleash greater strength, that pushed out energy to a painful degree and in return struck with power unmatched. Pinned by the jaws of Gumshoos as it was, Decidueye lacked any of the requirements to strike with the Brave Bird technique, developed only in the latest stages of Moon's training with Mina, but it could still manifest the power, and that power still burned bright. Burned Decidueye, yes, but surged against the jaws of Gumshoos as well. Pushed open and back the vicious Stakeout Pokemon's attack, Decidueye dropping free before diving into the swirling sands around them. A desperate technique that harmed the user too, but little more could have broken free.

And because of Moon's absolute belief that this was necessary, Decidueye's focus remained. This wasn't over yet.

The Grassium-Z Moon set into her Z-Power Ring said as much.

Ilima expected it. Even with the sandstorm obscuring his vision of Moon – high-powered cameras around the battlefield showing better details on screens for those watching in the stands and across the world – he knew she'd be looking for this. Moon's uniqueness, her ability to perform Z-Moves without limit, Ilima not only expected but wanted her to lean into it. To use every last scrap of power and ability she had. Anything less would be a disappointment. And he would not be disappointed here upon the stage of the Pokemon League.

It wasn't time for his own Z-Move, of course not. But just because Moon and Decidueye threatened with one, it didn't make for an advantage without compare. Focusing its senses, as Decidueye raced through the sands around it, Gumshoos tightened its body. Built up power within itself, and maintained its awareness of the position its opponent held. An arrow, infused with Grass-type energy, fired from a direction expected and was handled, Gumshoos's own strength letting it attack and destroy the incoming shot. More followed after, but strengthened by its focus the Stakeout Pokemon evaded by dived forward, chasing down Decidueye with perfect aim. To start with, if Moon couldn't even make the opportunity to unleash a Z-Move, her advantage didn't matter in the least.

The sandstorm was waning, only whipped up for a brief time. With its thick coat of fur and intense sense of smell the partner Pokemon of Ilima had shown little concern at the effects of the storm, while Moon's own partner proved less able to make use of it – not hidden by the sands from Gumshoos's sense of smell, and its own vision obscured. And the exchange of blows, the injuries taken, Decidueye had fared far worse. Was slower now, and less able to escape or evade Gumshoos's incoming charge. An easy conclusion should Moon fail to release the power of a Z-Move.
Ilima watched with razor focus for any sign she might.

Capturing the last swirls of sand a surge of wind summoned by Decidueye wrapped up the loose particulate, the darker Ghost-aligned energy that was shaping the wind proving useless but the blast of sand it compacted surprisingly effective. Loose sand, even at high speed, hadn't properly blotted out the senses of the focusing Gumshoos, but a concentrated ball of sand smashing into its face as it charged forward did the job. Good and clever thinking, another arrow from Decidueye fired as Gumshoos shook its head to dislodge some of the sand that had been lodged within its flared nostrils. The arrow hit, and it was a fine shot, but the strengthened body of Gumshoos, Ilima's focus never faltering, and the Pokemon focusing its own power in each spare moment it found, meant the shot splintered and did far less than Moon no doubt wished. Harming Gumshoos in any real way wouldn't be easy now. Little that could stop it beyond a Z-Move.

Having pushed Moon into this situation, Ilima made sure he was ready to counter such the moment it should appear.

The Grassium-Z, the Z-Move Bloom Doom, had two powers. Firstly, naturally, it released a wave of intense energy, Z-Power flavoured to the Grass-type, which spread outward in a wave from the user and washed over everything around it. Those caught within suffered heavy damage, as all Z-Moves would do.

Secondly and uniquely, it caused plants to grow.

Time and time again, in battle and in training, Moon had seen this. The way plants immediately grew under this Z-Power – disappearing almost as fast as they formed. But more importantly existing plants, even things not rooted or growing, would still respond. And those changes, those did not disappear.

That was the second aspect of this Z-Move she had begun to learn to wield.

Against Acerola it had done as well as could be. Caused leaves stuck into an opposing Pokemon to burst into thick vines, trapping the foe and catching it within the Z-Move's force. When considering this Z-Move, Moon looked always for both ways to use it. As power, and as growth.

Both aspects she and Decidueye had prepared for in the moment the sandstorm had obscured Decidueye from sight.

Before Gumshoos even closed in Moon began the Z-Pose, Ilima directing his Pokemon back, unsure as to Moon's intent. At this distance that Z-Move would never hit his partner Gumshoos. What was her plan? Casting his eyes across the field, looking for anything that stood out, Ilima recognised the issue far too late. It wasn't a tactic he'd ever consider, using a Z-Move in such a way, and that was Moon's greatest and most dangerous skill. The things she'd do, they'd be things no-one else had ever conceived of.

In spite of himself Ilima's grin widened, a fierce thing, as scattered across the League battlefield, caught in the radiating light of the Z-Move Bloom Doom, the sharp leaves Decidueye had thrown out when hidden by the sandstorm burst alive into twisting and intertwining vines.

In her experiences, Moon had come to rely on two great strengths in battle to close the distance between herself and greater Trainers: disguise and terrain. The first allowed her partners to perform actions without sight upon them, and from those actions allowed them, with Moon's will joined, to perform techniques no others expected. In any situation where a Pokemon of Moon's was hidden from view, even if the opponent was hiding too, the advantage was actually hers. For the things she did that no-one was prepared for, without seeing the moments preparing for each, they'd come as a
surprise every single time.

The sandstorm Ilima had called for, allowing his Gumshoos the freedom to strengthen itself, Moon had made use of it too. And this was the result. The second aspect.

Terrain.

This was a lesson from the Tapu. The nature of infusing the environment with a Pokemon's power, and drawing greater power from that environment in turn. It was a far less elegant method than those Pokemon that could naturally create a Grass-infused terrain, using a Z-Move to overgrow scattered plantlife, filling them with Z-Power so they might give more power in turn, but it worked. For a brief moment, as Decidueye landed upon one of the bloated vines and immediately drew a surge of energy from it, the plant withering away as the power infused transferred back into the Pokemon atop it, they had a terrain that was theirs to wield.

The Gumshoos, not yet having moved as Ilima parsed just what had happened, the voices of the announcers going wild over this ridiculous use of a Z-Move, found itself unable to dodge the next arrow shot by Decidueye, lingering Z-Power trailing from the shot. Nowhere near the strength of a Z-Move, but the scattered power equally restoring and empowering Decidueye still meant so much.

The arrow that hit, through the Gumshoos' own boosted bulk it pierced.

How much was propping Decidueye up? How much was keeping it standing? Was it barely staying on its feet, or still ready to continue on? Ilima studied the foe but found himself unable to tell, this situation not something he had ever seen or even imagined. This Z-Power created terrain, it was a far more costly to create variant yes, but even still... it was brilliant. How much had Mina seen, how much had she guided Moon to, over their months of training? Or was this, as with whatever Z-Moves she might show after, simply the nature of Moon embracing an ability no other in the world had. Ilima had to know. He simply had to know.

His fingers twitching Ilima raised a hand, focusing first on those fingers, and then on the sight of Gumshoos beyond. The Stakeout Pokemon dove forward once more.

Of course it was hurt. So was Decidueye. The two had met and clashed and fought and hit and struggled, with intensity and techniques all of their own, the kind of fight a real Pokemon League battle should be. The kind that Ilima had watched since a child, with wide eyes at the showing of each region's best. To have joined that same pantheon, the joy in his heart was only equally matched by the feral intensity lurking within him. More more more.

There was still so much more to enjoy!

Decidueye dodged. Wove from vine to vine, each footstep drawing power from the Z-Power infused plantlife. But that power wasn't loyal, and as Gumshoos passed over vines it drew energy too. The battlefield was littered with those little pockets of strength to be taken, and as much as Decidueye shot its arrows, and Gumshoos harried the Arrow Quill Pokemon with its own strength, the two focused more on snapping up whatever they could. What a wild and risky technique Moon and her partner had unleashed! Ilima loved it. And that passionate appreciation for this battle he and his partner had joined, it kept Gumshoos's own strength and focus even despite the blows it had taken. These two, dancing to the song of Alola amplified by the pounding heartbeats of all those around them, they were truly showing what it meant to stand here at Mount Lanakila's peak.

Pride. Delight. Happiness. Joy. Ferocity. Battllest. Ilima's body pulsed with all of those emotions, while his mind wrangled them into a razor's edge he could balance calm upon. Even in this first match Moon had pushed him beyond so many of the battles he had experienced thus far. It was
everything to him.

He truly couldn't be happier.

At this edge, pushed this far, both Pokemon exhausted, all the Z-Power scattered into energy to be made use of absorbed, there was little more either could do. They'd both worn one another down, and their movements had slowed to nothing. But for Ilima, with experience and learning beyond Moon's own, there was one more thing he could do. For his Pokemon though exhausted, having given almost everything it could, still had one ability left to call upon. Something that could only be unleashed in this exhausted state.

A true Last Resort.

Decidueye could not evade. The focused senses of Gumshoos, underlined by Ilima's own, allowed the Stakeout Pokemon to strike with Normal-aligned attacks even against a Ghost-type foe. Commentary by Professor Oak, which Ilima would hear when watching a recording of this battle after the fact, would cause the Captain to blush at the distinguished Professor's praise for Ilima, stating that the ability for a Pokemon Trainer to have their Pokemon maintain that honed state of mind for so long indicated an incredible focus of Ilima's own.

By that ability, and experience, and teaching and growth of his partner, the attack that could only be formed by a Pokemon driven to the edge landed and there was no way for Decidueye to withstand it. Blown back by the attack the Arrow Quill Pokemon fell, and raising an arm the judge of this match declared it unable to battle. The first of Moon's Pokemon defeated. Although, given Ilima was calling back his own, it was a battle just barely shy of equal. Should that Gumshoos be called on again, there would be very little it could do with the damage and exhaustion it had suffered.

An incredible first showing for these two Alolan Trainers.

As the seconds passed by Moon thought, going over the Pokemon she should next bring to the field. Not yet Salamence, or Bisharp, her two strongest. Of those remaining – Milotic, Volcarona, and Sylveon – each had weaknesses Ilima would no doubt hone in upon with his choice. As the victor he was free to make one in response to her own, after all.

In the end, as a call from the judge indicated Moon needed to choose a partner soon, she unleashed Milotic and narrowed her eyes upon the Smeargle Ilima chose in return. She knew about that Pokemon. Knew how it could copy any move it saw and make it its own. No doubt this partner of Ilima could respond to any number of Pokemon. Who knew just what it could do.

But that didn't change what she needed to.

She needed to win.

The requirements for a League standard arena are as follows: a rectangular field of fixed dimensions; a marked zone for Pokemon Trainers at either end of the field; and a flat, smooth surface of densely packed earth making up the battlefield. This environment allowed easiest for most Pokemon to unleash their strength – whether those that stand upon the earth, dig beneath it, or fly up into the sky – while providing no specific benefits certain types might make use of.

Yet this standard brought difficulty to one certain type of Pokemon: those who not only excel at movement within the water, but were hampered once outside of it. Many solutions have been debated and discussed over the years, from an alternate arena competitors may agree to use that contains filled channels of water, to requirements that Trainers taking part in Leagues must acknowledge the disadvantage they hold going in. A full redesign of the standard arena to include
water for swimming Pokémon has yet to be agreed upon, with arguments heavy that such a change would provide advantages and disadvantages for Pokémon that skewed their abilities further. The Alolan League Stadium, built quickly to host this first tournament, had not yet faced a discussion on an approach to this situation. The most notable Water-specialist Trainer taking part, Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill, has acknowledged the disadvantage this arena presents her and prepared for it.

Even without a native source of water, most Water-type Pokémon possessed the ability to create their own, allowing for those types to battle even in dry environments. But still, the requirement to devote power simply to match an opponent, it was an unfortunate disadvantage the world had acknowledged. A truth that all were not truly equal in this field. But was such a thing even possible with the wide variety of Pokémon in the world? Debates continued.

The Tender Pokémon Milotic was not one such Pokémon bound solely to the water, was perfectly capable of moving with serpentine grace even upon the land. But the truth was that on the land its movements were still less than in the water. There was still a gap between here and its full power. Moon had faced that, over the months of her training, realising this would be the case, but in the end still chosen to go forward with this partner of hers.

Milotic wished to fight alongside her and Moon had no desire to deny that wish.

The opening seconds of the second match between Ilima and Moon were immediately intense, the Smeargle partner of Ilima – a cream-coloured bipedal canine, sporting a long tail ending in a paint-secreting brush – crossing the distance between it and the Milotic partner of Moon in an instant. That speed, as those in the announcer's box reported, was unnatural for the Painter Pokémon, a clear technique it had claimed. Smeargle were unable to maintain more than four uniquely learned moves: the sole restriction upon their incredible versatility. If one of the specialised techniques it had learned was this extreme speed, that was one of the four Moon knew to expect.

The remaining three mysteries still.

The power of the charge from Smeargle was intense, crashing into Milotic and sending the Tender Pokémon flying, despite the far smaller size of the Smeargle that had attacked it. Hitting the barrier surrounded the battlefield, just before Moon, Milotic raised its head as Moon called her encouragements to the partner before her. Water was already cascading along Milotic's cream scales, the Pokémon manifesting the liquid to surround it. Many Water-type Pokémon used this ability: forming a coating of water to aid their movement, although the time and energy spent to do so in battles such as this made for a painful cost. Nevertheless Moon did not feel bad for this choice, and her focus and confidence kept Milotic's spirits high as the Smeargle before them vanished in a blitz of speed again.

Beyond the natural abilities it used: both lashing out with water as well as internalising it for offence and recovery, Moon's partner Milotic had two specialisations. Firstly the water it channelled, surrounding it like a shell that enabled it to move even faster over dry land. Secondly, ice.

To manifest and control the frozen water had been a journey across Alola, Mina's guidance leading Moon to Captain Lana, who knew much about drawing the similar type from her Water-type Pokémon. Milotic was all Moon trained with Lana – Moon aware Lana would be an opponent in the Pokemon League, Lana believing Moon would be in turn – but together with the Captain it was trained well. In the Final Trial with Kahuna Hala, Milotic had quickly changed water to ice to seal the Kahuna's Hariyama in place. One aspect of how it might wield that power.

Another, as Smeargle closed the distance between it and Milotic again, as act of counter.

Spikes of ice erupted from the water coating Milotic, the Tender Pokémon rapidly chilling a portion
of the liquid that wrapped around it, Moon's focus spotting Smeargle's angle of attack just enough for her partner to respond. The sudden mass of ice rebounded Smeargle, the Painter Pokemon diving back in surprise from the painful impact, as the lump of ice – no longer under Milotic's control as the water was – dropped heavy to the ground. A dangerous tactic that sacrificed the liquid Milotic needed to keep its speed and power high, but a necessary one to counter the strength that opposed it. Ilima nodded. That wasn't bad at all.

She'd taken it from Lusamine. The partner Milotic of that woman, it had released ice freely both times Moon had battled her, each to great effect. Seeing Trainers using the same species of Pokemon as she, Moon had from each she'd witnessed – whether in person or studying famous battles available – taken what she could. But none of those lessons learned felt as strange to her as this, to bring the battling style of her partner to mirror that woman's own. Gladion and Lillie would both be watching this battle. Would seeing Moon and Milotic fight like this feel off to them?

She still struggled with it.

For a moment faltered.

An explosion of fire focused Moon's attention, steam hissing in the air as the Smeargle, keeping its distance from Milotic now, unleashed a blast of flame into the water that wrapped it. Quick to point out that Ilima was moving to deny Milotic the water it used, Anna's point was agreed to by Alexa, quoting past battles she had observed where the wreathing liquid of a Pokemon would become the core of a battle between it and another. Ilima called another blast of flame and Milotic, under Moon's command, burst into movement alongside the barrier walls of the arena. The flames it dodged slammed into the barrier just before where Moon stood and she flinched back, even knowing she was safe. Few could blame her.

The Smeargle of Ilima was battling for attrition. Using its great speed to take position, then a blast of fire to strip away the water Milotic kept. The more Milotic lost, the more it created to maintain, the more strength it would give away. This was the core of this battle now, as Alexa had said. The strength Smeargle spent, would it be more or less than what Milotic lost? That came down now to what the Tender Pokemon did next.

Moon set the Waterium-Z into her Z-Ring and kept her focus tight.

She didn't have an Icium-Z. On the ascent of Mount Lanakila Kukui had discussed it with her, how those Z-Crystals tended to appear in the frozen caves, but despite looking Moon hadn't found one. Milotic was the only one of her partners to wield ice in any form, so it didn't specifically weigh on her, but one day she did intend to go back and search one out, simply to hold the variety.

There were Z-Crystals she rarely used, her partners not the types to bring out their full power, but even still with only two – Psychic and Ice – she didn't possess, Moon couldn't help wanting to find them all the same.

Expanding the options she could wield in any battle she would face.

The next blast of fire a jet of pressurised water shot through, striking Smeargle hard, the flame not dispersed hitting Milotic in the same moment. It was hard to say which Pokemon fared worse, both stumbling back, but with the potential of another Z-Move in hand, awareness remained that the advantage would be Moon's should she unleash it.

Professor Oak observed.

“The nature of multiple Z-Moves has left Moon with a battling style uniquely her own. That she can
use them even in non-offensive ways, as the use of the Grass-type Z-Move with her partner Decidueye has shown, indicates an extremely wide variety of high-power abilities she can unleash depending on the situation that faces her. Many Trainers across the world have battling styles that are their own, but Moon's is something that has never existed before, and because of that makes her very hard to predict. She has clearly trained incredibly hard prior to this Pokemon League, to be able to make use of that.”

“Moon's most notable appearances have all been centred around the Pokemon with her, more than her own battling ability.” Anna, well aware of all that happened of note across Alola, continued the topic. “But here we're specifically seeing not just incredible Pokemon to have been raised in such a short span of time, but also incredible talent as a battler from Moon herself. Despite the battle being in Ilima's favour so far, it is very much Moon making an impact within it.”

A second Z-Move was near. Aware of that, Ilima's focus was so tightened he couldn't hear a word of the announcers' voices, or the crowd around him. The pair of techniques his partner Smeargle was using had been enough to push Moon's Milotic into a bad position, but it had fought back hard all the same. The next major attack taken could easily open him up to a Z-Move reprisal.

To outplay that, Ilima moved as such.

Travelling once again at its extreme speed Smeargle closed in on Milotic, who had remained at the battlefield's edge to narrow the directions the Painter Pokemon could attack from. A lash of water whipped from Milotic's tail crystallised into ice, Moon's own focus and angle of view giving her the opportunity to track the Smeargle better than Milotic could. Moving at this speed was tiring too, but by pulling back from the ice each time, Ilima had made sure Moon felt confident in using it to stop these attacks.

Smeargle appeared overhead Milotic and swung down its tail into a chunk of ice that froze in response.

Then through it.

Milotic, being a Water-type Pokemon, was most at threat from the third of Smeargle's learned techniques – the Grass-type move Power Whip. But Ilima had held that move back, seeking to lull a sense of security from Moon in only showing two moves against her Pokemon, so that when he did command this attack it would hit with unexpected power. The ice formed to resist it cracked and shattered, this attack at this close range – especially coming out of an Extreme Speed dash – having more than enough strength to pass through any defense and land cleanly upon the Milotic's head.

A rushed “oooh” from the crowd echoed as Smeargle fell back from this hit and Milotic hit the ground, defeated by an overpowering and direct blow. Maybe Moon had still been on guard for Smeargle's remaining moves, and searching for an opportunity to unleash the Waterium-Z, but Ilima had denied her that. So what would be third, Moon? Calling back Milotic, she spent a moment considering. But with a Fire and Grass-type technique shown so far, Moon felt confident in assuming the type of the fourth Ilima's Smeargle had learned. Not Volcarona then, no.

Sylveon, Intertwining Pokemon, stretched as it manifested and set its eyes forward on its foe.

The next match began.

Of all of Moon's partners Sylveon's range of abilities was the widest at her command. The Fairy-type evolution of Eevee was well able to build barriers that weakened attacks, or distorted light, or even acted as lenses for focusing the Moonblasts it formed. Beyond that it was an agile mover; the curling feelers stretching from its head and neck could drain energy from whatever they wrapped around;
and the Pokemon could release a pink mist that obscured it from sight. A range of techniques that allowed it to achieve results of any form – a reliable Pokemon that Moon trusted fully. The training with Mina, it had sharpened all of Moon's Pokemon, but perhaps Sylveon the most.

Now to respond.

For Ilima it was simple logic. To call back Smeargle, weakened but not nearly yet beaten, and send out another fresh, would be to have that Pokemon and Moon's likely lose energy in similar amounts. At this pace, even with each victory he claimed, the Pokemon left behind would all be left weakened. A turn of the tide could overwhelm him all too easily. Cautious and logical, even despite the wide grin on his face, Ilima made this decision easily. Smeargle had more than enough power left to tease out just how that partner of Moon would fight, as well as leave it easy prey for a Pokemon to follow. There was no doubt at all in the Captain's mind that Moon's Sylveon would best his Smeargle here, but that didn't matter.

All that really did was how much he was able to do before that moment came.

In moments the pink mist Sylveon formed as part of its misty terrain spread out around it and the Intertwining Pokemon disappeared from sight; Alexa in the announcer's box pointing out this was a more traditional form of terrain in Pokemon battles compared to Moon's stunt with the Grass-type Z-Move, Anna theorising that Moon had a preference for terrain moves. Were she focusing on the battle any less, enough to hear them talking, Moon would agree.

A blast of fire from Smeargle tested the mist, disappearing into it and then passing through, Sylveon within able to dodge by the sight of Moon without. Recognising that, Ilima called for another use of Extreme Speed, Smeargle racing into the mist in a flash. But seeing it coming Moon countered that too, Sylveon's own fast-moving attack not quite the same in speed, but still quick enough to dodge away with the advantage the mist gave.

With both Pokemon now inside the mist, vision of their trainers cut away, it was up to them alone to find their way. All too quickly Ilima realised charging in had been overconfident – a slip of tactics in his excitement to clash with Moon again. Calling out he drew Smeargle to dash back at that same high speed, out of the field of mist before the Sylveon within it – used to that environment – could take the advantage.

Happily, just as she had with Gladion and his partner Umbreon at the base of Mount Lanakila, Moon called for a Moonblast and Sylveon gave answer. A beam of pink light burst out of the mist chasing Smeargle down.

“Hydro Pump!”

By Ilima's call the fourth technique his partner Smeargle had learned was released, a tremendous torrent of water surging from the Pokemon's mouth, crashing into and bursting against the powerful beam of Fairy-type energy Sylveon had unleashed. Against one another the two beams of power struggled, Sylveon's pushing hard against the faltering Smeargle – feeling the exertion of the battle with Milotic taking its toll – but not overpowering it before both attacks faded away. Moon frowned, the technique she had used so effectively against Gladion failing to strike here. But she had been right, in her guess, and was pleased to have not sent Volcarona out to face this danger.

It would have to be Sylveon that put this match to rest.

Racing forward Sylveon accelerated in speed, not at the same level as Smeargle's own but enough to make it obvious none of the Painter Pokemon's other attacks would hit it. Aware this had to be Moon's intent, that she must be prepared for Ilima to use such in counter, Ilima called for more
caution, more evasion using that speed. When each accelerated to their maximum it would be Smeargle that was never caught, though the cost of energy involved was significantly greater too. Was Moon's intent exhaustion then? To trick Ilima into wasting his partner's strength? Or was it both, a preparation to counter, and acceptance he might not? Was he overthinking this? Or was Moon just that dangerous a Trainer? He didn't know. For all those who knew Ilima, the expression of feral joy on his face said it all.

He was having the time of his life.

“Power Whip!”

Bursting out of its speed Smeargle lashed its tail around again, that powerful blow that had beaten one of Moon's Pokemon already. But this time, Moon prepared for an incoming attack, it bounced off of a strong barrier formed, before the ribbon-like feelers of Sylveon wrapped around the Smeargle's tail.

Oak took point on covering this topic.

“While the most powerful techniques of Sylveon are formed of the energy it releases – whether as beams, waves, or other forms – when draining energy from foes it takes far more by making physical contact with its feelers – a dangerous gamble by bringing the Pokemon closer to opponents, but one that has significant reward. Each of Moon's decisions with the three Pokemon she has used so far have been based around taking the more risky choice, a tactic no-doubt born of understanding the difficulty she faces. Ilima has shown caution often of the techniques Moon and her partners might unleash, but she has still a number of times narrowed him into situations where she can attack all the same. Both Trainers are showing an incredibly impressive amount of ability, for a battle that is still only in its first half!”

The grip Sylveon had was far too tight. That Pokemon far too healthy and Ilima's far too tired. The speed at which the remaining energy of the Painter Pokemon was being drained, it was significant. So much for wearing Sylveon down before sending out his next Pokemon, Ilima had only succeeded in letting Moon and her partner get warmed up.

Honestly.

He couldn't remember a time he was last as happily lost in battle as this.

Third from Ilima was a Pokemon Moon did not know, Rotom-dex not with her to provide analysis – Pokedexes considered unfair advantage in officially sanctioned League battles, the living device left with her mother instead. It was a small Pokemon, blue furred, a large head mounted atop a smaller body. Clutching a block of wood, the Pokemon breathed in and out, eyes closed, clearly deep asleep.

“Third from Ilima comes Komala, the Drowsing Pokemon!” Attempting to listen to Anna's announcement, Moon was forced to put her attention back to the field as the Drowsing Pokemon in particular suddenly launched itself forward, rocketing towards Sylveon through the air at frankly unreasonable speed. Sylveon, charged from draining the remaining energy of Smeargle moments before, dodged neatly, only for the Komala to hit the ground, then suddenly rocket in a rebound to where Sylveon was next. Was that Pokemon even really asleep?

It didn't make any sense.

“Komala is a curious Pokemon,” Professor Oak's explanation to those watching, Moon could only half-listen to, focused on the battle as she was. “Due to its specialised diet of sedative plantlife, it remains in a sleeping state for the entirety of its life. However this does not prevent the Pokemon
from being able to move, and even respond, to its surroundings. Wild Komala rarely battle, choosing to avoid others, but those partnered to a Pokemon Trainer can prove quite aggressive, as can be seen on the battlefield below!

It didn’t stop. Without any change in pace the Komala of Ilima seemed happy to surge across the League stage, hitting the ground and redirecting each time Sylveon dodged. Yet when Sylveon counter-attacked, firing a beam of Fairy-type energy at the incoming foe, it simply slipped past it, spinning around the wooden log it clutched to change its direction and pull out of the way of attacks. It was ridiculous.

Moon considered the Fairium-Z in her Z-Power Ring, swapped in when she had called Sylveon out before. Right now she and Ilima were roughly even, one of the Captain's Pokemon defeated, another almost completely exhausted. In return two of Moon's were declared unable to battle. And each of their third completely healthy in this moment.

If she could use a Z-Move, and steal the pace, it would help. No doubt Ilima still had incredible Pokemon, and would defeat her if he was able to continue matching her one for one. No, Moon needed to pull ahead here with a decisive blow. But Ilima definitely knew that and was watching out. Using Z-Moves wasn’t an easy thing at this level.

She'd need to use everything she and her partner had.

Another glow of Sylveon's body as another of the Komala’s charging attacks – all it seemed willing to do right now – was evaded. Another release of a field of pink mist, surrounding and obscuring the Intertwining Pokemon. If that Komala really was asleep, then it was Ilima's sight allowing his partner to hunt their foe. So Moon would need Sylveon out of sight. So they could perform their next step.

Spinning rapidly as it launched this time, the Komala blew apart the mist obscuring Sylveon as it passed through, able to generate intense force with each of its surprisingly powerful leaps. But something was different. Off. Ilima's eyes locked onto the smaller loose clouds of pink now drifting across the field, searching for their foe.

For Sylveon was not where it should be.

So almost all thought.

Mina and Acerola knew. Mina had helped Moon design this technique, and Acerola had been victim to it. The barriers Sylveon could form, to shape them to bend light away took time, and was obvious. But once hidden in the mist Sylveon had the freedom to disappear. Locked in one place, unable to move from where it was obscured, but for that moment completely invisible. Ilima, watching the smaller clouds for any sign of Sylveon, felt his eyes widen seeing Moon begin the Fairy-type Z-Pose. Acerola and Mina, in the competitor's box, both knew from where this attack would come.

No-one else did.

There should be light. There should be the light of a Z-Move. Sylveon should be glowing and that glow should be in one of the clouds but Ilima could not see it. Which direction should Komala dodge? Where was the light? Where was Sylveon? Why couldn't he see it?

... he couldn't see it.

He did realise, before the attack launched. Parse that the only way the light could be hidden would be if something was hiding the light. And if the light was hidden, so was Sylveon. And if Sylveon was hidden, something had to hide it.
And where better to be hidden than the one place Ilima expected the Pokemon to no longer be?

So yes, as the roar of the crowd broke, Sylveon blasting out of the light-twisting barriers it had formed, wreathed in Z-Power, Ilima did respond. Give direction to Komala to move, to leap as only the Drowsing Pokemon could. And it was a good leap, away from Sylveon's path.

But the difference between that movement and a Z-Move was still too extreme, and Ilima's response – while excellent – still too slow for the Z-Move Twinkle Tackle. An impact of incredible force struck and sent Komala flying across the field, the Pokemon slamming into the barrier surrounding it. Not quite defeated, still able to move but... the amount of damage taken was extreme. And that Sylveon, despite using a Z-Move, despite only being Moon's partner for less than a year, it was still standing steady. All of her partners so used to Z-Moves now they could continue after using one without showing concern.

Oh even he could feel how far up his face his smile was curling.

Compared to most Komala that adopted defensive strategies – lulling opponents into sleep, building up their defenses to be beyond harm – Ilima had trained his specifically for offence: a rarity that made his Komala an unexpected force for those used to them. For someone who didn't know anything of a Komala though, like Moon in this case, that had actually backfired. Compared to most Komala, Ilima's wasn't prepared to attempt to last out a fight on a disadvantage.

Moon had really got him good with that one.

Delightful.

Alright, enough enjoying the moment.

Calling Komala back, Ilima picked his fourth Pokemon. Both Gumshoos and Komala would still be able to do something – the first recuperating, the second not as badly hurt but still injured – but the pace of this battle Moon had definitely seized. On the other hand Sylveon had just performed a Z-Move: even if it was able to continue battling, that drain still mattered. Just as his Smeargle had failed to do anything to Sylveon, Ilima would ensure Moon's Sylveon could do no more. It was only fair.

The Wild Bull Pokemon Tauros, manifested before Ilima, stomped the ground and snorted loudly in agreement with his will. They'd win.

There was still so much more left to experience upon this stage.

A Tauros... Moon's expectations for what this Pokemon would do began to form. It could charge at great speed, held significant stamina, and would hit incredibly hard. Sylveon, though standing tall, would still be laid low were it to take a direct hit from that Pokemon's charge. Switching out now wouldn't be a bad idea – Volcarona would do well against this specific opponent – but... the pressure Moon felt from Ilima was strong. One single mistake could easily return the pace to his hands. Sylveon's will, its intent to fight, remained strong. Moon focused on that and set her eyes forward as the Tauros of Ilima began its charge and Sylveon moved to dodge. The only way was to do everything they could.

Any less was a loss well deserved.

Tauros accelerated.

Embracing an even stronger surge of power at the last moments the Wild Bull Pokemon countered Sylveon's dodge, catching and scooping up the Intertwining Pokemon between its horns before slamming it into the barrier lining the arena. Moon and her partner, they had taken into account the
speed at which the Tauros was charging, but Ilima had pushed for the strongest technique his partner could unleash. A dangerous gamble to bring out at any time, the Tauros now remaining still, panting heavily to recover from the immediate exertion, but the result was... as he'd wanted. The judge of this match, checking as Tauros stepped back and Sylveon dropped to the ground, pronounced the Pokemon of Moon unable to battle. The third of her partners defeated.

The crowd roaring loudly at this intense and amazing display.

“Despite Moon's varied team and unique use of Z-Moves, the battle remains firmly in Ilima's favour.” Observing, Anna gave her opinion. “With three Pokemon of Moon's declared unable to battle to only one of Ilima's, the advantage is squarely his.”

“The other two of Ilima's Pokemon have both taken significant hits though,” Alexa weighed in. “Whether they're enough to call the battle more than just barely shy of even we can't tell.”

“The Trainers in this Pokemon Battle are both very impressive,” Samuel Oak chose his own words as Moon chose her fourth Pokemon. “I would firmly say this battle could still go in either direction! Nothing is decided yet, and... oh! Well that just goes to show.”

The voices of the crowd, the voices of all watching, reacted to this. This was the first public announcement of Moon's partner Volcarona, evolved form of Larvesta, one of the strongest of all Bug-type Pokemon. Rare enough to find, difficult enough to raise, that having such made anyone notable, Moon's legend – steadily building second by second in this battle – grew rapidly into a greater form. Those who remembered the Pokemon she had shown before began to wonder if just maybe that one Dragon had evolved too.

Wouldn't that be something.

Wouldn't it.

Every time Moon called upon Volcarona the battle began the same. The Sun Pokemon appeared, floating above the battlefield, and then that field lit ablaze. The scales that fell naturally from its body, a dust of incendiary powder, ignited in an instant, turning wherever the Pokemon went into a storm of fire. A large part of Moon's training with it had, at first, been to curb this natural property so the Pokemon could exist without setting everything around it aflame. That said, in battle, this was an aspect well treasured by those who raised the Pokemon.

A creature so powerful the environment turned in its favour by its passage alone.

A rock, broken from the ground by a powerful stomp, flipped into the air by the Tauros's horns then sent flying with a quick back-kick, rocketed up towards the floating Sun Pokemon. But a powerful wind, mixing a surge of the scales that when concentrated burst into a forceful blast, pushed it aside, the rock deflected from the target it would so severely harm.

Training a Volcarona, developing with it techniques to use in battle, was no easy task. It was a Pokemon that took years of experience alongside to hone, and so with it Moon could only do so little. Unleash storms of fire with ease, but beyond that... there was not much her partner did besides float there. An easy target, which had led to its punishment multiple times before, and so Moon had focused on defense. That was as much as her partner was able to do for the moment. Exist and defend.

But in reward a field of raging fire without pause followed the Pokemon's mere existence, and the Tauros of Ilima amongst it remained at great risk from those flames. A Pokemon who exuded great danger by merely existing. Even if this was only as far as Moon and her partner could go thus far, it
was still significant.

What a troublesome foe.

Ilima had counters for Pokemon that flew, obviously – for if he did not he could never consider himself an even remotely able Trainer. But his Tauros wasn't specifically one of them, and Moon had done well in draining his team to this point. An exchange then. One Pokemon for another.

If amongst the flames Tauros would not be able to bring Volcarona down, without question the Parent Pokemon Kangaskhan could.

“As a measure of a Pokemon Trainer’s character, little could be more clear than this!” As the appreciative voice of Samuel Oak continued to narrate, Moon debated changing Volcarona for Bisharp, concerned that the strength of this opponent, the bipedal and heavy scaled Pokemon, was no doubt a counter Ilima had specifically chosen for Volcarona. But the flames spread about would be a danger for Bisharp: until they waned Moon couldn't send that Pokemon out. Volcarona made the battlefield unsuitable for half of Moon's Pokemon, which drove her to use it more often in the later stages of a fight.

That was simply how it was.

“As can be seen,” Oak continued his explanation, “the Kangaskhan partner of Ilima is without child. As a Pokemon, Kangaskhan exhibits the greatest strength when in defense of its child, however of course the use of such in battle is immeasurably immoral. Yet without the combative instincts a Kangaskhan holds to protect its child, it is nowhere near as interested in battle. That is why a Pokemon Trainer with a partner Kangaskhan has clearly forged a powerful Bond to allow their partner to fight. That Ilima has done so is as clear a sign of both his deep love for Pokemon and ability as a Pokemon Trainer as can be!”

Those who knew Ilima nodded and agreed.

Those who knew him best found themselves wondering whether his battle maniac nature had simply caught the interest of a similarly wild Kangaskhan itself.

On the League battlefield fire continued to rage, the Kangaskhan manifested within it already feeling the flames licking at its thick hide. Above floated the Sun Pokemon Volcarona, Moon keeping her focus and intent. If the Kangaskhan threw something, or shot something, Volcarona would move to dodge. If it leaped, or had some ability to close the distance, Volcarona would dodge that too. They'd avoid every attack that targeted them and wear down this Pokemon by the flames Volcarona spread, no matter how lacking in elegance the method was. Moon's determination to fight with everything she had demanded she do such.

Ilima, sending his command, had no complaints about her choices in the least.

The technique was one with similarities to Quick Attack, or Extreme Speed, in that the user would rapidly accelerate in a direction. But the time required to initiate made it slower, and easier to read. With the right teaching many Pokemon could embrace it, and Ilima had made the choice to add it to his partner’s repertoire. To close the distance and strike deeply a flying foe, the Flying-type move Aerial Ace was a powerful tool indeed.

The hit itself hurt. The Volcarona of Moon had a great natural speed, but had not yet grown to embrace it – the full power of the Sun Pokemon requiring far more time and growth to unleash. So even forewarned as Moon and her partner were, when the Kangaskhan launched with an aura of Flying-type energy around it there was little Moon's partner could do. The blow was struck, an
The technique was not to defeat Flying-type foes, it was to catch them. And with Kangaskhan's claw holding tight, and its great weight pulling Volcarona down, the Sun Pokemon's descent to the earth was without question.

In the brief moment the two Pokemon were falling, Moon quickly – and with practised ease – swapped the Firium-Z into her Z-Power Ring and performed its Z-Pose.

The instants of this moment went as followed:

Ilima, seeing Moon begin the motion, directed his partner to drop. Gravity pulled it faster to the ground, where even before its feet landed the Kangaskhan was digging its claws into the earth, hauling out a large chunk to throw.

Moon, completing her Z-Pose, was now sending power, Volcarona glowing brighter and brighter as it prepared to unleash the Fire-type Z-Move Inferno Overdrive.

Kangaskhan, with all the strength it could manage, threw the heavy mass of earth compressed by its power upwards. Volcarona, forming the blast, shot it down.

All over so fast Moon and Ilima had each only had time for a singular idea. Moon to perform the Z-Move. Ilima to interrupt it.

Caught on the rock, not the target below, it was between Volcarona and Kangaskhan that the Z-Move detonated.

And engulfed them both in the edges of its burning sphere.

This battle was one decided by experience. Even amongst the burning flames the Kangaskhan partner of Ilima still lifted and threw another block of earth. Volcarona, resistant to its own flames but not to those infused with Z-Power, remained too stunned to avoid the direct hit that successfully knocked it from the sky. And Moon's commands, her calls for response, weren't successful in helping her partner recover before Ilima's pinned it down. For its incredible innate strength, the Volcarona of Moon still had a long way to go before being able to truly compete as a member of its species.

That was how the fourth of Moon's partners was defeated.

Five of Ilima's partners had been seen. Of those five, one was declared unable to battle: Smeargle. Of those remaining, Komala, Gumshoos, and Kangaskhan had each taken significant damage. Some more able to battle than others, but each still notably hurt. The pace was Ilima's, but on a razor's edge. His remaining two partners, one a Tauros, the sixth unknown, were the healthiest of his Pokemon and would be acting as the counter to the remaining two of Moon. The rough evenness of this battle so far favoured Ilima, but as those commentating pointed out, it was still completely possible for a reversal of fortune. It came down to what came next.

From Moon came Bisharp.

Few knew just what this Bisharp was. The Kahuna of Alola had each experienced it. Kahili in the Final Trials had too. Mina and Tristan, in the training of Moon, knew. Gladion and Hau had observed it. But besides that... the Bisharp seen in the battle with Kahuna Nanu, it had already been worn down that day. Was not fresh, or able to display the true power it held.

Not like it was now, here finally, at the true peak of Alola Moon had promised to bring it to. The surrounding crowd, the eyes of the world, battles against the greatest of powers, it breathed out a low breath as the commentators remarked on the Pokemon's abnormally smooth head, only a small
fraction of the blade that had once curved over its metal skull remaining. That sundered pride, shattered in a battle it had confidently taken on, it was a wound the Sword Blade Pokemon held no shame in carrying or showing.

It had led to this meeting and this result, after all.

Professor Oak, in the announcer's box, made observation.

“That Bisharp is significantly aged: the lustre of its metal blades tells that clearly. Combined with the damaged head blade, it is clearly a Bisharp that was ousted from its position as a pack boss. I would confidently say that particular Pokemon is well older than Moon herself.”

“Old wild Pokemon will partner with humans that catch their interest,” Alexa took charge of this one, “but to do that so young, Moon...” there wasn't too much she could say to express it properly. That partner of Moon, it meant something that couldn't be truly explained. She'd touched the heart of a powerful Pokemon in a way few possibly could. As the Kangaskhan was a symbol for Ilima, that Bisharp was for Moon. That each was something more in the way they drew Pokemon to them.

Ilima, aware of the Bisharp's age by its lustre the same way Professor Oak was, felt a deep caution in his heart. That Pokemon was dangerous. Sensing that in turn, his partner Kangaskhan drew back. Should he switch for Tauros again? Or this time gamble on weakening this Pokemon with his own? In his heart of hearts Ilima was positive Moon had a Salamence as her sixth Pokemon. He couldn't match anything against that besides his own sixth at full power. Any less was far too risky.

This was the only choice to guarantee his win.

Even then, even with the caution, even with the awareness of the strength that opponent must hold, it was still a surprise. In two steps and a leap the Bisharp sailed through the air, crossed arms releasing a powerful slash as it closed in upon its Kangaskhan foe. The counter, as Ilima knew, to the Dark and Steel-type Bisharp was a Fighting-type move, which his partner knew, but even knowing that, even lashing out with a powerful strike at the incoming Pokemon, still the Bisharp went beyond.

Using its own attack to glance off of the straight punch of the Kangaskhan, Bisharp dropped back to the earth and stepped in, quick strikes of bladed hands scraping against the hard scales of the taller Pokemon before it. Dancing back out of the reach of the Kangaskhan's hands for just a moment after, quickly Bisharp dived back in, hauling itself up onto the Parent Pokemon's shoulder as the Kangaskhan stomped down hard, sending powerful tremors racing through the earth. Up close a knee from the Sword Blade Pokemon collided with the Kangaskhan's head before extending into a kick, Bisharp swinging its raised body in the air while gripping the thick bodied foe, circling around to the Pokemon's back.

Wild were the voices of the crowd, incredulous those commentating, at the incredible and athletic display of the Bisharp of Moon. Even those watching who knew the Pokemon, had seen its implacable pace towards foes and ferocious attacks, found themselves shocked. The song of Alola, whipped into a frenzy by the eyes and voice of all upon this stage, was flowing faster and faster and the Bisharp danced along with sparks of joy igniting within its heart. In the wild, as pack leaders, as hunters, Bisharp were pitiless Pokemon, sharp and focused as their blades. As a partner of Moon, assisting her in her climb to the peak, this Pokemon had taken a role of protector, called upon to aid her when she needed it.

But here, here at this peak where it was against battle with the best, an emotion the Pokemon species rarely felt bloomed. Joy, and from joy, battlelust. A feeling to match that of Captain Ilima himself.

No day before in the length of its life had the Bisharp of Moon been stronger than this.
“Not yet!”

But that alone would not decide this battle. Ilima's will and intent, his desire for this battle and the strength of his Bond with his partner, those were not things to disregard. The advantage Bisharp held, moving with incredible agility to maintain an assault upon the Kangaskhan of Ilima, was evened as, with a stronger than ever before stomp down, the Parent Pokemon shattered the earth around it into flying shards of stone, the upward wave of force enough to blow the Bisharp up into the air. Curving its fall Bisharp wound around the upward punch of Kangaskhan's right arm, swinging its own bladed arm around to counter the quick follow-up of its left: the impact of the grounded Kangaskhan's fist strong enough to send the airborne Bisharp flying across the field and into the barrier wall.

Rebounding from legs pressed against the barrier the Sword Blade Pokemon set off at a run across the field to close the distance once more, another stomp of Kangaskhan's foot sending waves of force through the earth its opponent leaped over, changing position quickly to circle around the foe and close through gaps in its powerful Ground-type attacks. Moon's training with Hapu had taught her much about this form of attack, and Ground-type Pokemon proved far more able to create omnidirectional waves than any other. She knew what to do here.

An even fight.

Fists and blades clashed, the two Pokemon before one another exchanging a rapid series of blows, blocks, counterattacks, and feints. Every Pokemon the two Trainers had brought out fought differently, and the two had engaged in a wide variety of styles over the course of this battle. Anna and Alexa, leading the charge on announcing, could not help but insist upon how impressed they were with each. Though each Trainer was young, Ilima still considered that even with his twentieth approaching, the two were clearly incredible.

What an astounding battle to open the first Alolan Pokemon League.

It was Kangaskhan that was first to break. The damage from the Z-Move it had suffered the peripheral of, it made the difference, and slowly Bisharp wore it down. Struck a leg that buckled, rapidly boxed the Pokemon's face, then landed a direct kick of its own into the Kangaskhan's chest. The concentrated assault, not slipping or failing for a moment, ended with the partner of Ilima falling back and the judge overseeing declaring it unable to battle. That this was only the second of Ilima's Pokemon, compared to four of Moon's, to be announced such didn't matter one bit.

As far as every last person watching was concerned, this was a battle that was incredibly close.

Acknowledging that, Ilima brought his Tauros back to the field.

There was still the threat of a Z-Move, and Moon would no doubt be searching for the chance to use it. The advantage in health and stamina was with Ilima's Tauros now, and to counter that Moon would need to use a Z-Move from Bisharp. If she didn't land one, the pace would go too far in Ilima's favour.

Which meant Ilima had to do everything he could to prevent Moon from unleashing such.

The field was large enough, and that Tauros fast enough, Moon knew, that there was no way to use the Dark-type Z-Move Black Hole Eclipse here. She'd considered it, as an attack that could be performed at range, but it wouldn't work. To stand a chance of stopping that Tauros, Bisharp would need to hit a close-range Z-Move without anything holding it back. Easier said than done, as the Wild Bull Pokemon stomped at the ground, lowered its head to present its great horns, and charged at full speed again.
Much like Sylveon, Bisharp proved unable to outspeed the charging Tauros, instead focusing on responding to its charge. The leap, intending to go over the top of the charging Pokemon, Bisharp made confidently, turning to swing a blade into the sudden back-kick the Wild Bull unleashed. Moon's focus on the battle, connected to its own, gave the Bisharp more awareness of its surroundings, more understanding of how to respond. This opponent, it would read its every move and lay it low.

That was the reforged pride of the Bisharp that had climbed to the peak of the world alongside its new pack.

Ilima knew the match-up here, between the techniques of his Tauros and the typing of Moon's Bisharp, was not good. Much like his Kangaskhan Tauros could stomp the earth and unleash shockwaves, but Moon and her partner seemed specifically trained to handle that. But, and this was what was important, the advantage of stamina was his. Moon would be seeking the way to perform a Z-Move, and each time that was denied it would take more from her partner in this fight. So Ilima's directions, his commands for Tauros to wheel around and charge Bisharp again, were underlined by the knowledge his partner would need to react to every dodge the Sword Blade Pokemon made. Never give it distance or peace. Never give it the opportunity to unleash the most powerful of its attacks. It would make mistakes as it tired, and by those mistakes Ilima's partner would drive further the advantage they held. His confidence in the Wild Bull Pokemon's stamina not unfounded, Ilima remained focused.

With skill and technique unrelenting, victory was still theirs to seize.

It was a vicious dance, tense and draining, for both Pokemon and Trainer alike. Moon had set the Steelium-Z in her Z-Power Ring, and Ilima had responded as she'd expected him to. Commentary passed overhead that neither had the spare focus to listen to, descriptions from those commentating of how the two Trainers were locked in a search to unleash and prevent the unleashing of a Z-Move. As the battle continued on, Bisharp scoring light hits but being hit back hard in return – even despite its steel body – Moon came to her conclusion. The focus on preventing a Z-Move, it would give another option instead.

If Ilima thought Moon was going to use a Z-Move...

As Moon raised her hands and began a Z-Pose, Ilima's eyes widened, the situation not nearly right for its release. Was she trying to force it through? He wouldn't allow it! Rearing back its head in response to Ilima's command, focusing all the force it could, the Tauros brought down its full power upon the Bisharp before it.

Hala, amongst those watching, who had seen the Bisharp of Moon do the same to his Hariyama, nodded. Her and her partners' equal willingness to take the greatest of risks to stand up to those stronger, it wasn't something just any Trainer could do. They had to share their will equally to go that far.

A drive for victory forged of equal hearts striving together.

A thing few would ever expect to see from a twelve year old girl.

The technique, in name, was Metal Burst. A counter-attack of the Steel-type, it took the damage that fell upon a Pokemon then returned it even stronger upon a foe. A dangerous move, for it required taking a great blow to deal an even greater one, but the sharpened will of Moon and Bisharp allowed it.

Ilima's eyes, wider still at being led into this trap, stayed fixed upon the two Pokemon in the clash. Of
the Tauros, staggering back from the surprising and forceful blow, legs shaky and buckling. And the Bisharp, on one knee, unable to rise again. Between the Kangaskhan and Tauros of Ilima it had been exhausted, and though proudly it had taken on the strategy Moon had thought of, pretending to perform a Z-Move in order to unleash a counter-attack upon a hasty foe, it had still been costly.

It...

A judge, observing, pronounced both Pokemon too hurt to continue the battle. Ilima and Moon were to call each back.

Ilima's third.

And Moon's fifth.

There was tittering amongst the crowd as Ilima chose Komala again, but he didn't care. This battle between him and Moon, he wouldn't have it end with one of the Pokemon pulled from an earlier battle just lamely remaining standing after it all. Before revealing his sixth, he would give everything the five before had to give. That was his own pride.

And it wasn't like either of these two, Komala or Gumshoos, were completely beaten yet.

Moon's sixth Pokemon was Salamence. Immediately the crowd's roar surged again, Anna, Alexa, and Samuel Oak all admiring the Dragon Pokemon. To have one at Moon's age, even more than the rest of her Pokemon, even the Volcarona, it stood out as seemingly impossible. Ilima, having suspected this from the very beginning, nodded.

Attention from the crowd focused upon the band around the Dragon Pokemon's tail. Wait, was that a Mega Stone attached to it? Ilima's call for attack went ignored as Moon and her partner tensed and shared the will of Mega Evolution. No holding back.

The roar of the crowd and shocked cries of the commentators meant nothing to Ilima. He'd known Moon had a Key Stone and Salamencite for the longest time. He'd known this was how her fight with him would end. Now all that mattered was what each of his partners could do. But he was confident. His Z-Move still unused, as Anna was quick to point out. Even against the power of Mega Salamence, manifested before him, Ilima kept his smile. No, especially because of the power manifested before him. All those times he'd wished to battle Moon, to test her and see how far she could push him, being denied them had led him to this. It had been worth it.

It had all been worth it.

He laughed and gave his next command.

Quick to attack and reposition itself Komala continued to rocket around the field. But with a mouth full of blue flame, lifting off of the ground to float overhead, the Mega Salamence of Moon quickly brought this match to an end. So this was the power of Moon's final partner, flying above the battlefield and unleashing such intensity. Mega Evolution could last some time, especially for the trained, and so Ilima chose to have no hope in outlasting it. He'd need to beat that form outright.

But he still chose Gumshoos next, if nothing more than as an announcement of his own intent. He wanted things to go this way. To feel the greatest of pressures and intensities here on this stage. Making these decisions, he wouldn't complain about how it came to an end.

The feelings he felt in this moment, they were too much to doubt.

This battle was over quickly too, the Gumshoos unable to stand against the overpowering force of
the Mega Evolved Dragon above it. But that was fine, Ilima smiled as he called that partner back. Moon had earned that.

He held a simple Pokeball now, a sign oft-considered that of a Pokemon from one's youth. His Z-Ring, without a Z-Crystal set within it to this point, Ilima placed a deep brown Z-Crystal within. Something he had earned himself independent of his Island Challenge. Trained under an old master for the right to wield. Now he and his oldest partner would unleash it for all to see. Activating the Pokeball, Ilima smiled as the partner it contained appeared before him.

Now he and Eevee would show the world just what their true power was.

Against the Mega Salamence of Moon, a fully evolved and Mega Evolved Dragon, stood an Eevee. Incredulity coursed amongst those watching, while those who did not doubt Ilima's skills questioned what secret he and his partner held. Those who knew, who understood the Z-Crystal set within Ilima's Z-Ring, waited with bated breath. The display of the full power of the Evolution Pokemon.

Ilima, with wide grin, raised his arms as Z-Aura surged around him.

A Z-Move? Now? At this distance from Mega Salamence? Moon's lack of understanding drew her partner to raise higher into the air, while those commentating discussed just what this power to be unleashed was. The Eevee partner of Ilima was shining brightly now, pulsing with intense Z-Aura. What attack was it to perform? With easy steps the brown-furred Pokemon strode forward, in no hurry at all to move.

The aura around it did not fade.

Wait, Moon's eyes widened further, was that Eevee-

“Quick Attack!”

Faster than any other Pokemon to have stood on this stage. With power that eclipsed every other foe to have clashed. The air split and howled as through it at speed none could react to the Eevee aglow with rainbow light surged, slamming into Mega Salamence and pushing it all the way into the barrier wall, the tiny Pokemon to have done so racing along the wall as Salamence's wings beat hard to push it back into the free air of the arena once more.

The crowd roared.

“Extreme Evoboost!” Ilima's raised voice crossed the battlefield, caught by Moon's ears and cameras at ground level both. “This is a move that only the Pokemon Eevee can use, that uses Z-Aura to energise its body into a supreme state that can battle even a Mega Evolved Pokemon! This is our all, Moon! I'm thankful you got to see it!”

The confidence in that, the belief from Ilima that this victory was his, manifested easily in the way his partner Eevee jumped from wall to wall of the barrier surrounding the battlefield, evading the flames breathed out by the flying Mega Salamence before slamming into it with great force over and over again. It was... horrifically uneven, the great dragon unable to do anything against the insanely quick and powerful tiny Pokemon that opposed it. Keeping his eyes high, Ilima smiled. The journey that had led him to take on the Eevium-Z and begin the path of mastering this power, it had been a rewarding one. He was proud, and thankful, to be able to finally show the distance he and his partner had walked.

This victory earned in the greatest of battles he had ever partook.

Moon's mind burned. Ilima's Z-Move, it hadn't been an attack, it had been to empower his partner
Eevee in a way no Z-Move should be able to do. Moon had learned about it, about how to use Z-Moves to charge a Pokemon, but the power never lasted. It never stuck around, fading away in moments. This special move, that allowed Eevee to keep the power, she'd never expected it. A surprise and now her partner, her Mega Salamence, couldn't even begin to keep up with the tiny Pokemon hammering it again and again.

What if she used a Z-Move? If she drew out the Dragonium-Z and released the full power of Salamence against this foe? Doing such, every single time it left Salamence exhausted. Not as badly harmed as the first, after practise in being used to each power, but still doing so, it would end the battle. If it even hit Eevee, the best this could do now was end this with a tie. And Moon couldn't even believe it would hit. That Eevee was way too fast. She couldn't use a Z-Move to attack here. It wouldn't work.

She couldn't... attack.

It wasn't something she'd ever done before. It wasn't something she'd ever considered before. The teaching in using Z-Moves, it had always been in expressing that power fully and immediately, for holding it caused it to fade quickly away. But, maybe...

There was no reason to believe this would work. It was an idea never-before tested, a moment's wonder whether such powers might react. But... Moon's mind focused upon the idea. She believed, from the bottom of her heart, that this battle was all but lost. The only way to win now, against the ridiculously powerful Eevee of Ilima, was to go beyond anything she or anyone else had ever imagined, just as Ilima had now.

In that case, not the Dragonium-Z but...

All eyes locked onto Moon as she set the Normalium-Z into her Z-Ring. Samuel Oak was narrating as fast as he could, discussing how a combination of Mega Evolution and Z-Move had never before been seen. How each took so much power from a Trainer that the two could never be used at once. Unless, of course, that Trainer held an unlimited reserve of power to give.

Pitaya, watching, frowned. Moon was doing something different from each time she had used this power before. What was her student thinking? She focused on Moon's expression, something wild and desperate. An idea beyond ideas forged in the last moments of a battle beyond intensity.

Would it bring success? Or failure?

She waited to see.

Moon raised her arms. Z-Aura flowed around her. Ilima, catching this motion, spent a moment acknowledging it before focusing upon his partner, circling the Mega Salamence flying in the centre of the ring. Whatever ultimate attack Moon was to unleash, he and Eevee would evade it. That would be the end of this fight. He knew that in his heart.

All those around the world tensed as Moon completed her Z-Pose, arms held to mimic the character 'Z' itself.

A sight the world had never before seen.

Salamence roared. It roared and the air shook, pressure so intense countless members of the crowd recoiled. The force exerted by the Mega Evolved Dragon, it went beyond belief. As precursor to its ultimate attack, a golden shine beginning to form around the Pokemon's body, it gave the exact impression of what such a combination of Mega Evolution and Z-Move should be.
Moon, feeling the intense demand upon her own mind, focused with everything she could. The power was there to give but to control and direct it, to hold it, that was something else entirely.

But... she... her partner... they would...

They'd unleash this power beyond anything to ever come before.

When Moon had first performed the combination of Mega Evolution and Z-Move, against Lusamine in the depths of Ultra Space, it had been using the Dragonium-Z. Salamence had been wreathed in light, taking on the larger draconic form of its attack, a form that soon expressed itself in a great surge of power. That form had been purple, flavoured by the Dragon-type attack at its base.

This time that form was gold.

Great wings larger than Salamence's before beat as a pair, different again from the curved and fused shape of its Mega Evolved form. A long tail lashed out from its body, tip almost trailing over the ground, as a neck lengthened too, jagged waves of scales along it stretching out as the head of the shape sharpened, wider jaws lined with teeth filling it up. Aglow in gold this shape, this form of energy, remained there in the skies, wings beating slowly, each flap sending out such a surge of wind that even the empowered Eevee was caught and pushed back.

Seconds passed by, silence the crowd's at this sight. Moon, eyes closed, focused, her heartbeat racing but her mind locked on. Hold it. Keep it. This power, Z-Aura caught by Mega Evolution, don't let it go.

Don't let this form fade.

... It didn't.

“That-” even beyond all of the exclamations before, the voice of Samuel Oak was shocked. “That form, that is... something different. Something different from Mega Evolution or Z-Move!” With that the roar of the crowd came back more than ever before, Ilima on the ground staring up at the massive golden dragon overhead. What... what had Moon...

“By combining the power of a Z-Move with Mega Evolution, Moon's partner has taken all of that strength into its own body, much the same way as the Z-Move from Ilima we've just seen!” Oak was speaking at a rapid pace now, his own heart pounding at this new sight. “This form... something less concrete than a Mega Evolution,” the golden body of the giant dragon flickered, outline constantly reshaping itself, “but holding onto the power of a Z-Move for strength,” the dragon slowly lowered, tail coiling on the ground, Ilima's partner Eevee standing just before its Trainer, growling at the great foe before it, “this is something apart from Z-Move or Mega Evolution!”

He already had a name in mind.

“This form, this combination of powers,” Samuel Oak smiled the deepest he could ever, for the sight he had been granted here on the stage of the first Alolan Pokemon League, “to name it, I will call it Ultra Evolution! And this Pokemon before us: Ultra Salamence!”

Ultra Evolution. Ultra Salamence. Immediately the name imprinted itself in the hearts of the world, a showing of a power and form never before seen. Beyond anything believed possible. Professor Sycamore, watching from Kalos, had neither lowered nor drunk from the glass he held for the past few minutes.
Ilima, blown away by the sight, found his smile unchanging. A power beyond powers. Something never imagined. What Moon had shown him, what he had pushed her to create, he... he...

“We’re not done!”

The command flowed through the Bond between him and his oldest partner, Eevee still aglow with rainbow light racing forward, unwilling to bow before the great golden dragon it faced. Despite its ferocious roar before this form now, the being known as Ultra Salamence, was silent, resting on the ground as if struggling to hold onto its form. Maybe it was, with that much power. Ilima would still fight with everything he and his partner had. Any less would be an insult, to him, to Eevee, to Moon, to Alola, and to the very world itself.

Moon chose Dragon Breath.

Bright, brighter than any Dragon-type move should be, shining with a light that blinded, an intense orb of brilliant blue formed in the open mouth of the gold dragon Ultra Salamence. Eevee, racing forward, did not shy from its goal of striking the dragon with everything it had. But the flames released, howling with a galeforce of sound that roared even over the voice of the crowd, marked the end. Blue crawled up the walls of the barrier surrounding the arena, those measuring the readings of the protective coating making increasingly more nervous noises about the amount of damage it was sustaining.

But the barrier did not break, the flames burned away, and the bright golden form of Ultra Salamence dispersed, to reveal a single Dragon Pokemon standing tall, head still raised, roaring a victory cry.

The bested form of Ilima's partner Eevee lying before it.

The victory of the first battle of the first Alolan Pokemon League, between Captain Ilima of Melemele Island, and Moon, child from Kanto who had embraced and been embraced by the spirit of Alola – Moon's to claim.

Chapter End Notes

First thing's first, art! To start with the Moon art featured in the VS banner has been drawn by @milkychai. Chai has been an amazing help in producing four different character arts that mimic the Sun/Moon style for use in these banners, we'll be seeing their Tristan, Jace, and Pitaya in upcoming chapters.

Secondly, I'd like to just share this excellent Ryuki drawn by my buddy Jen at @Sphenodontiaart (slight body horror warning for her art). Followers of the Sun/Moon anime might have seen Ryuki make his excellent appearance in the most recent episode, and my excitement for that proved infectious enough for Jen to draw this rowdy boy. I'm very thankful to her.

I want to talk a little about my style of approach for writing Pokemon battling. To start with, I have no loyalty to the four moves limit in the games and indeed anime and manga too. A Pokemon has natural techniques involving the use of their claws, teeth, whatever physical features they have. Many times I will specifically write them using a technique, like Decidueye's Leaf Blade or Spirit Shackle, without naming them. I've even described Decidueye as firing Grass-type arrows at targets, which is more like a Long Reach (Hidden Ability) Leaf Blade than anything else. Generally rather than
specific moves I treat a Pokemon as having a range of powers they develop over time that people apply the name of moves to, but they have a lot more flexibility in practise than in the games' logic.

However: the techniques I do have Pokemon use are still sourced primarily from their natural learnset. Pokemon performing moves beyond that are specifically Pokemon with reasons to: those who've trained for long enough to be taught techniques out of their regular wheelhouse, like Ilima's partners using Sandstorm and Earthquake, or Hala's Poliwrath using Poison Jab. Decidueye doesn't use Phantom Force, for example, because that's not to me a naturally learned technique (given you can only get a Decidueye with that technique in the game via Event). Or if it is a learned technique, it would be something developed with experience, like Decidueye's leaf dodge.

Smeargle I specifically locked to four moves because of its natural Sketch ability, and specifically used the four moves Ilima's strongest Smeargle in the game knows. You might note the initial three Pokemon from Ilima in this fight were the same as his game versions. I'll use game Pokemon as kick-off points a lot, but often also add my own touch of flexibility and style. That's a lot of my thought about how I design Pokemon combat in Eldritch.

So this battle between Ilima and Moon is the largest Pokemon battle in Eldritch by a metric. After I finished writing it I immediately fretted that this much writing solely focused on a combat scene was too much, but support from friends encouraged me to follow through with my initial vision for this chapter anyways. Within this chapter it was important for me to a) drink my Ilima respect juice and give him the battle he's dreamed of and b) define Moon's starting point in the League. We got a solid look into where each of her Pokemon is at, what they're doing, and because of that I can flow much faster with her in future chapters.

My initial outline for the chapter pacing of the first rounds of Eldritch was four fights per chapter so I could give them equal focus while maintaining a solid pace but haha I totally broke that. Now I have to figure out how I'm going to approach pacing over the next few chapters, but all I can do is write and see what happens. I'll have faith as long as you all believe in me. I really, and truly, hope this chapter worked for you, held interest and entertained, without feeling like a slog to get through something so combat focused. Tournament arcs are notorious things pacing-wise, so choosing to end Eldritch on one is a big declaration from me that does keep me worried. But I'll keep doing my best so just let me know your thoughts so I can improve!

So that's it. Fifty chapters huh. Almost 450k words. Wild. To those who've read this far, thank you for all your support, it means the world to me. If you have any thoughts at all please consider leaving a comment, and if you can, please consider sharing the advertising posts for Eldritch on twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

That's it for this chapter, I hoped you enjoyed. See you with the next one.
Revelations of Power, Determination, and Prediction

Chapter Notes

This chapter uses a custom style - for best readability, please ensure the "Show Creator's Style" button at the top of the page is active.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You seem unsatisfied.”

Moon jumped at Ilima's observation, as the two Trainers placed their Pokemon into the care of the League Pokemon Center. A private access from the staging ground for League competitors allowed the two to avoid determined reporters lurking about the building, and the Pokemon Center carers took the Pokemon for healing with minimal comment. Moon mentioned checking that her Salamence was okay and received confirmation it would be. Little more she could do for now. She turned to face Ilima, though did not raise her head to meet his eyes.

Was it right? Ilima had in every sense defeated her, beaten her Pokemon handily, and outmatched even her partner Salamence in its Mega Evolved state. What she did, what she pulled from nothing to win and defeat someone stronger than her, was it really-

A hand settled on Moon's head, Ilima smiling at her when she looked up at him, no upset at all on his face. He ruffled her hair.

“Who was stronger?” Ilima asked the question easily, smile ever with him. “You defeated me in a Pokemon Battle, for the moment that makes you the stronger Trainer. I have no complaints about how this ended, Moon, nor about what you did to defeat me. In truth I feel only excitement at this new power revealed. That form, that dragon, my only wish now is to battle it again after all of this is done. Would you do me that favour, Moon? Allow me to battle you again? I am sure that the remainder of this Pokemon League will only help you grow stronger still. I would very much like to experience the you who has continued on from this point.”

She... it felt odd for Ilima to be so calm. Moon's heart still felt like it was hammering after everything that had happened. Another way she felt like Ilima was a stronger Trainer than herself but... he seemed unwilling to hear that. Only had one thing to ask.

So yes, Moon nodded, Ilima's hand lifting from her head, she would battle him again after the League was done. As many times as he liked.

Only barely did Ilima keep the slightest hint of teeth from making its way into his smile.

“I will hold you to that.”
Moves and Mega Evolution, that awareness that drifted in the global cognition had still not been prepared. Not for the way she and those with her battled, showing strength and focus that went far beyond expectation. And not for the conclusion.

No-one had been prepared for the conclusion.

Delighted to have been the one to observe it first-hand, to place upon this new phenomenon a name, Samuel Oak fielded reporters from the moment he stepped down from the announcer's box of the Alolan Pokemon League, Alexa gone off to call upon the next announcer she and Anna had chosen. Yes, the distinguished Professor confirmed, he felt confident in proclaiming the power Moon and her partner Salamence had shown at the battle's end as something new: a fusion of Mega Evolution and Z-Move that created something apart from either. The name of Ultra Evolution was on everyone's lips, the sight of the golden Ultra Salamence on everyone's minds. What a thing.

For those to come next as competitors it was quite the pressure, with such an intense and amazing showing – an all out six against six battle – opening this Pokemon League. Not that what would come next would not impress too. One of the four Tapu of Alola, divine deities of the region, would be clashing against the legendary Psychic-type Trainer Sabrina. What would be seen in such a fight? None knew for sure.

Though plenty enough held their suspicions.

Sabrina rested silently in the staging room of the Pokemon League dome, eyes closed but mind abler. When she had drawn from the lottery to determine her League position, she had flexed the powers she held to try and place as close to Moon as she might. Not quite the first battle, but right next to it. Should she win, she would face Moon next. That was exactly now the problem.

She'd looked for the closest place to Moon she could find. But in return without considering her opponent, been matched against one of the worst possible for her. As a Trainer, it was true she was out of her prime. Her lifestyle as an actress she'd embraced happily, but also accepted it took time from the honing of her skills. Even a majority of the Pokemon she'd used when battling at her peak were no longer with her. She'd prepared some more to fill out her team in Unova, but had gone into this League knowing her own powers, her ability to read her opponents so she might move in perfect counter to them, would be essential. She'd said it precisely, hadn't she? “There are no movements any Trainer can make that can escape my predictions.”

Except she wasn't facing another Trainer.

Why did Legendary Pokemon of all things have to decide to compete? The Tapu of Alola were known to those who looked from abroad, a feature of the region considered quite notable. Legendary Pokemon that appeared commonly, holding relations with the leaders of a region, that was something else. But she hadn't predicted this. When the four Tapu appeared to draw their own positions, Sabrina had tried then to look into them. To see the power that flowed around the Island Deities and just whether she could probe their minds.

She couldn't.

And now she was to face a Legendary Pokemon in her first major battle in years without the ability to use her own psychic powers to close the gap.

It was almost laughable how poorly her luck had worked out.

“Miss Sabrina? Your battle will be beginning soon.”
Standing with a wave to the judge calling her, Sabrina set off slowly, eyes still closed, awareness of her surroundings innate. Onto the stage of the Pokemon League she emerged, and to her place on the stage's right she walked. The time for her battle to begin.

“On the east side of the stage stands a woman who needs no introduction;” the voice of Alexa took charge of doing what she'd just claimed as unnecessary, “the legendary Psychic-type expert, former Gym Leader of Kanto's Saffron City, as well as famed actress now living in Unova: taking part in this next League battle is Sabrina!”

A roar of the crowd. She had popularity here, even when facing one of the divine guardians of the region. That was interesting.

“And on the west side of the stage.” Holding her words for a moment, Anna’s eyes locked onto the pillar to the north-west. Each of the four pillars at the corners of the League dome were in reference to the four islands of Alola and their positions, and atop each rested one of those four islands' Guardian Deities. A loud call, echoing and somewhat crowing, accompanied a crack of lightning and thunder as Tapu Koko, Guardian Deity of Melemele Island, lifted off that pillar and began its descent.

“The Island Deity Tapu Koko of Melemele Island.”

Different was the pulse of voices in response to this Pokemon’s descent. The mood of the crowd to Sabrina’s senses was... confusion about how to feel in this situation. A general belief in the infallibility of the Island Deity, and thus that Sabrina would never win. But from that a wonder as to why to cheer for Tapu Koko at all. Why the Tapu themselves were even here, the result of their presence as obvious as it was. It was almost oppressive, the level of doubt weighing upon her – the crowd’s and her own. This truly was not fair.

But none of that, not even her own doubts, would stop her from giving this her all. Inside of Sabrina still beat a Trainer's heart. And the spirit of the Pokemon League, she felt that too.

She'd still give it her all.

“Joining the two of us,” Anna spoke again as the crowd began to settle and Tapu Koko took its position, entering the League battlefield before the barrier that surrounded it rose up, “is Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island. As the single closest person in the world to Tapu Koko, Kahuna Hala is poised as the perfect figure to provide insight into the battle we are about to see. Kahuna Hala, before we begin, could we please receive your thoughts?”

“Hmmm,” giving weighty consideration to all he would say, Hala spent a moment in thought before continuing. “To battle a Tapu is something different from a regular Pokemon, as is befitting their Legendary status. There is little I can say so as to not influence this battle before it begins, but I will state that Sabrina faces a significant task – but not an impossible one.” Voices amongst the crowd reacted with great surprise to hear the Kahuna of the very Tapu in battle say such. “It is in her hands how this battle will go. I will say no more.”

Quite the endorsement. For the first time Sabrina opened her eyes, the immediate presence of the crowd around her dulling, but the Tapu before her seeming to fill up her vision in its place. It seemed gigantic, so many times larger than she knew it to be. Her senses for not just Bonds but all forms of power about others, they made the Tapu far more terrifying than those watching could conceive.

But in the end all that meant was that she was just seeing the truth no-one else could.

The boards around the stadium lit up, Sabrina and Tapu Koko's names and visages displayed.
Beneath her name was a count of Pokemon, four in total, the number she'd kept with her and those she'd raised in Unova combined. Oh she'd commanded six together in times past, but her atrophy had changed her situation. If she'd been nominated for this League even a few more months ahead she likely could have brought at least five. But now was not the time to complain. Now was the time to fight. At the midpoint of herself and Tapu Koko, standing just outside the barrier surrounding the field, another judge raised their arms to indicate Sabrina and Tapu Koko both. Once more time dilated, Sabrina's focus as she grasped and raised a Pokeball tightening to its max.

And then...

“Begin!”

The manifestation of Sabrina's chosen partner, the Psi Pokemon Alakazam, her first, strongest, and oldest, drew only a scattering of attention compared to the flash of Tapu Koko as the Land Spirit Pokemon unleashed its power, electricity bursting from its body and washing across the field, crackling and jumping, climbing the walls of the barrier surrounding. The presence of the Tapu was so extreme as to make Sabrina and her partner seem so small. But that didn't stop her from intending to give this her all.

Didn't stop her from shifting one of the wide bracelets she wore to reveal a shimmering rainbow stone within.

“She has begun the battle with an intense opening move, performing Mega Evolution with her partner Alakazam! It's clear she intends to give her full power from second one!”

She'd debated it, whether to begin this way or not. But in the end Sabrina had known that if she did not strike Tapu Koko deeply, the rest of her Pokemon would never stand a chance to do even a little. So it had to be this way. Her partner, the yellow-bodied and fox-faced humanoid, its Alakazite Mega Stone tied by a cloth to one of the Pokemon's two horns, shone red and transformed into something more, its psychic power now washing out in a wave to compete with Tapu Koko's electric own.

The form of Mega Alakazam was more wizened than its norm, the physical body of the Pokemon withering as its psychic powers expanded beyond all limit. From its face now flowed a beard of white, a red bead emerging from the centre of its head. The two spoons Alakazam were known to carry, symbols of their psychic strength, spun around the Mega Evolved Pokemon as it levitated, each splitting apart into two as a final fifth coalesced from the raw psychic energy the Psi Pokemon commanded. This was the form of Sabrina's most powerful partner giving their all. Even despite everything, she and Alakazam could still join their hearts and minds to create a power difficult to
Now their battle could truly begin.

A noise of surprise came from Tapu Koko as the electricity around it flickered, beginning to bend to the will of another. Mega Alakazam held more than enough inner power to replicate such a field, and its psychic energies quickly infused and twisted it away. To begin with they'd deny this power to the deity before them.

Then through its efforts to take that power back strike it down.

Electricity cracked and forked through the air, psychic energy shaping and directing it as the Island Deity Tapu Koko silently exerted its will. To Sabrina, connected to her partner by a Bond of unbreakable strength, it felt as if trying to pull against a mountain. Or an entire island of Alola. An immovable wall of power resting before them. Moving one hand as its other held the electricity in the air, Alakazam sought to attack Tapu Koko with psychic force.

The Island Deity blitzed through the air and slammed a massive clawed hand into the Psi Pokemon's side.

The battle between Tapu Koko and the Mega Evolved Alakazam of Sabrina was not close. The partner of Sabrina was incredibly able, forming barriers in an instant to negate its opponent's force, counter-attacking with an intense and varied psychic assault. Easily the Alakazam displayed a width and breadth of abilities that awed Psychic-type Trainers around the world. Sina and Dexio, in the competitor's stands, were quietly (for them) losing their minds. Hau, a few rows away yet easily able to hear the two, considered what he could as well.

But despite the endless ways in which the Alakazam fought, despite the clear strength it displayed, still it could not stop the power of the Island Deity Tapu Koko. So fast did it move, so hard did it strike, so powerful was the electricity it commanded, that the battle was simply nothing more than an extended defeat. Hala's commentary, neutrally given, simply observed that the struggle over Tapu Koko's electrical terrain had inspired the Land Spirit Pokemon to put perhaps more effort into the battle than initially intended.

A rough beginning for Sabrina as her partner's Mega Evolved form faded away, a burst of particularly powerful electricity piercing through the many shields and barriers it had built up.

Second from Sabrina was one of the two Pokemon she had captured and raised in Unova, blue bodied and blue furred, black winged and pink nosed, the Courting Pokemon Swoobat, a Psychic and Flying-type Pokemon known for a powerful and destructive call. By the typing of that Pokemon it held significant disadvantage, and the timing was considered questionable. Sabrina wondered about that herself.

She truly had gone in with full intent. Despite the odds against her, despite her awareness of her own ability – a far cry from the peak she had battled at before – still she and her partner Alakazam had displayed everything they could do. And so little had it mattered. Her partner defeated and, despite suffering attacks, despite being struck and forced to hold this battle for some time, Tapu Koko still remained seemingly unconcerned. And... more than that...

Her head hurt. The presence of Tapu Koko, it was like a radiant star bearing down upon her. Even without her psychic abilities Sabrina was sure that attempting to battle this Pokemon would still push her down. It was growing steadily more difficult to battle like this, with the weight of her opponent's power upon her mind. And trying to shut it off, to ignore the natural power the Legendary Pokemon exuded, was something beyond possibility. Her own psychic powers, as strong as they were, simply
could not ignore the magnitude of force pushing against her.

Swoobat, fighting hard, dodging as best it could, leaving after-images to evade while howling out powerful waves of sound, lasted well against Tapu Koko indeed. Not to the length of Alakazam, whose raw power was such that it could negate and avoid many of the Land Spirit's attacks, but more than most people had credited the Courting Pokemon either.

Still it only took one true strike from the power of the deity to end this. Sabrina, her focus fracturing as the pressure of her opponent continued to wear upon her, was beginning to feel her ability to send strength through her Bonds slipping. Was this what this would be? Overwhelmed by this Tapu, left unable to even fight back? It was mortifying. Her own pride, even tempered by awareness of her difference from her battling days, still struggled against this. The second of the Pokemon who had always been by her side then. The Barrier Pokemon Mr. Mime, a jester-like creature able to create projections like no other. Gritting her teeth and focusing her mind as best she could, Sabrina set her eyes forward upon the great opponent she had been tasked to overcome.

This wouldn't end here.

The Tapu of Melemele Island fought with speed and power. The electrical field Sabrina and Alakazam had fought so hard to control at the battle's beginning, in the end it seemed like little more than an afterthought to the deity, Tapu Koko's focus more on moving with speed, slamming against opponents, and striking with its massive claws as electricity flowed around it. Unafraid and unconcerned by whatever opponent was set against it, Tapu Koko struck relentlessly, the incredible power it expressed so naturally just an aspect of the very life it breathed. Something that was this innately strong, whose power was so deeply tied into every movement it made, it truly defined what a Legendary Pokemon was.

And as Tapu Koko slowly broke through and overwhelmed the barriers, misdirections, and psychic attacks of Sabrina's partner Mr. Mime, she realised in her heart of hearts just what an opponent she faced.

There was just no way.

“And that is the third of Sabrina's four Pokemon defeated,” Alexa narrated as Sabrina raised her partner's Pokeball and called it back. “Despite showing a trio of incredibly able Pokemon, Sabrina and her team have been unable to make a dent against the raw power of Tapu Koko. It's a sobering display of just what the Guardian Deities of Alola can do, and a significant concern for those matched against the remaining three in this round. Kahuna Hala, at the beginning of this battle you stated it was possible for Sabrina to attain victory. After this long, do you still believe your statement was correct?”

“It is difficult to say.” The Kahuna continued to pace his words, so as not to flavour the battle taking place. It was obvious to him what was happening – how Sabrina was being pushed down by Tapu Koko's presence and proving unable to give the full power her partners needed. To escape that weight and be able to fight back... for someone exposed to it for the very first time, it was almost impossible. The Kahuna breathed out. “The Tapu are difficult to battle, intense and driven to fight. To seize control of the battle and drive them back takes awareness that requires experience. To learn and use that in so short a span is... no easy thing.”

No easy thing... the words flickered in Sabrina's peripheral as she held the Dusk Ball containing her fourth and final partner. No kidding. At this point... she sighed. It was just performative. The result decided. To push back further against this weight upon her... she felt tired. Worn down. She'd just let it play out. A degree of despondency had settled within Sabrina now. She'd intended to show better than this. Had pride and history as a master Trainer. Sure so many would simply acknowledge she
was facing an impossible opponent but even still... it hurt.

But what else was there to do? Tapu Koko would win this fight and Sabrina's opportunity to face Moon, to feel the full power of that girl in battle, would be denied. It would be Moon against Tapu Koko next. An incredibly difficult test for that girl, one Sabrina envied no more than her own situation. Moon... Sabrina still owed her an apology. Had gazed further into Moon's heart and mind than she'd intended and invaded that girl's privacy in a most awful way. And now here she was passing on the duty of facing Tapu Koko to her as well. How much more was she going to do wrong by that girl?

The weight of Tapu Koko's presence, felt even deeper than for most by Sabrina's own psychic strength, stopped upon a mote it could not shift. An innermost core of will and determination that would never budge. Sabrina frowned and, hearing the judge calling for her to unleash her next Pokemon, did so. Gothitelle, an Unovan species, the Psychic-type Astral Body Pokemon, a humanoid creature made of waves of black garment-like tiers stacked atop itself with a feminine head at the peak, flexed its psychic powers upon manifestation. The arena already rich with the leftover energy of those to have come before.

Slowly, Sabrina raised a hand to her face. Placed it over her and closed her eyes. Focused not on Tapu Koko. Not on the crowd. Not on her thoughts. Not on anybody but her partner and the Bond between them.

There was still something she could do.

No matter how great the odds, how strong the opponent, she could still go further. She could make it show more. So even if defeat was inevitable, even if the end was so near, she and her partner, they could push Tapu Koko still. Make it give more. Make it show more.

Make it reveal everything she could force out of it to the eyes of Moon so that young girl, watching with razor-focus from the stands for anything that could prepare her for her next fight, would be as ready as she could. Far more ready than Sabrina herself had been.

This display, let it be the first words of the apology Sabrina owed Moon.

And let she and Gothitelle show just what the title of Master Psychic meant!

Though his words would come as no comfort to Sabrina after this battle was done, Hala still found himself deeply impressed by the speed at which she threw off the pressure Tapu Koko exerted. It was no small feat indeed.

As Sabrina focused upon the battle her mind, her psychic abilities, reacted, taking and reshaping the force laid upon her by Tapu Koko. It was significant, that deity's power, but by her reforged will Sabrina pushed through. The weight, the drain, she couldn't even feel it now. Set her attention solely upon what was before her instead. The air quaked and Tapu Koko, considering the Astral Body Pokemon before it, hit the ground. Loud was the cry of shock and surprise from those watching, little did Sabrina hear it. The energy in the air of the Pokemon to have come before, with it and the power she was giving her partner, they had changed the field themselves. Set a weight of their own that pushed all down upon the ground. Tapu Koko's speed, the way it raced through the air when floating, let it display that when held against the earth. The pulse of power radiating from Gothitelle told clearly just how much strength it took to pin Tapu Koko down.

But still they had done it.

Intense was the yell of the Island Deity, the burst of thunder and lightning around its form. Wreathed
in sparking electricity the Tapu raised a clawed hand, indicating towards the opponent before it, as a massive bolt of electricity formed and shot forth, arcing and splitting through the air towards Gothitelle. In counter Gothitelle raised a hand of its own, the approaching lightning fracturing over a barrier before the lightning and barrier themselves both spun together into a blast that shot out as a beam from before the Astral Body Pokemon's hand, the attack striking fully upon Tapu Koko's prone form. Sabrina's focused expression did not change even the slightest after landing this powerful blow.

She still had further to go.

Raising its other hand, the one outstretched maintaining the gravity holding Tapu Koko down, Gothitelle manifested a crawling wave of pulsing rainbow power, something that lurched strangely through the air before settling around the Tapu's form. Lightning crackled through the psychic energy, Tapu Koko releasing more and more against the power holding it down, intending to throw it off, but Sabrina and her partner's will was now unshakable. It had been a long time indeed since she'd last felt this way.

They weren't going to lose yet.

Digging a claw into the ground Tapu Koko pushed itself up as the electricity it was manifesting suddenly sucked itself into the Land Spirit Pokemon, a pulsing yellow glow around its form now pushing against the rainbow of energy Gothitelle had surrounded it with. A single moment passed as Sabrina identified what would come next before Tapu Koko launched itself forward, an explosion of electrical force sending its body flying against the gravity pulling it down. Surrounded by more electricity Tapu Koko closed its shell around itself, its full form on track to crash right into Gothitelle's form.

One hand outstretched maintaining the gravity, the other keeping the cloying psychic force upon their opponent, it appeared to those observing there was little more the Pokemon could do. Yet it was not the Pokemon alone, and Sabrina with it gave her focus as well. More, they could do more. A surge of its psychic power lifted Gothitelle and pulled it neatly to the side out of the way of Tapu Koko's charge.

Sabrina, standing just before the barrier Tapu Koko had slammed into, did not react at all, her eyes still closed. She knew all she needed to right now. Gothitelle, keeping both the gravity and psychic assault upon Tapu Koko held, pulled itself further away from the Tapu as it recovered from hitting the ground once more.

Once more shoving a claw into the ground to prop itself up, Tapu Koko glowed again. But differently too.

Pink, not yellow.

The wave of power that washed out from the deity covered the field. Gothitelle, reacting, formed a barrier and that power cut through the barrier with ease. Sabrina felt it the moment it touched the partner to whom she was linked. A sudden loss of strength, as if everything it had to give were cut in half. Her partner now only capable of half of what it had been a moment before.

How?

“That…” Hala could not shake the impressed tone from his voice, “is notable.” Requests from Anna and Alexa to explain the Kahuna acquiesced to. “Each of the Tapu has their own known power: Tapu Koko's electricity, Tapu Lele's psychic strength, Tapu Bulu's control over plantlife, and Tapu Fini's mystic water. But at their core each Tapu shares a power as well, something different from
those individual types. Not one of them likes to use that power however, having pride in their own unique. To force Tapu Koko to use that power... means much.”

Sabrina, the strength and focus she'd found as this fight neared its end... if she'd had two more partners for a full six, if she'd maintained her resistance to the pressure Tapu Koko formed, victory might have been hers after all.

But one strike of the Fairy-type power Tapu Koko held changed things. And once unleashed, that power did not fade, the Guardian Deity of Melemele Island wielding both Fairy and Electric techniques equally to slam down upon the resisting Gothitelle again and again.

Strong was that partner Pokemon. Strong was its Trainer. Powerful were the Pokemon to come before. But the battle was decided here. The gravity pulling Tapu Koko to the ground faded, and the Island Deity ascended into the air once again as Gothitelle fell for Sabrina to call back.

She hoped with all her heart that what she had been able to reveal of the deity would help all those to battle the four over this tournament's length.

Her role in it now complete.

“Trainer Jackson. Trainer Mina. You are to decide upon a number of Pokemon to use in your upcoming match.”

“Something more sensible I think.” Mina wore a small smile, the two showings before a little too much to rise to. “I don't think we need to reveal more than three each to settle things.”

“If that's your request,” Jackson held a smile of his own, calm on his face before his first opponent of the Pokemon League. Not that his expression was anything but the barest facade. The first battle between Ilima and Moon, the second between Sabrina and Tapu Koko, they had driven all witness into a frenzied height of excitement. Trying to tone that down with a more reasonable battle for the first round of the League might not be a popular decision, but Mina was right. Both Trainers intended to keep some mystery for what came next, unlike Moon who was in the unenviable position of having revealed everything she could do from the very beginning. Although whether that would make any difference in the battle she had next was well up for debate.

As the two moved out to take their positions upon the League field, each considered the five Pokemon they had and the three they would choose. Jackson, Captain of the Pokemon Rangers in Alola, facing Mina, recently former Captain of Poni Island.

Begin.
“As the long-standing Captain of the Pokemon Rangers in Alola, Jackson's Pokemon partners are all trained in managing the environment – whether performing restoration, reshaping, or rescue – which has left each with impressive stamina and unique uses of their abilities compared to more traditional battlers. However due to that focus they are not as significantly trained for battle and conflict with other Pokemon, which may be a weakness in this upcoming match.”

Acting as third commentator alongside Anna and Alexa, Asuka, head of the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola, outlined her beliefs going into this next match. “Mina is a Fairy-type specialist, making that the most likely make-up of her Pokemon team. The match-ups between Jackson's Pokemon against Mina's will be significant here, and if Jackson is unable to leverage any advantages he holds, or if Mina counters him well enough, the battle will most likely be hers. Jackson is more experienced as a person, but debatably as a battling Trainer, and so we will see just what talents each is bringing to the field. Either way, this battle will be a roughly even one.”

Having accepted the invitation to play the role of commentator, Asuka made no mention of the training she and Jackson had undergone over the past few months together, sharpening themselves for the League ahead. Though the spheres each worked within were so completely different, comparing the Pokemon Rangers to the Schooling System, the two were often referred to as a pair when discussed as members of this League. Enough so that Jackson himself had sought Asuka out to work on his battling skill.

It wasn't like she didn't have her rust to shake either – it had been a long time since Asuka's retirement from the battling scene. Certainly she'd not be taking part in the open League to follow this one in two years more. But this invitation, the request to take part in the first, she hadn't been able to resist the call. No one had.

So here she was. And there Jackson was. Doing their best.

The same as everyone else.

“Jackson has led with a Tropius!”

Against Mina two of Jackson's Pokemon were ruled out immediately: both his Crawdaunt – an excellent Pokemon for handling underwater work, its heavy pincers able to sever through sunken logs and even shatter stone – and Machamp – a partner easily able to carry multiple people while moving through the most dangerous terrain – both severely at risk from the former Captain's Fairy-type specialisation. So the remaining three to Jackson's name it was.
First to lead was Tropius, the fruit Pokemon, a long necked saurian boasting a set of leafy wings emerging from its back and a number of richly sweet fruit hanging from its neck. Tallest of Jackson's partners, the Pokemon was able to airlift people both into and out of dangerous environments, as well as provide nourishing and energising fruit to those in need when out in the wilds. Grass and Flying-type, it was a Pokemon species that had recently grown into use as a Ride Pokemon by those using the Ride Pager system. Not for public hire however.

A Pokemon specifically for use by those with reason.

“And from Mina, Granbull!”

The Fairy Pokemon Granbull stood at just over four and a half feet, its skin a pale lavender, most distinguishing feature by far the size of its wide jaws and huge fangs stretching up from its bottom lip. A naturally timid Pokemon on its own, Trainers who battled with them were clearly trusted deeply for the Pokemon to be willing to go into a fight. Mina, standing on the left side of the battlefield from the perspective of the announcers and combatants both, kept a calm expression as she looked past her partner to the much larger Fruit Pokemon opposite.

Here they go.

Jacksons' strategy was as follows. With Crawdaunt and Machamp unwise to take into this battle, only one of his three partners boasted true combative strength. Tropius and the other were defensive Pokemon, and in battle did best by exhausting and outlasting opponents. They could attack, yes, but it wasn't the true source of their strength. So to seal the deal against Mina's Pokemon, Jackson would need to wear down each before bringing in his third. But should Mina switch in a counter and bring something that could defeat that Pokemon in turn, that would be the end for any chance Jackson had. The typing of Mina's Pokemon team did more than just make her a measure predictable.

It made her opponents seeking to exploit her weaknesses that too.

The Tropius of Jackson was more able to maintain itself in the air than most of its species could. Even unleashing great gusts of wind infused with cutting strength didn't cause the Pokemon to dip from its flight, curving around the League battlefield, raining combinations of Flying and Grass-type attacks upon the Granbull below. But Mina's partner was strong too, and with a powerful leap launched itself all the way up into the air, grabbing hold of the Tropius tight. The glow of Tropius attempting to drain the energy of the Pokemon grasping it did not stop the Granbull from maintaining its grip, jaws seizing a wing and causing the Fruit Pokemon to topple from the air. A threat Pokemon that flew always faced in battle.

A storm of leaves blocked the worst of the descent, pushing back enough against gravity for Tropius to land and Granbull to detach, the constant glow of the Fairy Pokemon draining the Fruit Pokemon's health fading as the two broke apart. It was difficult, Asuka remarked as commentator, to determine who had fared worse in that exchange, but any attempt the Tropius made to take off again would be subject to counter.

This battle was now on the ground.

The battling style of Mina, former Captain of Poni Island, was one relaxed. Not easy-going, or sloppy, but calm and patient. Undaunted. Jackson's was far less so.

He hated to admit it, but Mina had lit something of a fire in him to improve. His attempt at self-deprecation when they'd spoken on Poni Island she'd rebuffed with startling honesty, a statement that translated clearly as saying Jackson would have no excuse for losing. Being told that... had really been what motivated him to try harder still to prepare for this League. He and Asuka had discussed
it, how a number of the competitors taking part were simply not able to be defeated by the two. Asuka herself had been given the bad luck of being matched against Kahuna Hala. There was little anyone in this League could do about such a draw.

But even believing there was no path to victory for them, each still wanted to make the best showing they could. A Pokemon Trainer's pride was strong, even for those who rarely tapped into such things these days. When Asuka battled Hala, she would give everything she had all the same.

And right now facing Mina, Jackson would only be insulting her if he did any less.

So full of energy and determination, Jackson commanded his Pokemon keenly and fought back, Tropius pushing against Granbull, the aggressive attacks of the Fairy Pokemon only slowly making dents in the resilient and recovery-based strength of its Grass and Flying-type foe.

Mina considered the pace. Jackson was trying very hard and that was good, though it wasn't like she wasn't doing her best herself, just that she never actively showed it. There was an advantage she held, she'd admit it. The Pokemon of Jackson were known, him being a public figure for decades now, while Mina's specifics were not widely so. So of the Ranger Captain's Pokemon, Mina knew that Crawdaunt and Machamp would in no way show their faces before her. So the two to follow Tropius would be Blissey, the Happiness Pokemon, an essential Pokemon to keep out in wild environments to help care for injured humans and Pokemon both, and Scizor, the Pincer Pokemon, Bug and Steel-type. Much like Crawdaunt it was an expert in cutting through overgrown environments and handling fallen debris from natural and unnatural events alike.

Scizor was the core of Mina's worry; of Jackson's Pokemon the most threatening to her own. Which meant that if she defeated it, this Pokemon Battle was as good as hers. Jackson absolutely knew that too though. Knew that specific Pokemon would be the key to his victory and that he had to make use of it perfectly. This was a battle that would be resolved in one single absolute strike.

It just depended on who would be the one to make it.

Granbull was growing frustrated, the Tropius opponent recovering well from each of its attacks. With this Pokemon Jackson appeared to be focusing on defense and recovery, which said much for how little that Pokemon took part in serious battles such as this. Though the two Pokemon were fighting, there was a clear difference in level between their strength and that expressed by the two battles before, and that was reflected in the cheers of the crowd. There were noises of support, of course, but nothing like the sheer excitement from the battle between Ilima and Moon, or Sabrina and Tapu Koko. It was for the best that this conflict was only three against three. An extended fight which could not compare to the energy of before would never sway the hearts of the masses so.

Jackson exchanged Tropius for Blissey and Mina Granbull for Mawile.

The logic for Jackson was that an extended fight between Tropius and Granbull would lead both too far down the path of exhaustion equally. If Granbull were placed before the fully healthy Blissey instead, it would exert itself far more than Blissey would to resist it, and become incapacitated with far less energy spent from Jackson's Pokemon team.

For Mina it was the same, but also that if she did not change her Pokemon at the same time as Jackson, there would come a time when she made a substitution and gave him the freedom to counter it, and a minute spent alone against the Scizor of Jackson was not a minute Mina intended to give. Her third partner was best suited to deal with that Pokemon. Though Mawile would still trouble it if the two had to fight. For now though, there should be little that Blissey could do.

Asuka, commentating, made no mention of the specific training she and Jackson had undergone, nor
her offering up her significant collection of Technical Machines – devices used to teach Pokemon the methods to perform techniques beyond their natural style – for Jackson to shore up his Pokemon's weaknesses with. While Pokemon kept their natural abilities, teaching them those beyond that was an act that grew more difficult the more they knew. But Jackson's Pokemon, all long past the days of training their strength for the mission they kept in aiding nature and those within it, had had the room to learn something new.

Blissey, stomping down heavy and sending a web of cracks following shockwaves through the earth, showed something new.

Those Ground-type techniques were common things taught, ways to destabilise opponents, change the terrain to work against them, and counter a range of dangerous foes. Blissey was not a naturally strong Pokemon, and could not truly infuse a great volume of power into this stomp, but the shifting and cracking earth still made Mina pause. That was a problem.

And who knew what else Jackson's Pokemon knew.

Blissey stomped happily, seemingly enthused with the ability to change the environment in a way it never had before, unconcerned about the jutting shards of earth now breaking out around it. Caught considering how best to approach this, Mina took stock of her options. Mawile was not so fast as to close the distance and attack wildly to put a stop to this assault, nor was Blissey so easily knocked out – a battle with it continuing to stomp around like this would end poorly for Mina's partner. So instead keeping its distance from the slowly approaching Blissey, Mawile followed Mina's direction, focusing strength it could pass on to an ally more able.

Of course, when Mawile swapped out for the third, Jackson would move Scizor to counter. And at that point it would be a race to whether Mina or Jackson took the win. Mina was willing to gamble that though. You had to go big on the stage of the Pokemon League, right?

Mawile, strength concentrated by focus, pushed to the battlefield's edge by Blissey, activated the power to pass that power to another. An orb appeared before it and Mina raised her partner's Pokeball, Jackson seeing that and quickly moving for his own. Another switch. As expected.

From Mina Wigglytuff.

And from Jackson Scizor.

Third to the fight.

The Balloon Pokemon Wigglytuff, Fairy and Normal-type, a round and pink bean-shaped Pokemon, immediately took on the golden orb left by Mawile, power passed from one Pokemon to the next. Greater now were its defenses, a necessity Mina had chosen for this Pokemon to resist Scizor enough to punish and bring it down.

Immediately and without hesitation Jackson began the pose for the Steelium-Z.

Each Trainer had set a Z-Crystal into their Z-Ring before this battle began. At this distance it was difficult to pick the colour, as was intended. So Mina hadn't known – though had fully expected – Jackson's choice to be a Steelium-Z.

Jackson hadn't known, nor had he fully expected, that Mina's was a Firium-Z.

Most Island Challenge Champions had a stock of Z-Crystals still, those no longer battling returning theirs to Captains and Kahuna for redistribution, while each active Trainer kept a few on hand – useful options in battle. Mina, as a Fairy-type specialist, always carried the Fairium-Z, but that was
not her only Z-Crystal and she wouldn't be constrained by it. Her partners were innately weak to the Steel-type.

So she'd prepared to deal with that as best she could.

The distance between Scizor and Wigglytuff meant that it was difficult to stop the activation of a Z-Move, but there was time to move in counter. Mina considered Jackson's choice hasty, as she performed the pose to activate the Firium-Z. The Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Crash would cross the distance to Wigglytuff okay, but to reach Mina's partner have to pass through the Fire-type Z-Move Inferno Overdrive first. As far as Mina was concerned this was a situation in her favour. Scizor launched from where it stood, spinning with Z-Power surrounding it. Wigglytuff breathed in, further and further, expanding in size five and ten times over, then out as a massive fireball erupted from its mouth.

Z-Move met Z-Move. Asuka waited patiently for the clash to result before explaining what she had pointed out to Jackson in their training before.

“Corkscrew Crash has significant value to Jackson as a technique specifically able to clear a large amount of debris near instantaneously. It is his most practised Z-Move, used for excavation in significant situations: creating flood drains, or breaking through rockfalls, for example. Of all the Z-Moves that bring its user into contact with an opponent, it loses the least amount of energy by passing through opposition. As can be seen here.”

In the wake of the lingering flames from the fireball released by Wigglytuff the shape of a hole was revealed, dug through the upset and broken earth from Blissey's earlier stumps, Scizor easily passing through the shifted ground before emerging again a short distance after, perfectly evading the Z-Move from Mina and Wigglytuff before landing its own directly. Mina stared blankly in response.

...wow, she really needed to get better at identifying people disrupting the ground for future attacks, didn't she?

This... was bad. Reinforced by its defenses Wigglytuff hadn't exactly been knocked out, but the speed at which the Balloon Pokemon had dropped from one-hundred percent to, like, ten was near instantaneous. That was what a good Z-Move did though. Had Jackson... baited her? Used his understanding of that Z-Move to lure and then evade Mina's own? She hadn't... given Jackson nearly the proper credit for his strategic skills. Now she just felt foolish. This wasn't good, not at all. If she couldn't stop that Scizor, there wasn't a lot more she could do.

Wigglytuff breathed out a stream of flame and Scizor disappeared in one moment then reappeared the next, beside the Balloon Pokemon to strike an iron claw directly against its head. Wigglytuff dropped and Mina called the Pokemon back.

The core moment hadn't gone her way. She'd used her Z-Move. So had Jackson, and his Scizor would feel the effect of that, but even still... choosing Mawile again, Mina focused on what her best techniques would be. Counter-attacks involving biting down upon the Scizor when it attacked and holding on. Eliminating the advantage of its speed. Maybe.

Jackson, still commanding strong, keeping count of the seconds before he could safely switch again should Mina manage a turnaround of her own, silently thanked Asuka for the amount of teaching she had spared him in their training. He only hoped his presence as her battling partner had helped her nearly as much as she'd helped him.

Unlike the Blissey, which Mawile could not get close to, there was no running out of moments the Deceiver Pokemon and Scizor were within range of one another. Snapping claws met gnashing jaws, clashing and sending sparks flying each time. Mina was relying now on weakening down the
Pincer Pokemon, focusing on the effect using a Z-Move would have left it with. Indeed her partner was matching it well, the two exchanging blows roughly equally. Jackson's partner had strong pincers for shattering debris, but wasn't specifically trained in how best to apply such to Pokemon. It was a different skillset. Mawile, meanwhile, knew how to latch on and hold tight. It wasn't an elegant fight, but it was a more equal one. Mina felt good enough about the work this partner had done.

Jackson, pulling out the Pokeballs for Scizor and Blissey both, exchanged one for the other without any ceremony at all.

Okay... Mina considered, as the Blissey set foot on the ground once again. It was just going to do the stomps again and make a mess, so Mina would choose Granbull this time. That Pokemon was far more able to cross the uneven terrain and get in close enough to punish an opponent. As Mina made her own substitution, Blissey, in the time given to act, glowed brightly.

Then dropped to the ground.

“Huh?”

Mina's confusion mirrored with much of the crowd's, as the judge overseeing this match pronounced the fainted Blissey unable to battle. Jackson, keeping both Pokeballs he'd just used held, pulled Blissey back, a shimmering field of light left where the Pokemon's comatose body had been.

Wait... oh no.

“Healing Wish,” Asuka narrated plainly as Anna and Alexa provided far more energy in reacting to this strategy, “is a technique that transfers a significant portion of energy from one Pokemon to another. The Pokemon to use this technique is sent into an unconscious state to recover. And the Pokemon to receive its benefit...” in a flash of red Scizor returned to the field and the lights left by Blissey quickly flew to it, glowing bright before fading away, no marks left remaining on the Pincer Pokemon's body, “is restored to full health.”

Ah. Mina's mental state could be best described as crumpling up a piece of paper the drawing on hadn't worked out and throwing it in the bin. She was... pretty utterly and completely beaten now. Healing Wish went as far as to undo even the effect of using a Z-Move, so potent was its energy. Were it Moon battling, for example, she and that Scizor could perform another Z-Move right away. But even without that ridiculousness, that Pokemon being at full strength and Mina's two – Granbull and Mawile – each being worn so far down... it was a done deal. The writing on the wall in a way even the most “we can do it if we try our best!” types had to bow their head and pretend didn't exist. She could keep battling. Maybe try and take that Scizor down but... Mina didn't see that happening. Or really relish the idea of throwing her Pokemon against a wall to fight for the sake of fighting. Jackson had taken the critical moment and the battle had turned accordingly. That was a fair win for him.

Raising Granbull's Pokeball, Mina called the Pokemon back then nodded to the judge. A nod back in understanding and a raised arm in acknowledgement.

“The winner of this battle is Jackson!”

Good for him.

“Mina, thank you for joining us up here in the announcer's box. I would love to hear your thoughts
about the previous battle at a later date, but for now we have an upcoming match you are best able to speak of.”

“Thanks.” A little awkwardly and not quite sure what to say about her battle, Mina focused in on the reason Anna had approached her after it, as Mina was passing her Pokemon for healing at the League Pokemon Center. “Lana is Captain of Brooklet Hill on Akala, and Tristan of Poni Island—we just say the entire Island because the entire place can be a Trial Site. Lana's been Captain for about two years now, Tristan for about two months, but Tristan's an early-bloomer as a Trainer, so that experience might not mean as much as you'd think.”

“An early-bloomer Trainer is one who is able to form a Trainer's Bond at a younger age than the intended eleven,” Alexa covered that topic, Anna having been the one to introduce Mina to the crowd as commentator for this upcoming match, “and so that Trainer and their bonded Pokemon may have grown significantly before even beginning a Pokemon Journey. I'm sure we'll see the Pokemon in question in today's match.”

“Tristan has requested a four versus four battle against Lana, which Lana has agreed to,” Anna swung back in, “so we can expect this to be an intense match. The two are just down on the stage now and the judges look ready to start, so let's prepare for the battle to begin. Ready...”

Go.

Lana's choice was Cloyster, Bivalve Pokemon, the deeply purple-blue shelled Pokemon floating easily in the air. With the first Alolan Pokemon League's stadium not designed in any way for Pokemon restricted to watery environs, Lana's picks had to be Pokemon that could compete without. Her partner Cloyster was one she was known for by any who knew her well enough—a Pokemon the Captain relied on time and time again.

No easy opponent to face first for any challenger at all.

From the Ultra Ball Tristan used emerged Emolga, a small white-furred Pokemon, highlighted by black around its head, ears, and tail, yellow within its ears, upon its cheeks, and beneath the sails that stretched from the Pokemon's hands to run along the length of its arms and body to its feet. The Sky Squirrel Pokemon was an Electric and Flying-type, native in Alola solely to Poni Island upon which Tristan had spent the majority of his Island Challenge, being taught and trained by Mina in the lead-up to his ascent to Captaincy. An agile Pokemon that moved at high speeds, its typing was an immediate danger to any of Lana's team. But the typing of Cloyster, Water and Ice, was a threat too. A dangerous opening clash from each Trainer where the right or wrong choices could define the
entire battle's flow.

Here they go.

Crackling lightning mixed with pelting ice as immediately Emolga released a surge of electricity, Cloyster summoning a storm of swirling hail, the battlefield turning into a nightmare storm of power as each Pokemon within it grimly moved against the other. Neither Tristan nor Lana were particularly used to the other – Tristan having done his Water Trial with the Captain to come before Lana and so the two never really having met – and so this battle was beginning with each trying to feel the other out.

As people Tristan, while enthusiastic, still found himself feeling like the newest Captain too much, and Lana, a rather blunt individual, couldn't really settle and make friends with someone intentionally trying to appeal themselves. The discussion where they'd settled on the number of Pokemon had just been Tristan asking for four and Lana agreeing. She hadn't even considered his reason. It didn't really matter.

Wouldn't stop her from winning and going forward.

Tristan had four Pokemon total. Between the choice of three or four to battle Lana... he felt best about trusting in the full power of his team. And also slightly intimidated. Lana was strong and fierce, Mina had said that before, and so to battle her properly he...

Shaking his head Tristan focused a smile. Hey! He was here on the stage of the first Alolan Pokemon League! Who's going to wear a frown or have doubts here? Sure Lana across the field had a scary intense look on her face but whatever! Have fun and battle well! That was something he tried to live by! So hey, Emolga, don't fret about the pelting ice or lack of sight, just go with the flow and find the song in the clash of hailstones striking one another, or the sound of the lightning shattering through the sleet.

That's the way to go.

“Tristan's a Trainer who's strongest in the flow of the moment.” Mina, who had observed and guided Tristan's flourishing as a young Trainer of Alola, gave fair comment on what she'd seen. “As long as he keeps his calm he's going to be extremely difficult to gain any advantage against.”

“By comparison Lana appears deeply intent.” Alexa's observation was meant to be fairly made, but it did draw attention to the fact Lana's expression wasn't exactly easy-going. Her face could be best described as so intense and focused as to be just a few points short of a scowl. Mallow and Kiawe, who knew Lana best of all amongst the Trainers of Alola, and her mother, seated besides Jewellery, all noted the state the young blue-haired Captain had reached.

As a person, first she was playful and teasing. Pushed further and she'd begin to reveal more and more focus, less and less words. But when the Captain of Brooklet Hill was completely silent, then she was at her most ferocious. Neither Mallow nor Kiawe knew Tristan particularly well themselves, didn't have a concept of his own strength, but both knew this.

If they had a choice, they'd never want to be in his shoes right now.

An explosion of water cast through the swirling storm of hail froze immediately, becoming a gigantic meteor of ice falling from the air and crashing into the stage floor, shattering into a plume of thick frost that only intensified the storm further. Tristan directed Emolga to try and pull back against the barrier lining the battlefield, so the Sky Squirrel Pokemon had at least something safe behind it, but couldn't get a good response besides the sense his partner was evading ice still. That Cloyster of
Lana's, it was going above and beyond what he'd expected of it. She was really going into this battle with everything she had. Those in the crowd with the experience necessary noted Lana's partner to be pushing into the strata of the most powerful of its kind. A shocking display for one so young.

Still, Tristan didn't let his smile fade or his heart slip. As long as he and his partner stayed calm they could do this! So keep sending out those electric blasts, and make this storm even worse for that Cloyster than it was for them!

Eventually the storm did break. The heavy ice in the air settled upon the ground, the Emolga of Tristan worn down well from dodging the worst of the hail while firing back lightning constantly into the opponent it sensed. The Cloyster of Lana, encased in a heavy layer of ice it had manifested, the electric attacks of Emolga having cracked and split so much of it but never reached the Pokemon within, released a slow running stream of water from within its shell that shifted and broke apart the last of the ice, allowing it to emerge floating free just before the watching judge could declare it incapacitated. The Pokemon harmed only by the effects of the frost it had been buried within.

“That's, forgive me, a cold strategy.” Alexa grinned through the groan that echoed in the crowd. Anna half raised a mock rude gesture to her before remembering Mina was seated between them. “Using a heavy storm of ice to obscure battle and then hiding within a layer of ice to be beyond harm, the partner of Lana has sapped a lot from Emolga without spending too much itself. I can't imagine Tristan feels too good about that.”

If he didn't, he didn't show it. Still Tristan kept his smile, Emolga settling down upon the light frost covering of the ground before him. That calm and focus, it kept his own partner's confidence up. They could still do this. That Cloyster... one good hit could still drag it down. Reassured by Tristan behind it, Emolga launched up at the Bivalve Pokemon again.

Spiralling up at its foe, lightning crackling around it, Emolga unleashed the bolt. A shard of ice, coalesced before Cloyster from the ample material created prior, shot at great speed in the same moment and each attack struck the other head-on. Both Pokemon reeled and dropped from the air after the attack they'd suffered, but one was far more exhausted than the other. The judge overseeing this match pronounced Emolga unable to continue battling.

Tristan chose his signature partner next.

“There it is! The rarely seen Dusk Form of the Wolf Pokemon Lycanroc!” With excitement Anna took the lead on diving into this specific topic. “Lycanroc, evolution of Rockruff, were popularly known to evolve into one of two forms depending on the time of day: Midday and Midnight Forms having quite startlingly different appearances! But only recently, first observed with Tristan's own signature partner, has the Dusk Form been observed! Besides the time of day as the name implies, we're still not yet sure of the cause of this evolution, whose orange fur stands between the brown and red of Midday and Midnight, but investigation is ongoing! An exciting Pokemon to see!”

The Dusk Form Lycanroc, a quadruped like the Midday Form, though possessing a fiercer spiked mane similar to Midnight, stretched out and stepped lightly across the field of frost Cloyster had unleashed before, the Bivalve Pokemon floating just above the ground. It had exerted a lot of power to end the first battle cleanly, and Tristan intended to stop the part Ice-type Pokemon from continuing on. Necessary for the rest of his team to stand a chance.

So let's go!

“That Lycanroc was Tristan's first partner.” Mina provided her understanding of the Captain for those watching the match. “Raised beside him as a Rockruff, and Bonded since he was seven; it's very strong. Keep an eye on it.”
Hard to at the speed it moved.

The immediate acceleration of Lycanroc left no footprints on the frosted surface of the League stage, the Wolf Pokemon disappearing in the blink of one eye and then slamming into Cloyster in the next, easily evading the shards of ice raining down upon where it had just stood. Lycanroc's jaws bit heavily into Cloyster's shell, the orange-furred Pokemon kicking and scrambling against its opponent, its weight pushing them down as Cloyster failed to throw it off. A burst of water exploding out from the shell of Cloyster washed over Lycanroc, pushing against it, but the Wolf Pokemon's intent let it push back and keep close. Lana, searching for a way to make distance so her Pokemon could activate another of its techniques, weakening its shell to better unleash speed and attack, couldn't find the option. The initial strategy against Emolga had been good, but this Lycanroc was just too aggressive. Tristan's Pokemon was strong, and the Captain of Poni Island kept a happy smile.

She needed to be more.

For so long building up to this League Lana had been excited. Trained hard with her fellow Captains to be ready, prepared as best she could. But the closer and closer she got, the more and more she began to feel her own nerves. She wanted to do well. No, not just well, great! A desire to prove herself had bloomed heavy within her heart. That battle with Ryuki back then, it still stung. How one person could be that strong compared to Lana and her friends, friends who she'd always considered impressive themselves. Sure they weren't like the Kahuna but they weren't nothing either!

Being made to feel that way sucked and Lana hadn't quite gotten over it yet.

If she beat Tristan she'd be battling Jackson. Jackson who'd been a mentor for Lana in caring for Alola, and growing into a good Captain herself. They'd never once had an all-out battle. And the way Jackson had battled Mina... that had been cool. Lana wanted to fight him. She wanted to show him how far she'd come.

Beyond Jackson it was either Tapu Koko... or Moon. If it was Tapu Koko then Lana had to battle not only a Tapu, but one she was elementally weak to. And if it was Moon... then Moon had surpassed a Tapu herself. And that thing she'd done, Ultra Evolution, Lana would have to face that too. Either way she'd be matched against a power that honestly spooked her. Something about the fact she was spooked rubbed her the wrong way.

And beyond them, if Lana won each of the three battles of Blue Block, she'd be facing the winner of Green Block. Looking at those there, it would be either a Tapu, Kahuna Olivia... or Ryuki. All strong. So strong. Lana didn't know how to even begin measuring up.

All these walls making her feel so much smaller than she had for so long in her confidence until that battle with Ryuki. Maybe that was the reason she'd felt that upset all this time. Maybe she'd just been forced to realise she'd been considering herself too highly. Being brought down to earth sucked. Yeah, that was definitely it.

And that was why she had to fight her way back up to the top again. Because she believed in herself and wanted to show that. Show that she could go so much further. That was the personality of Captain Lana of Brooklet Hill, fighting to go beyond herself. A powerful drive to improve and overcome.

It wasn't like she didn't acknowledge Tristan's ability here, he was definitely a strong Trainer. But Lana had her eyes on a far more distant peak. So this battle to her... she'd already decided it was won.
Lycanroc, still harassing Cloyster with its own attacks, yelped as its opponent rambmed into it at full power, before striking back with a powerful storm of Rock-type force. Lana, required to call her partner back, chose Octillery next. The Water-type Jet Pokemon, a red bodied cephalopod of eight limbs and one large head, waved its legs eagerly and immediately unleashed a jet of water shooting towards Lycanroc, the Wolf Pokemon dodging around it before charging in at high speed again. But this partner of Lana's was slippery, dodging around the charging attack before shooting again, a blast of ink striking into Lycanroc's face. Lana considered the Waterium-Z in her Z-Ring. She'd need to stop that Lycanroc, even with it weak to water. It simply radiated too much strength. A beam of ice caught Lycanroc in the leg as it shook its head to throw the ink covering its face free. Lana immediately began a Z-Pose the moment her opponent was caught.

Tristan, confident Lana would do so, performed his own.

“Lana is using the Water-type Z-Move Hydro Vortex to attack! This will unleash a powerful twister of water that, if caught up in, Lycanroc will suffer greatly!”

“Tristan's using the Lycanium-Z.”

Pokemon-specific Z-Moves were a rarer thing compared to the Type-specific variants, but in return boasted power both greater and less known. The Lycanium-Z, a Z-Crystal that would only work with the Pokemon Lycanroc, would result in the Z-Move Splintered Stormshards, an attack Tristan unleashed with his smile never fading. Keep calm and keep the pace, so that his Pokemon could have the most fun possible! As a great storm of water surrounded Octillery, washing out across the field, the stone beneath Lycanroc's feet shattered, ice binding it breaking, and began to rise, before shot by shot shooting into the watery storm. Z-Move against Z-Move, the crowd's energy spiking at this clash. To maintain the power of their attacks each Pokemon had to stand steady and weather that of their opponent. Each Trainer had to have confidence their Z-Move would have enough strength to push the other back.

At this level, Lana and Tristan's partners both so very strong, the length of one's experience was balanced by the advantage of the other's type. The halfway point of this battle coming to an equal draw as both Octillery and Lycanroc were laid low by the strength of each other. Both Lana and Tristan required to call their second partner back and choose their third. From Lana next came the Water Bubble Pokemon Araquanid, Water and Bug-type arachnoid. From Tristan the Coconut Pokemon Exeggutor, Alolan Form. The crowd's voice surged.

“A sighting of the famous Alolan Exeggutor!” Delighted, Alexa took commentary here. “The long-necked Alolan Variant of Exeggutor might seem silly at a glance, but it is a Grass and Dragon-type Pokemon, and by his smile Tristan's showing no worry in bringing it out! That's no small feat!”

Immediately in battle the Exeggutor of Tristan began its attack, a powerful wave of Dragon-type energy echoing from the Pokemon's three heads down upon the Araquanid below. But taking the blow upon it, piercing through with its own counter, another beam of ice shot through the attack to strike the Coconut Pokemon's crown. Though Lana's team and bias were of the Water-type, she'd also trained hard in using techniques of Ice to expand the power her Pokemon could wield. It wasn't just Cloyster, the Pokemon Tristan had hoped to deal with before calling upon his Exeggutor partner, that was a threat to the part Dragon-type.

The battle between Exeggutor and Araquanid was vicious, neither Pokemon quick enough to dodge, each bearing the attacks of the other before attacking in return. But this back-and-forth, clearly it favoured Lana. Even against a Dragon-type Pokemon like the Alolan Exeggutor, her partner didn't break. Tristan's go with the flow attitude, staying calm and loose, was failing against Lana's unbreaking will.
A funny thing considering the Pokemon type Lana herself specialised in.

The last of Tristan's four Pokemon was an Oricorio – the Sensu Style native to Poni Island. Indeed the three of his Pokemon that had not begun his Pokemon Journey with him Tristan had caught and raised on Poni Island. Lycanroc alone had been strong enough to both be all Tristan needed, and all he could handle, for the first three of his Grand Trials. But with Kahuna Koa's fading health, and Mina asking Tristan to learn from her to become the next Captain, Poni Island had been where he'd stopped and his abilities had really bloomed.

He was excited. He had almost five whole years of Captainship ahead, guiding and overseeing those seeking their seventh Trial and fourth Grand Trial. That was really exciting! He'd be seeing so many great Trainers, and helping them all get stronger! And he'd get so much stronger too! It was all exciting and that enthusiasm meant even as he commanded Oricorio, the Dancing Pokemon evading around the ice attacks of Araquanid, he was still happy. He'd never even considered winning or losing, just enjoying being on this stage for the first time. He'd make his way back in the next League. And the one after that too. He'd keep going and doing his best every time without fail!

But this time his best wasn't quite the same as that of the opponent he faced.

Lana's intensity, her brutal focus, didn't reach Tristan. Didn't scare him or overwhelm him in the least. Her and her Pokemon's abilities crossed the distance, and earned the Captain of Brooklet Hill the win, but not once since the battle began had Tristan found himself perturbed. He was happy. That was all.

By contrast Lana's win didn't feel like anything at all to her. She didn't celebrate. Didn't feel joy or relief. Shook Tristan's hand, as each competing Trainer did with their opponent, but didn't even know what to say to him. Was only thinking about what came next.

A few amongst those competing considered whether it was right to pull the Captain aside and check just whether she was okay. Whether her focus was a healthy state.

Mallow resolved to after her battle – the last of today's – was done.

So came to a close the four battles of Blue Block, first of the four making up the structure of the first Alolan Pokemon League. A rest period would now take place, as the field was once more repaired, and all would eat and relax. Then, in the first hours of the afternoon, the four battles of Green Block would begin.

And the first to lead those were...

“Sina Long. Ryuki Oda. Please come forward.”

Called by a judge to declare their number of Pokemon in the coming battle, Sina and Ryuki each wandered forward with a smile, well fed from lunch and ready to go. Both Trainers sporting a bronzed shade of skin, Ryuki's spiked hair making up the difference in height between them – Sina's own more rounded and flowing dark hair standing in good contrast to it – the two grinned at one another. Battle time.

“Long, huh?” Ryuki considered the surname of the woman before him. “I like that, good name.”

“I could say the same to you, Ryu,” Sina smirked back, not missing at all the reason her name had caught Ryuki's ear. “You're a Dragon Tamer, right? That's not subtle.”
“I don't do subtle.” Ryuki held no shame in admitting that. “What about you? Not bringing any dragons yourself to the field? That's a shame.”

“Oh you'll just have to find out,” Sina's smile widened slightly. “It's a surprise.”

A moment's pause, the two staring at each other with smiles, before they broke, chuckling lightly, each amused by the other. Dexio, having come with Sina to the staging grounds, held no smile of his own. Kahili, getting a drink of water here herself, noted that.

“You of all people cannot possibly be stupid enough to be jealous, can you?” Her question distracted Dexio, who looked at her with the most wide eyes possible.

“What? No, that's- what? That's stupid.” Kahili raised an eyebrow in response to Dexio's own. He shook his head. “No, that's not it, come on. Look.” Pointing, Dexio indicated the two, Ryuki saying something to make Sina laugh as the judge patiently waited for the two to settle on the number of Pokemon they'd use. “It's just kinda... don't they give you the feeling of siblings like that?”

Kahili paused. Stared and genuinely thought. Then shuddered.

“That's horrifying.”

“Right?”

“Three.” Sina held up a hand, middle three fingers raised. “Let's not give any more in the opening round, y'know?”

“Sounds good to me,” Ryuki nodded back, “I'm game.”

Each turning to the judge waiting, they nodded. The judge turned to Ryuki specifically. “You won't be able to take your guitar onto the stage. League rules prohibit objects that could aid Trainers in battle.”

“Oh! Right, uhhh,” always used to carrying his guitar with him, Ryuki glanced quickly around the room. “Hey you!” Jolting in shock from where he'd been standing by Kahili, Dexio went still as Ryuki quickly charged over to him.

“Hey buddy,” Ryuki was unhooking the guitar strapped over his back, “could I get you to hang on to this for me? Thanks.” Shoving the guitar into Dexio's arms, the brown-haired Kalosian staring blankly ahead, Ryuki turned away and took a few steps before slapping a palm to his forehead and stepping back.

“Hang on,” fiddling with the guitar case Dexio was now holding, Ryuki opened a slot and pulled out a Key Stone hanging from a pendant chain, shoving it roughly into a pocket somewhere in his red leather outfit. Maybe just into the inside of his belt. “Okay!” Clapping Dexio on the shoulders, Ryuki smiled wide. “Thanks man, I'll give you a ticket to my next show after this, enjoy the battle!”

Spinning away from the stunned Dexio once more, Ryuki quickly power-walked back to Sina and the awaiting judge. “Ryuki Oda, ready to rock!”

Dexio stood there blankly as Kahili, by his side, failed to hold back her giggling laughter at Dexio finally getting his comeuppance at the hands of someone even more chaotic and whimsical than he. Clapping a hand of her own upon Dexio's shoulder, Kahili set off to the competitor's stand to watch the battle to come.

Dexio just remained standing there still.
“...what?”

“Sina Long is a League Trainer from Kalos, as well as a Pokemon Researcher under Professor Sycamore. An expert in guiding Trainers in learning to handle Mega Evolution, she displayed a keen strategic mind that brought her through the opening rounds of the Kalos Pokemon League, though unfortunately after her first major win she was eliminated by a semifinalist Trainer.”

Alexa, well aware of all the going-ons of the last Kalos League, passed introducing the next Trainer over to the third commentator she and Anna had invited for this match. After a moment's pause Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, spoke.

“Ryuki Oda received writ to join this Alolan League from the Hoenn League. Though eliminated in the first round of that League, it was by the Trainer who would go on to become champion, and so Ryuki's full ability remains unknown. He is specifically a Dragon Tamer, and has shown significant skill already in Alola. I hope to see more of his full measure today.”

“Ryuki's been a notable figure around Alola this past year,” Anna took charge of finalising what was known, “both as a Pokemon Trainer and musician appearing at venues across Alola. For a time he headed the Kantonian Gym in Malie City, providing intense challenges for people visiting the complex.” Politely Anna skipped over Ryuki's unwillingness to go easy even while working as part of the tourist attraction, and how he was specifically let go for refusing to both go along with the establishment's theme, as well as give those facing him any chance of victory at all.

Sina, who'd spent her time in Alola mostly on holiday – achieving the necessary minimum for Professor Sycamore to not pull her and Dexio's funding but taking it easy beyond that – didn't have the same local pull. That was okay though. She'd make her splash here. Ryuki had six Pokemon for sure, with everything she'd heard about him, and so in an extended fight he'd definitely have the advantage. But the way he'd been knocked out in the Hoenn League, it had been the same. An initial three versus three. So she'd do the same here. Use her Pokemon, who specifically held advantage over his, to hit hard and fast before Ryuki could get the advantage of a stamina battle. She'd proposed three and Ryuki had agreed to it in a snap.

Now Sina just had to seal the deal.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Sina knew how she would lead this. Chose the Ultra Ball containing the partner who would start things off. She was ready.
Ryuki had one in mind too. Went to reach for it.

But someone else had an idea of their own.

Pokemon in Pokeballs remained connected to their Trainers. There was less demand for those at rest within, but a level of consciousness remained enough to understand their surroundings, and leave the Pokeballs should they wish. But even without leaving, especially for those with Bonds strong enough, communication could still be made. Wishes and wills expressed.

She wanted to fight.

“What?” Ryuki's mounting smile for the battle to come dropped immediately, his attention snapping to one of the six Pokeballs at his waist, a black and gold Luxury Ball. Had he heard that right? “No way, come on, why would you even-”

She wanted to fight.

“She was going to fight.

The colour was draining from Ryuki's face. No no no this was way too soon he- “Why? Why would you want to? You never want to unless-”

Choose her. Now.

“Trainer Ryuki, prepare your Pokemon!”

The call from the judge barely reached Ryuki, sweat beginning to form beneath his brow. Hang on he couldn't just... this would change everything but... why was she-

“Trainer Ryuki!”

Child!

“Aaaaahhhhhhh!”

A low pitched and slow rolling yell emerging from his mouth, Ryuki grabbed at the black and gold Luxury Ball and held it up to point forwards. Well.

No other choice.

From Sina the Frost Tree Pokemon Abomasnow, Grass and Ice-type, a towering giant of a Pokemon, bipedal, thick coat of white fur accented by deep forest green upon arms, feet, and tail. Immediately Sina also focused on the Mega Ring around her left wrist, and the Key Stone set within it, an Abomasite set into a bracelet around her partner's own left arm. She'd open this battle with Mega Evolution and tear the pace from Ryuki's hands.

That was how she'd win.

From Ryuki a Pokemon that drew gasps without pause. Its shape lengthy, tail cracking the air with each snap, black the colour lining its body, its neck and limbs, and the six stretching wings emerging from its back. Blue and deep purple filled the colour out, lining its lower body, legs, and tail, the purple forming the colour of the frills around its heads while the blue made up those heads – both the main one upon its neck and two more that tipped its arms. A roar from those three heads echoed, the
air quaking before it, as she announced her brutal arrival upon the stage.

Pitaya, in the commentator's box, drew a shaky gasp.

“That Hydreigon...” Anna and Alexa turned to the Guildmaster, each immediately stunned by the shocked expression on her face. “It's ancient. I've never... I didn't think that species could even live that long but that thing is... centuries. Its size, its markings, its fangs and the growth of its body, that Pokemon has been alive longer than any single one of us by far.”

The noises in the crowd circulated again and again, Ryuki's surprise Pokemon stunning all. What a thing to reveal in his very first battle, his very first match. What a choice.

Only Ryuki understood there'd been no choice at all.

The battle began.

Immediately Sina called forth the power of Mega Evolution, Ryuki's shocking reveal not changing the plan one bit. Bulking up in size and growing larger and larger, her partner Abomasnow once Mega Evolved sprouted giant spikes of ice from its back, fur of white and green wrapping up around it, its coat growing out further as a storm of frost whipped up around the Pokemon, spreading out across the field with far more fury than Lana's Cloyster in the match before had unleashed.

The plan was still the same, Sina would take down Ryuki's Pokemon quick and hard, and steal the win from out under his nose. Stay calm, stay focused, you have a Mega Evolved Pokemon ready to go so let's g-

A spark, a flash of light in the raging storm of ice, and then it flowed. From each of the three heads of Hydreigon, flying above the ground, flame poured, hitting the ground and washing out across it. Without pause the fire continued, a torrential storm that spread further and further, the ice in the air melting to water to steam to nothing, flame licking and crawling up the barrier on all four sides of the arena, filling the contained box with burning colour red, yellow, white.

And when it was done, when the fire faded to reveal the Hydreigon still flying there unharmed, beats of its wings keeping it in place, Sina's heart fell to see her partner laying upon the ground, its Mega Evolved form already gone. Hey... Come on...

“Isn't that... a little much?”

“I'm sorry!”

Only Ryuki truly knew his cry to be one sincere. He hadn't intended this. He'd wanted a good battle, clashing together and pushing each other further. But his partner, she... she only ever showed her face when the rest of Ryuki's team was done. When he'd shown he couldn't go any further without her. Why now? Why like this? He didn't understand her thinking at all.

And he couldn't stop her brutal fury from being unleashed.

Despite holding a Psychic-bias, Sina's Pokemon were by majority the Ice-type. Bias determination was only a recent thing after all: people naturally found their own types by living, but knowing for sure wasn't a thing when she was a child. Ice-types had captured her heart and she'd favoured them, even after discovering raising Psychic-types was easier. That was just part of who she was.

And she'd been so confident! Sure Ryuki was known to be incredible, but she had her own determination! She'd been ready to give this everything she had! But this... not just Abomasnow, but Glaceon and Jynx as well, crushed by that Hydreigon without being able to do a thing, the Brutal
Pokemon unrelenting in putting its opponent's resistance down, this... this wasn't fair.

It sucked and she hated it.

What an awful way to lose.

The battle was called and each Trainer to compete asked to step forward and shake hands. Ryuki, having called his partner Hydreigon back, walked without any of the confidence or swagger he had before. He honestly looked like he was the one who'd lost this fight. But Sina wasn't in the mood to look at things that way at all.

“Really?”

“I am so sorry.” Their hands clasped, Ryuki couldn't even meet Sina's eyes. “She... she's not meant to just jump out like that. Normally she won't ever fight until all the rest of my Pokemon are beat.”

“What?” A snide tone made its way into Sina's voice, “The Dragon Tamer can't keep one of his own under control?”

Ryuki gave a small smile. “She's like twenty times older than I am so... no.”

That cut through. Sina's expression dropped to shock. That... oh.

“Well... shit.”

Over so quickly was the match between Sina and Ryuki that in no time at all it was Kahuna Olivia and Tapu Lele standing on the field. Well Tapu Lele was floating. That wasn't the point.

The crowd, still reeling from Ryuki's absolute destruction of Sina, were beginning to recover their interest, the battle ahead one Alola held in far higher regard than Sabrina – a Trainer from afar – battling one of their Island Deities. This battle, especially between a Kahuna and their partner Tapu, how would it go? No-one was quite sure.

Except for those who knew.

“Kahuna Hala, thank you for joining us again.”

Given the competitors standing on the stage, no-one was better equipped to oversee this match than the Kahuna of Melemele Island.

“Olivia has been Kahuna to Akala Island for just on ten years.” Anna took charge of introductions again. “An expert Trainer of the Rock-type, she has been the guiding hand of the second Grand Trial of Alola, and the active community leader of Akala a Kahuna is expected to be. Residents of the island are all quick to point out the care Olivia gives wherever she goes to those in need, and those who've taken on their Island Challenges all speak highly of her ability as a Trainer. But will that be enough?”

There was little Alexa could speak of here, and so after a moment's breath Anna continued.

“Facing Olivia is Tapu Lele, Island Deity of Akala. A Tapu and Kahuna of an Island are linked, able to share a Bond when necessary to protect Alola – as was shown during the Ultra Beast Invasion last year. But what will happen when these two are pitted against one another instead of alongside? Kahuna Hala, do you feel this battle will be any closer than Sabrina's with Tapu Koko?”
A deep pause lasted as Kahuna Hala emitted a long “hmmm”, thinking about the best way to say this. As the noise of contemplation ended, he shook his head. “No. I cannot say that will be the case.”

“Oh...” both commentators seemed to deflate a little at Hala stating that so clearly. Shakily, Anna attempted to recover. “Well, Kahuna Olivia still has an impressive record as a Trainer, so keep an eye on what she does all the same. The battle is just about to begin, so here we go!”

No concern at all could be seen on the face of Kahuna Olivia of Akala Island. Standing in the Trainer's circle on the eastern side of the field, the dark-skinned woman kept nothing but a simple relaxed smile upon her face. If Kahuna Hala's voiced doubts about her chances reached her, she did not show it in the least. Chose a Pokeball, a pink-coloured Love Ball, and brought forth the second Lycanroc of today, the bipedal and red-furred Midnight Form, to the field. The Wolf Pokemon stretched and set itself at the ready.

Across from them floated Tapu Lele, the black-bodied and pink-shelled Guardian Deity of Akala, a Pokemon that had connected to Olivia time and time again over her years as Kahuna. It was difficult to see any emotion in the movement or mouthless face of the Land Spirit Pokemon, but at the least it showed no distress either. Words from the few who knew circulated, that Kahuna and Tapu would battle now and again – the Kahuna tasked to sate their partner's desire for conflict. But how would things change when it was a battle on a stage like this? Well, Kahuna Hala had already said it. The best that could be hoped for was that Olivia's showing would impress.

Those Tapu... was it really alright for them to be here?

Ticking seconds, Olivia keeping her smile and her eyes forward on the Island Deity before her. The judge overseeing this match raised their arms.

And then...

“Begin!”

With a lash of its black-skinned arm Tapu Lele reached forward, a deep pink glow shining around its outline, psychic energy stretching out at incredible speed to the Lycanroc before it. Confidently, the Land Spirit Pokemon took its grip.

“Lycanroc let's go!”

Heavy jaws wreathed with black energy snapped down hard, the trailing pink threads of Tapu Lele's
power caught and torn by them, initial attack of Tapu Lele broken apart. In the same motion one of the heavy clawed forearms of the Lycanroc dug into the ground and heaved, tearing a mass of earth compacted by Rock-type energy up before the Pokemon slammed it with a foot, sending the block flying at great speed towards its Tapu foe. Before the outstretched hand of Tapu Lele the rock shattered into shards, unable to touch the Deity. A second rock smashed through the remains of the first, again shattered by psychic force. Snapping a hand through the air all the shards were blown away, Tapu Lele reaching up with its other to grasp at the Lycanroc before it.

That was no longer before it.

Immediately clapping its hands the Tapu radiated a burst of force around it, turning as it did so to find the opponent it sought. Lycanroc, who'd charged behind the second rock and slipped between the shards, leaping high into the air just before the burst was unleashed, fell down and its jaws seized upon its Tapu foe.

The pitch of Tapu Lele's scream at an attack actually touching it hurt, but compared to the crowd's flinch back Olivia did not move an inch. Next Tapu Lele would lash out with a powerful storm forward that would crack against the barrier before her, Lycanroc dodging around it after letting go of its bite, then snapping down to sever through the next burst of psychic energy the Tapu swung as a blade, its other claw pulling up a gout of stone into the Tapu's underside and flipping it into the air. Once airborne Tapu Lele would summon all the loose material around it into a great armour and throw it forward. It would be obscured for a moment then.

Again Lycanroc could leap above before slamming down and shattering the rock before it could be thrown, then pushing it down upon Tapu Lele. That distraction, the Island Deity lashing back upwards to send the stones shattering against the barrier's roof, would let Lycanroc land on the ground then leap up again and slam its head into the Tapu's gut, a Steel-type technique Olivia had taught it long ago the most powerful way to harm this foe.

And even beyond that Olivia knew what would come next. The entire battle from beginning to end she could see, how Tapu Lele would react each time, and where the weaknesses she had trained her partners to exploit would be. The presence that Tapu exuded, the same as what Tapu Koko had weighed down upon Sabrina, it meant nothing to Olivia, exposed to it so often as she was. This wasn't a Pokemon Battle. This was a dismantling.

That was what it meant for a Kahuna to face the Tapu that had chosen them.

“As I said,” the rough yet distinguished voice of Kahuna Hala spoke over the stunned silence of Anna, Alexa, and indeed the entire crowd as Olivia and her partner Lycanroc countered every single one of Tapu Lele's actions without pause, “this battle would be no closer than the one we saw before. A Kahuna knows their Tapu better than any other alive. We understand them to such a depth that their thoughts we can not only see but predict. For Olivia and I, who have grown alongside the Tapu who chose us, there is... no manner in which the Tapu can possibly win. This battle was decided the moment it was announced.”

It was... impossible to believe. The power Tapu Lele possessed, the vast realm of psychic energy it exuded, it was so clear. So clear that this was a Legendary Pokemon, the same in strength as Tapu Koko who had crushed each of Sabrina's Pokemon – Pokemon that were by no means weak themselves – with relative ease. But Olivia, and her partners, Lycanroc exchanged after a long battle for Armaldo to continue the battle equally as ably, what they were doing was... it was mechanical. Precise. Every action, every thought that Tapu Lele had, the Kahuna of Akala read, knew, and had already prepared counter to. There was nothing Tapu Lele could do before her.

Alola, never before witness to a battle such as this, sat in silence as one of their four deities meant
nothing to its Kahuna.

A sight never before seen.

Moon watched, eyes riveted. Her next battle, against Tapu Koko, if she could use any of what Olivia did to fight Tapu Lele... to stand against that Deity she needed to be able to do this herself. But this was overwhelming.

Olivia did not win this battle quickly. The intense and immense power of Tapu Lele, amplified by the Land Spirit Pokemon's growing and growing frustration, didn't fade even as Olivia changed her second partner for a third. Then that third for a fourth. Each time Olivia commanded perfectly, matching and outplaying everything Tapu Lele did with absolute precision, but still the Guardian Deity fought on, sacrificing its own pride to mix Fairy-type techniques alongside its own psychic strength. But even that Olivia had predicted the moment of. She handled that too.

Unbelievable.

Mallow too watched with eyes unblinking. Her battle against Tapu Bulu as the last of today... she knew. She knew she'd lose. How could she not? But this sight, this feeling no-one in Alola had ever felt before, it meant something to her too. If she could take anything from it herself...

Lana and Kiawe, sitting by her side, said nothing so their fellow Captain could focus with all her might.

The last of Olivia's six Pokemon to battle the Tapu was Probopass, the Compass Pokemon, Rock and Steel-type. Anna latched onto the presence of a Pokemon with a typing specifically able to harm Tapu Lele best, noting that Olivia had yet to use her Z-Move. Almost calmly, as if reminded of that fact by the commentary and reacting to it at an easy pace, Olivia set a Steelium-Z into her own Z-Ring, Probopass and the Mini-Nose units it controlled harassing Tapu Lele and occupying its attention still.

The Guardian Deity was growing tired. Its reactions were slowing, the weight of power it raised to fight smaller and smaller. In the end it couldn't even push back the trio of Mini-Noses that surrounded it to unleash a stunning electric wave. Olivia, having known this exact moment would come long before this battle began, performed the Z-Pose to use the Steelium-Z with perfect calm, as this entire battle had been fought. A spiral of energy curving around Probopass, the Compass Pokemon shot into the sky, arcing overhead as the Mini-Noses released all the electricity they held to keep Tapu Lele in place.

Seconds from contact, Tapu Lele blasted itself with psychic force, wrenching its own body beyond the electric field to dodge.

Probopass, its angle already changing in that same moment by Olivia's command, slammed into the Guardian Deity without restraint. Waves of Z-Power exploding from the moment of contact, Tapu Lele yelling as the psychic shielding it still held was torn away, the battle ended as Olivia had known it would and Hala watching had expected. No Kahuna could ever lose to their Tapu once enough time had passed. It was a lesson rarely ever expressed in their history, but the reminder, especially after the passage of Ula'ula's last, was worth making.

The three remaining Tapu, watching from the pillars in the north-west, south-west, and south-east, stayed silent at the sight of their fellow defeated without achieving a thing. Kept their own thoughts held.

The judge for this match, seeing the partner of Olivia float back and Tapu Lele, face down on the
ground, shakily raised an arm.

The winner of this battle the one it was always going to be.

Quickly did Tapu Lele recover beyond that, pulling itself back up from the ground, crackles of the last of its power echoing around it, but there was no opponent left to face. Olivia had already stepped down from the stage, battle won without a single one of her Pokemon declared defeated, and the Island Deity was left without satisfaction. The announcement had been made. Its battle over. From the first Pokemon League of Alola, the first of the four Tapu had been eliminated.

And the ramifications of this battle amongst the people of Alola began to flow.

Chapter End Notes

Credit once again to @milkychai for this Tristan art used in his VS banner. We'll likely be seeing Jace and Pitaya's in the next chapter.

One thing of note for me to get into before anything else is that Sina did a swear. There've been a few cut short so far, with people who don't want to swear at/around children, but given Sina and Ryuki are both adults and it was just the two of them, it felt a little more difficult for me to avoid this when it was so clearly her response in her voice. So I guess that's my one? P sure this doesn't affect my rating at all but it's essentially the first (probably only) actual of this fic and I didn't want to ignore using it either. Felt too right not to though. It was very much her mood at the time. Sorry Sina. It had to be this way.

Compared to the singular Ilima vs Moon battle before, this chapter was five different battles, each of varying length, intensity, equality, and fighting style. The title was actually a tricky one to come up with, finding a connecting thread for these five battles, but there were definitely revelations of each of those three elements described in this chapter. So I'm okay with that now. I've got a concept for next chapter's title already so at least that one should be easier on me.

Six battles of the first round down, ten more to go! I think I should be able to do either a 5/5 or 6/4 split to ensure we get through the first round of the Pokemon League in four chapters, which will put me back on track for my bigger plans. I hope that this sight of how each of these Trainers battles and thinks proved entertaining, it's nice for me to get to dig further into each and learn a little more about them.

Writing combat is an intense thing, knowing all the moving pieces and keeping an active flow of events both engaging and not dragging. Without an in-depth focus we instead see a higher overview of the battle, where I'm still trying to make sure each individual part gets at least described as happening. My general style of opening with a look into immediate back and forth moves, then scaling out to a summary of how things go, is continuing on, though I'm looking for opportunities to try different things as well. We'll see what next chapter brings. More exciting fights at least, I hope.

That's all for this chapter, so once again I'd like to thank all my readers for your support and feedback. It means a lot to me and will always mean a lot to me, so please don't ever feel shy from saying whatever's on your mind! And of course, if you're able, please consider sharing either of the following advertising posts for Eldritch:
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Thanks for reading, see you again for the next one!
Aspirants, Teachers, and Rivals

Chapter Notes

This chapter uses a custom style - for best readability, please ensure the "Show Creator's Style" button at the top of the page is active.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Trainer Plumeria. Trainer Jace. You are to decide upon the number of Pokemon you will be using in your upcoming battle.”

Plumeria stood taller than Jace did, but even if she did not, he was sure it would still feel as though she were looking down at him. The former second-in-command of Team Skull, now here battling at the Pokemon League. It wasn’t like Jace himself didn’t feel guilt over his past actions, even as manipulated as they had been, so it wasn’t like he didn’t fully understand people could change and seek repentance – and specifically go through the Island Challenge as part of that. Maybe of everyone competing in the Pokemon League he was one of the best suited to understanding how Plumeria felt.

But truth be told she still just intimidated the heck out of him.

“Your request?” The judge, watching the two silently looking at one another, prompted them. Jace struggled for a thought. By the rules of the League he had to use at least three. And on a personal level he had four to his name. So one of those two. The choice of which would give him better odds against Plumeria was...

“Is... four okay?” The more time he had in this coming battle against Plumeria, the better he’d be able to study her style and find weaknesses to exploit. Analytical was the nature of Jace’s own battling style. It would be better to go the full distance.

“Is there a reason you can’t do it in three?” This was the first time Plumeria had ever addressed Jace, and her tone was everything he’d expected of her expression and posture. Something dismissive in the form that she’d never even considered him enough to actively dismiss him in the first place. “I’d rather this not take too long.”

“Four... I’d prefer.”

“Is there a reason I should agree to that if it would help you?”

Plumeria’s answer back shut Jace’s mouth, the young man struggling for a response that would make any difference at all. He was... just saying what he wanted for his own benefit. It wasn’t specifically wrong of Plumeria to argue for a number she’d rather as well but... looking up again, Jace tried to focus on what he’d been reminded of in the months since the Ultra Beast Invasion. Confidence, Ilima’s voice whispered in the back of his head. Jace kept that voice repeating.

“Is there a reason I should say three if you’d rather that yourself?”

A slight twitch on Plumeria’s face wasn’t enough to identify as anger or amusement, leaving Jace in the dark about his upcoming opponent’s mood. After a second more of staring she just sighed and
shrugged. “Fine, four then.” Then turned to the judge. “We’re ready.”

Nodding, the judge left the two their instructions to prepare to enter onto the stage, heading off to provide the details to the commentators in the announcer’s box above. Plumeria looked away from Jace as soon as the discussion was done and didn’t look back at him once even as the two were called to the stage, she heading to the eastern circle, he to the west.

The crowd, far less smoothed over from the last battle than the battlefield itself, kept their voices flowing, some beginning to note one of the two competitors come to the stage. Anna’s voice emerged from the speakers surrounding the stands.

“Formerly of Team Skull, Plumeria took and completed her Island Challenge on recommendation of Kahuna Nanu of Ula’ula Island, and former Captain Molayne. To reach this stage she has been approved by each Captain and Kahuna of Alola, and ultimately been nominated by the four Kahuna to take part in the first Alolan Pokemon League. I have been asked to request that we remember that.”

It was hard for Plumeria to tell whether this was forgiveness or punishment. Being asked to come to this stage, where Alola and the entire world would see her for who she was before and was now. Anna hadn’t hid who Plumeria had been, which she found herself not minding, but it was true now that fact had been bluntly stated. Formerly of Team Skull. Formerly of the misfits and troublemakers that ran Alola ragged.

At least she hadn’t gone any deeper into who Plumeria was than that.

“Facing Plumeria is Jace, another Island Challenge Champion, and Research and Development Engineer of the Aether Foundation. Jace is part of the team that, including Captain Ilima, created the Ride Pager System, and has done much impressive work as part of the Aether Foundation. He, along with Ilima, were original record-setters for the Island Challenge: completing the four Grand Trials at a blistering pace before stopping before their Final Trials. With those Final Trials recently completed, Jace has returned to the position of Pokemon Trainer – and no doubt shown great skill as one to pass his Final Trials and be nominated to take part in this Pokemon League!”

The voices of the people were far more for Jace than Plumeria, but ultimately that was based more on their knowledge of Plumeria than Jace himself. Any port in a storm, it seemed.

“Trainers at the ready!” Raising an arm to each of the two Trainers prepared, the judge overseeing counted ten seconds then gave their command.

Let the next battle of the first Alolan Pokemon League begin.
Plumeria’s choice was a Crobat, Bat Pokemon, a large purple flying creature, four winged and wide mouthed. Immediately the Poison and Flying-type Pokemon drew forced acknowledgement from the crowd, as a Pokemon that could only evolve through the care and affection of its Trainer given. If Plumeria really had raised that Pokemon, it meant she at least cared for it genuinely enough.

If Plumeria picked up on even a single iota of the crowd’s mood, she didn’t show it. Just kept her eyes forward on the opponent before her. And the steps she had to take to what was next.

To what would be next.

Jace’s partner drew interest too, a Pokemon not often seen. The Virtual Pokemon Porygon-Z, final evolution of the Porygon line, was not an easy Pokemon to come by or raise to this form. Intriguing.

It was thanks to the Aether Foundation that he had this Pokemon. In fact all four of Jace’s partners were thanks to the Foundation – his original team, who he’d walked alongside during his Island Challenge with Ilima back then, all gone to the wild or other Trainers so they might continue to live battling lives. Acquiring these new Pokemon, working with them to forge a rapport, and then training with Ilima to an exhausting degree, had been the majority of Jace’s months outside his work with the Foundation up to the date of his Final Trials. He still sometimes struggled to believe he’d passed them.

His younger self would laugh at him for the degree to which he doubted himself now.

Quick to begin this battle the two Pokemon burst into motion, Crobat flying at swift and silent speed about the battlefield, Porygon-Z’s own movement a more jerky and difficult to predict thing. Electricity sparked across the Virtual Pokemon’s body, Jace’s thoughts on this battle already being that Electric-type attacks would be best and his partner responding. Plumeria caught that sight and clicked her tongue. Jace had won the initial match-up of chosen Pokemon. But that didn’t mean this exchange would be won by him, though once the sixty seconds were up Plumeria wouldn’t disregard the option of changing her partner for another either.

She wasn’t about to give a single chance of losing here.

Crobat was quick, and trained in creating protective barriers, enabling the Pokemon to dodge the vast majority of attacks while blocking those it could not. With its innate stamina for flying – spending little energy even when quickly dodging – it was a Pokemon that did well in readily exhausting opponents. Had done excellently in the Final Trials doing just that.
Porygon-Z, a Pokemon that originated as an electronic program given physical form, mutated by various adjustments to its current state, showed no difference in electrical output from second one to second sixty. Having no regrets in retrieving her partner and substituting it for an Alolan Muk, the brightly coloured mass of rainbow sludge that was a Pokemon, Plumeria considered that her opponent would likely show no exhaustion even to the point it was defeated.

But defeated it would be.

Jace, choosing not to switch partners yet so he could wear down this opponent first, continued to give Porygon-Z commands. Electrical attacks would still do fine in affecting this foe, and the Virtual Pokemon was armed with plenty of other tricks besides. For example...

Colour coalesced from nothing, two-dimensional plates of energy matching the colours of Porygon-Z itself. Then darkening to black. The third commentator, nominated by Anna and Alexa to join them for this match, finally found a good moment to speak. They’d done introductions so well he hadn’t been able to say a thing.

“Porygon-Z is a Pokemon able to change its Type in battle, rewriting its own body according to the powers it can exude.” Well versed on the topic, Molayne nodded to himself as Anna and Alexa realised they’d skipped introducing him before.

“With us,” Anna’s voice showed none of the shakiness she felt in missing this step of her role, “is Molayne, a former Captain, head of the Hokulani Observatory Team, and overseer for the Pokemon Storage System in Alola. Have you worked with the Porygon line before?”

“Only studied,” Molayne was quick to say, “but what we should be aware of is that the Virtual Pokemon can almost freely edit its Type, making it easily able to become resistant to most opponents it faces. We’ll be seeing how Plumeria moves to counter that.”

Were Plumeria to judge by the colour Porygon-Z changed to, it would be that it had taken on the Type of Dark. A way to resist some of the powers her partner Muk had. Some. But not nearly all. Not nearly enough.

Jets of purple fog burst from the rainbow-coloured body of the Sludge Pokemon, quickly filling out a field around it and expanding, omnidirectional in a way that Porygon-Z’s rapid dodging would never escape. Jace saw that clearly, directing his partner back, but the more distance it gained the less the bolts of its electricity fired upon Plumeria’s partner mattered, either glancing off of the ground as the Muk flattened itself out or dancing overhead. Jace frowned and called his partner to stop those attacks, so they might construct one more direct and able to strike through the poison cloud.

The break in attacks Plumeria had been needing.

What this was, as the commentators reported, was a clear sign of the strength a Pokemon partnered to a strong Trainer could gain. The way that Muk made the throwing motion with its hand, the way the blob of its own poisonous body detached and flew, and the perfect accuracy for it to strike Porygon-Z head-on: all of that was as clear an announcement as could be. This Pokemon was strong, and its Trainer had raised it well.

Begrudgingly those watching were forced to admit the former Team Skull Admin had true skill as a Pokemon Trainer.

Poison sapped health and stamina. Reduced energy. Targets afflicted slowed, and made mistakes, presenting openings for foes to strike. Despite the Muk’s movements being slow, the mass of sludge rolling ominously forward over itself to it opponent, the attempts of Porygon-Z to stop it proved
futile. The bolts of electricity emitted seemingly simply ignored by the Sludge Pokemon, who perfectly struck with another shot of thrown poison when a gap in the Virtual Pokemon’s dodging emerged. Concerned Jace raised the Pokemon’s Pokeball, intending to call it back from this obvious failed attempt, only for the ball itself to not respond, the poison still coating his partner cutting off retreat.

Porygon-Z attempted to gain height from its approaching foe. Another twinge as the poison wracked its body – so painfully physical in this fight – and the Muk hit it again. And again and again as, despite Jace’s support, his partner could not pull away and slowly, inexorably, the Muk rolled over the Porygon-Z, cleaned its poison coating away, and pulled back to leave a bested Pokemon for collection by its trainer. Jace, doing so, couldn’t deny his frustration.

Immediately chose the strongest of his four partners next to fight.

“Fossil Resurrection,” Molayne commented, aware of much to do with all scientifically created Pokemon, “is a field researched and practised by institutes in regions across the world. The Aether Foundation has been specifically working with an independent scientist in Akala to study this field, but doesn’t manage it themselves. Still it seems Jace was able to get approval to take this one.”

“The Fossil Pokemon Aerodactyl,” Alexa hadn’t had much she could say about either competitor or the previous Pokemon, but this one she knew something about, “is known for both its power and aggression – which any Trainer of it will report is difficult to control. Aerodactyl have appeared in numerous Pokemon Leagues before, thanks to their impressive strength, but their responsiveness to their Trainers has always varied. How well this one battles under Jace’s commands will be a clear sign of his own ability as a Pokemon Trainer.”

It certainly hadn’t been easy. Ilima had made Jace list out every Pokemon he could think of partnering with from those the Aether Foundation could provide. They’d trawled Pokedexes and considered teams and movesets and opponents and everything else the Captain could imagine or, more importantly, drive Jace to imagine. Getting back into the mindset of a battling Trainer, as he had been before, was a challenge for Jace now, and he’d struggled with it.

The concept of going to the Fossil Restoration Center and requesting an Aerodactyl be revived from the material gathered by the Aether Foundation for Jace’s own Pokemon team had been... he’d immediately told Ilima that was too much. Ilima had maintained confidence though.

Confidence, always confidence.

How was it he was so different, Jace found himself wondering as his partner wasted no time in setting upon the Alolan Muk before it, the Sludge Pokemon’s poisons having much more difficulty taking hold on the rock-hide of the Fossil Pokemon, Aerodactyl mercilessly raining Rock and Flying-type techniques down upon its foe. Jace only half paid it attention in this moment.

Once upon a time he and Ilima had been so much the same. Both so brash and confident, supporting and challenging one another, laughing and racing forward, battling and pushing each other further. And for all that time, all the way until each had completed their four Grand Trials, only the Final Trials left before them, Jace hadn’t noticed. Hadn’t paid attention to what his best friend was struggling with until Ilima had said he was leaving. Going to Kalos to change. To better become the person he wanted to be.

What feelings Jace had fought in that moment. The thought of even trying to argue Ilima to stay, so they could go on together, was revolting, but Jace hadn’t been able to stop having it, again and again, no matter how many times he pushed it down. Then other thoughts too, mixing together with that. Thoughts that it was his fault things had gotten as bad for Ilima as they had, that he had been pushing
Ilima to keep going and not step back and take things slow. As if Jace himself had any control over the effects each’s puberties had on them.

In contact always, but separated by land and ocean. Without the will to go on, believing that his unrelenting intent had pushed Ilima to ignore his own struggles, Jace had left Pokemon battling behind. Eventually found his way to work with the Aether Foundation, somewhere his thoughts could be preoccupied. Though over the years until Ilima’s return the constant doubts that his own confidence was anything but a danger to others had become quite the complex on their own.

Ilima came back from Kalos, different yet exactly the same. Little about him had changed, really, since the younger days he and Jace had raced across Alola. In contrast Jace... well, they hadn’t really spoken about it for the longest time after. Jace hadn’t been willing to bring it up, and Ilima was focused on what was in the past staying in the past while he worked on the future. Completing his Island Challenge. Becoming a Captain. The two of them, along with a group of others both Aether and not, developing the Ride Pager System. Moving on.

Jace still found himself looking constantly behind.

After the Ultra Beast Invasion, after Faba, they’d finally spoken. Jace had confessed his fears, that his racing Ilima had forced Ilima to ignore his own growing discomfort, and Ilima had soundly told Jace that for someone Ilima considered very intelligent, Jace was also exceedingly stupid. That he had no grounds to take responsibility for anything Ilima had felt or chosen to do. Ilima had made his own choices then in pushing on with the Island Challenge. Then he’d made his own choices to stop so he might seek a solution to the growing tension he felt within his own skin. And even today he was still making his own choices. And not regretting a one of them.

So wasn’t it about time Jace stopped looking for things to regret too?

“The Aerodactyl partner of Jace has demonstrated the exact power its species is known for, savaging the partner Muk of Plumeria without pause! While the lingering after-effects of exposure to that poison might still be a threat, at the very least this member of her team has been declared defeated!”

Calling back her Muk, Plumeria wasted not a second in choosing the next partner to follow. Neither Crobat nor Salazzle, both at risk from that Fossil Pokemon before her, so next instead something that would be far more threat to it than it to they. The Brutal Star Pokemon Toxapex, evolution of Mareanie, Poison and Water-type. A dispassionately cruel Pokemon, powerfully defensive, it would prove an immense challenge for the Aerodactyl to crack and overcome. Jace, taking note of it as he shook from his thoughts, recalled the countless Corsola he and other members of the Aether Foundation had been tasked to care for due to the Brutal Star species’ horrendous habits.

Made a substitution in counter to it easily.

“Thanks to the victory against Plumeria’s Muk, Jace has the luxury of responding to her choices now!” Alexa’s commentary continued, looking for a chance to add her thoughts given the others were covering Alolan understanding so well. “The Mysterious Pokemon Starmie is Water and Psychic-type, which strongly opposes the Water and Poison-type Toxapex! Plumeria is in a dangerous situation now!”

Acting like she didn’t have a counter to this. Like she hadn’t spent her time training hard to counter Psychic foes after what Tapu Lele had done. The way Olivia had fought, the way her partners had so neatly cut through Tapu Lele’s powers, Plumeria had watched and studied that with all her might. She had the timing and execution memorised now.

She’d do the same.
Starmie was fast, the two violet five-pointed stars that made up its body rotating in opposite
directions of one another, creating a force that allowed it to move even over dry land. The red jewel
in the Mysterious Pokemon’s core, glinting with energy preparing to be unleashed, was all the
warning available before bolts of psychic energy burst free and sought Toxapex out. The far slower
Brutal Star Pokemon would be hard pressed to catch this foe.

But to end this battle clearly this would be where Plumeria put her foot down.

With each wave of the twelve tentacles that surrounded Toxapex’s main body a pulse of dark energy
was released, brushing aside the seeking psychic bolts, the same motion a second time around
sending poisonous needles raining across the battlefield, each impacting with the ground before
emitting an ominous purple glow. Controlling the direction of the Starmie’s movements through the
field of needles, Plumeria watched as it danced about, Jace clearly on guard for the effects of her
Pokemon’s poison even with the advantage Starmie’s typing gave it. Smart, really.

But all that time spent dodging gave Plumeria and Toxapex time to act.

Poison spread, a rolling liquid emerging from where Toxapex remained in place, beginning to coat
the field. Plumeria’s partners all specialised in this Type, and could control it in manners above and
beyond the norm for each of their kind. That Starmie could bounce about the field all it wanted, but
the poison of Plumeria’s Pokemon wasn’t an easy thing to shake. Just one dose and even with a
Psychic typing things would not go well for it.

Jace, as his partner shifted over the spreading pool, kept his calm and gave a simple command.

“Change.”

Starmie was one of a number of Pokemon possessed of the ability to change its own Type. As was
the Porygon-Z. As would be the third of the Pokemon Jace had received from the Aether Foundation
directly, each former research subjects in the matter of changing Type. Research that went into the
creation of the RKS System. Something Jace hadn’t been involved in creating, but after everything
had come to light, had involved himself in cleaning up. Part of that was studying the records of the
research done.

He hadn’t been able to help but grow fascinated in this aspect of Pokemon he’d never studied before.

“A number of Pokemon possess the ability to change their own Type,” Molayne took over the
scientific angle again, “and for most it’s done in different ways. The Porygon-Z uses its own internal
powers to adjust itself. Starmie, meanwhile, reacts to the environment around it.”

It wasn't... difficult to see, per se, but difficult to track now all the same. Less like a spinning disc and
more like a rock skipping over water, the Starmie's body and even centre gem now coloured a deep
purple to match the poison spread about. Taking on the Poison type from the infusion of poison into
the environment, the Starmie partner of Jace was now immune to the greatest power Plumeria and
her partners held. He was frustratingly intelligent and able.

This was no easy fight.

Ilima, in the stands, kept his focus locked on the battle his best and most precious friend was part of,
his smile unable to be kept back from spreading to see Jace doing so well. He was just as quick to
find solutions to problems as ever.

Jace, Ilima was proud to say, was no easy opponent at all.

It was a stalemate now. The changed typing of Starmie meant that its attacks had lessened power
behind them, the psychic energies it flexed easy enough for Toxapex to block or break – commentary indicating Plumeria was copying Olivia’s own counter to the type, Olivia herself deeply surprised by Plumeria’s effectiveness in doing so. But Toxapex was a Pokemon best at countering physical attackers, and while it had techniques it could fire upon the swift-moving Starmie, the lack of effectiveness its poison techniques now had made it difficult to do much of all.

The seconds ticked idly by until Plumeria could change her partner and exploit the short period of time before Jace himself would be able to as well.

Crobat, more than fast enough to catch the Mysterious Pokemon out, manifested and chased it down without pause.

This battle was one of constantly moving to counter the other, each Trainer taking a moment’s advantage then losing it again as the other responded. But the advantage was still in Jace’s favour, and though the Crobat of Plumeria had successfully evaded and struck Starmie a number of times in the countdown until Jace made his next substitution, make it and return Aerodactyl, who Jace felt confident could take the Bat Pokemon down, he did.

Plumeria, expecting this, smiled calmly as her partner Pokemon’s wings shone bright silver and the Bat Pokemon quickly sliced through the heavy rock hide of its Aerodactyl foe.

“A Steel-type technique.” Anna’s voice clearly implied how much she felt that hit had just hurt. “With both Pokemon being high speed fighters, and each possessing attacks significantly effective upon the other, this is about to get rough.”

Rough was certainly the word. Without pause or restraint the two Pokemon, Crobat and Aerodactyl, circled one another in the air, the first lashing out with Steel-infused wings, the second Rock-powered blows. Again and again one crashed against the other, this battle far more equal than Jace’s prediction had been. The time until a switch could be made – he didn’t even know which of his Pokemon he’d respond to this opponent with – did not pass nearly soon enough for the battle within.

Plumeria’s partner, older, stronger, simply more able by experience and time invested, left a deep score along the stony chest of the Fossil Pokemon and Aerodactyl dropped, to be called back as defeated. The second of Jace’s Pokemon removed from the field.

The advantage now squarely Plumeria’s own.

The fourth of Jace’s Pokemon, the third he’d taken from the research subjects kept by the Aether Foundation, was a Kecleon, the Colour Swap Pokemon. A species known to transform their typing into any an opponent struck them with, a subspecies possessed a different and, to the Aether Foundations’ research, far more interesting ability.

The ability in question, dubbed Protean, rarely seen in the Kecleon species, caused the Pokemon to change its typing in response to the power it used, instead of the power it suffered. Similar in a manner to the Porygon line, but different too. Well worth study by the Aether Foundation in order to create the RKS System.

Not the most powerful of the Pokemon Jace kept – Aerodactyl holding that honour – but one incredibly dangerous provided a keen strategic mind behind it. Breathing out, Jace focused on keeping his calm, his confidence, and sent his next commands.

This battle not over yet.

Plumeria didn’t understand this one. She knew what a Kecleon was – they appeared around Akala
mostly – but the way Jace’s fought was... different. Each time it attacked it changed, resembling the attack it unleashed. The first time, a bolt of electricity lashing out to strike Crobat squarely, Jace having access to the TM collection the Aether Foundation kept, was enough to finish off the Pokemon weakened by the battle with Aerodactyl.

Two to two.

With that threat equally dangerous for Toxapex, Plumeria chose Salazzle without a second thought. Then immediately prepared for the Pokemon before her to unleash a technique the Poison and Fire-type Toxic Lizard Pokemon would be vulnerable to as well.

Not as easy. Jace had trained hard with the Pokemon he’d taken on, in the months since the Ultra Beast Invasion, but there were still limits. He’d taught each a variety of techniques, both their own natural and those they could learn, and honed them with Ilima’s help, but that didn’t mean each of his Pokemon alone could handle any threat. There wasn’t a great answer to the partner Salazzle of Plumeria. Not with those already defeated.

A dash through its own shadow, the afternoon sun of Alola giving none other for use as disguise, at least aligned the Kecleon with the Ghost type so it could resist the Poison Plumeria’s partner used.

Not that, against the immediate and intense wave of Fire-type techniques the Salazzle unleashed, it made that much of a difference.

Kecleon were hardy Pokemon. Did well in resisting those attacks, continuing to dive through shadows that did not fade under the flickering flames spread about. But again it came down to experience and power. The Salazzle partner of Plumeria... it was her first, her oldest. A Salandit, once, she had been taught to catch at eleven years old.

Coolly, in spite of the heat baking the battlefield before her, Plumeria continued to give her commands and, before the time to switch Starmie back in came, laid the Colour Swap Pokemon low.

Jace’s Pokemon were strong enough, and his talents as a Trainer clear. But there was a clearer difference still. As Starmie manifested, a Pokemon that would be a proper threat to the Salazzle it faced, Plumeria was already beginning the motions to unleash the power of the Poisonium-Z upon the last of her four foes.

Her arms held, one above her shoulder the other below, and then whipped apart as she dropped to one knee, other leg bent forward. The Z-Pose to allow her partner to perform the Poison-type Z-Move: Acid Downpour.

The timing was everything. The volume of poison Salazzle unleashed through this Z-Move, a liquid and gaseous rain of it spreading across the field, Jace could counter it. Not with his own Z-Move, the opening not yet found, but the Camouflage technique Starmie knew, by changing again to the Poison-type as poison rained down across the field, it would negate so much of it.

Jace’s confidence in that, his timing on the call, was correct. Perfect. Starmie transforming once more into that type, preparing to resist the Z-Move upon it.

But the element behind that move, the poison specifically sourced from a Pokemon of Salazzle’s species, made that plan moot from the very beginning. Its poison corroded. Affected anything it struck, no matter how resistant.

So despite the perfection of Jace’s command, a clear sign of incredible skill, it didn’t matter. The poison still burned deep. The Z-Move’s effects still took hold.
The Starmie, caught by the wave of poison and unable to resist the toxins infusing its body, unable to rise again after the Z-Move was done.

A battle well fought but a battle come to an end.

Of this conflict, the winner to move on to the next round: Plumeria it was.

“Mallow has been Captain of Akala Island’s Lush Jungle for almost three years now, serving as one of Akala’s three guiding hands that test and sharpen Trainers taking their Island Challenges. She has a keenly focused understanding of her natural environment and a fantastic sense for it – which has enabled her as a Grass-type specialist Trainer to bloom into an impressively skilled young woman.”

As tense as the opening seconds were before Mallow’s battle against the Island Deity Tapu Bulu, hearing those words from Kahuna Olivia, commentating this match alongside Anna and Alexa, a woman Mallow had idolised for so many years now, still made her heart pound equally as hard with a different feeling entirely.

She’d... never heard that much praise from her before. Oh was she blushing? She’d better not be blushing! People were watching here!

In the stands Kiawe and Lana both smiled at the clear happiness their dear friend was trying to hold back.

“Thanks to that specialisation,” Anna took over, “Mallow has a unique advantage against her opponent: the Guardian Deity of Ula’ula Island: Tapu Bulu. Tapu Bulu’s signature power is in the growth and control of plantlife. Will Mallow’s experience with that natural element allow her a level of control in this battle? Or will the raw power of the Land Spirit Pokemon prove too much? We’re all interested to see!”

Anna’s excitement was much more sobering, Mallow’s momentary pleasure at Olivia’s words quickly fading away. She... okay. Breathing out, Mallow tried to calm herself. It wasn’t... it wasn’t like she was like Lana here. Winning everything, forging ahead, becoming a master Trainer, those weren’t Mallow’s end goals. She enjoyed it! She did, genuinely! But the path she wanted was closer to home. Her family’s restaurant, a lifetime making things that made people happy. And taking part in nature to do that, yes. How things were right now was good. Would be good for three more years still. And then she’d step back from being a Captain but still do the rest of everything else. Go out and care for nature and gather ingredients then cook them all together and serve great food that made people smile. That was her.

She was happy that that was her.

But even with that future she desired that had nothing to do with winning here, even with no great desire in Mallow’s heart to take victory in this League, still the sight of Tapu Bulu floating before her struck her with a feeling of... unfairness? Even without a passionate drive for victory, some part of her had still wanted to have a good and proper Pokemon Battle here at the Pokemon League. And this... was there really any way she could? No, right? She couldn’t do what Olivia had, overwhelming Tapu Lele by knowing its every move before it was made. And Sabrina... Mallow could tell so clearly that if she’d fought that woman Mallow would have been the one to lose. And if she couldn’t measure up to Sabrina, and Sabrina had lost to Tapu Koko clearly, then against Tapu Bulu Mallow would...
“Competitors at the ready!”

Okay okay okay it was time it was time she had to calm down breathe, remember to breathe, choose your Pokemon and ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh-

“Begin!”

“And Mallow has led with a Shiinotic! The Illuminating Pokemon is the evolved form of Morelull, both of which can be found often in and around the Lush Jungle area!”

“Shiinotic,” Olivia continued on from Anna’s announcement, “take over large territories by attaching to root systems and then monitoring all plants within a wide area. Given her opponent, Mallow may be attempting to affect Tapu Bulu’s control over plants.”

Yeah... that was the plan. As the Guardian Deity of Ula’ula floated across from her, Mallow sent her starting commands, Shiinotic – the purple capped and pink bodied mushroom-like humanoid – beginning to dig its roots into the earth of the League battlefield. After seeing how Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele had fought, and what Kahuna Hala had said about each, Mallow had enough ideas for what she’d do.

Not exactly sure why she was doing it, given even with all her ideas Mallow was still sure she was going to lose, that this battle’s conclusion was foregone but... she wanted to. For whatever reason.

So she would.

So anyway, what Hala had said during the battle between Sabrina and Tapu Koko was that because Sabrina started so hard, with her Mega Alakazam trying to control Tapu Koko’s lightning, Tapu Koko had immediately revved up and fought back at full strength. Same thing with Tapu Lele – as soon as Olivia showed she was fighting hard it immediately went wild attacking as ferociously as it could. Which... pretty much flowed into Olivia’s plan to make the Tapu wear itself out.

The thing about Tapu Bulu though was... it was kind of lazy as heck. Kinda famously so, wouldn’t show up and do much of anything without a lot, a lot, of motivation. So right now, as Shiinotic spread its own roots into the ground, Tapu Bulu floating there did... not much at all. Waited to see what would happen.

All part of the plan.

The four deities all joining the Pokemon League was a thing. They did love to fight, that was known,
but each had their own levels of motivation when it came to it. Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele got into the action real quick, but Tapu Bulu and Tapu Fini were more reserved. Interested, yes, but still took some effort to get going.

But since they were here to fight, a lack of motivation didn’t stop their natural power from spilling out.

Already plants were growing around Tapu Bulu, the deity floating before Mallow and Shiinotic, waiting for her to do something to catch its eye. She already was though. The field of grass rapidly spreading outwards, the beginning of bushes and saplings emerging from the earth – a nightmare of a task for the cleanup crew to take care of, lucky there were no more battles for the rest of the day after this – Mallow and Shiinotic were already tapping into it. Spreading control through the earth beneath Tapu Bulu’s sight. All these plants to grow, Shiinotic would seed in them elements for it and the rest of Mallow’s team to make use of going forward.

Make something out of the power Tapu Bulu believed it alone commanded.

Acting more in curiosity than conflict, Tapu Bulu crossed the distance to Shiinotic, the trail of grass continuing to grow, and poked at the Illuminating Pokemon with one of its golden hooved hands.

The crowd was growing restless. Noises circulating about the low energy of this battle, neither Tapu Bulu nor Shiinotic moving to attack. Olivia’s insistence that a strategy was unfurling, that Mallow was approaching this carefully and cleverly, didn’t quite slack the thirst for action amongst those watching. But Mallow, connected to her partner, didn’t notice that at all. They were still building up.

They still had much further to go.

She and Mina had each raised a Shiinotic. In fact it was Mina who’d inspired Mallow to seek its pre-evolution out, in the early days of Mallow’s Captaincy when the older Captain of Poni Island was helping her fit in. Kiawe was still all enthusiasm and ‘doing the title of Captain proud’, while Ilima was always trying to make every Trainer he could get stronger and stronger. Mina, much easier going, was way more Mallow’s speed for finding her feet. The two spent some time in Lush Jungle, Mina sketching the environment, and the Poni Island Captain had suggested Mallow capture and raise a Morelull into Shiinotic. Agreeing immediately, partly to impress her senior, Mallow did so and made that Pokemon her fourth.

She always found herself nostalgic for the early days of learning to be a proper Captain when she and Shiinotic battled together.

Tapu Bulu was actively lifting Shiinotic up now, its curiosity at what this was beginning to take hold. It had come here to fight too, after all. But Shiinotic, despite being lifted, remained connected to the ground, its rootlike arms and feet both stretching and extending downwards into the earth. Curious at this Tapu Bulu pulled the Illuminating Pokemon higher, noting that the connected roots stretched but did not break. Still greenery was growing around them, Tapu Bulu’s natural combat power spilling out around it. The Guardian Deity unaware of what was going on beyond that growth. Okay, Mallow breathed out slowly, her partner had kicked things off.

Here they go.

The cloud of spores Shiinotic breathed out into Tapu Bulu’s face surprised the Land Spirit Pokemon, who dropped its equally typed foe – Grass and Fairy – upon the ground. Waving at its face Tapu Bulu made a deep noise of displeasure, before jerking an arm upwards, a series of thin trees immediately bursting from the ground like spears around Shiinotic’s body, catching and dragging the
roots attaching Shiinotic to the ground and hauling the Illuminating Pokemon into the air.

Now roused to fight, Tapu Bulu displayed the lack of mercy all Tapu held for opponents they fought, and treated the caught Pokemon as little more than a speed bag for its heavy hooved hands until Mallow was able to call her partner – pronounced defeated – back to her. That was how it was, really. Tapu Bulu had strength that eclipsed and what were you meant to do about that? None of Mallow’s Pokemon had the body to resist it and neither the speed to evade forever. This wasn’t something she could win.

But the strategy she’d designed was still on pace and for whatever reason she still intended to see it through.

She didn’t even know why.

“Second from Mallow is the Ghost and Grass-type Elder Tree Pokemon: Trevenant! Kahuna Olivia, what do you expect from this Pokemon?”

“Trevenant is the evolved form of Phantump, which occur around Akala’s Memorial Hill and Ula’ula’s Tapu Village.” Not one single person who understood what referencing Tapu Village during a conflict Tapu Bulu was involved in meant said a word to that effect. “They’re Pokemon known to command and control forests they live within, so given Shiinotic started something with the plantlife Tapu Bulu is growing, Trevenant may be intending to continue it.”

Right again. Olivia probably knew all of what Mallow was planning. Every time Mallow tried to surprise the Kahuna, or impress her, Olivia always seemed on top of things. Gosh... she was so cool.

As Trevenant raised its arms and dug its own root-like feet into the ground, a larger tree began to rise up from the mass of fertile growth Tapu Bulu had created and Shiinotic had seeded. As if surprised Tapu Bulu fell back from where the single large oak had sprouted, rising up in response to Trevenant’s command. A single note, like surprised curiosity, emerged from the Deity before them.

Then Tapu Bulu raised its own arms in response.

Two greater oaks sprouted immediately, rising faster and taller than the single tree Trevenant had commanded, a direct statement from the Tapu that its power was superior. Yet coating the trunk of the trees fungal growths, seeded by Shiinotic before, began to bloom, spores dusting the air from the three trees grown. Either not noticing or choosing to ignore such, Tapu Bulu grasped the tree Trevenant had grown and pulled, its massive strength causing the ground to shift and break apart as the tree, roots and all, was ripped out of the earth. Swinging the tree around overhead Tapu Bulu brought it into Trevenant’s side, who held out both hands and grabbed at the incoming gigantic wooden club, the force immediately tearing Trevenant itself out of the ground it had been attached to, pushing the Pokemon so hard it left drag marks in the ground.

But Trevenant, holding onto the swung tree, was still able to go on.

Shiinotic colonies spread wildly when unchecked, and part of Mallow’s role as Captain of Lush Jungle had been checking more virulent strains of growth the Pokemon living within could unleash. Each of her Pokemon was used to these fungal blooms, and had their experiences in handling them safely. Not solely as a battler, but as a controller and director of nature, Mallow had great experience. And it was that aspect she leaned into to oppose the Guardian Deity Tapu Bulu.

From Trevenant’s hands grasping the tree power flowed, mushrooms blooming larger all the way up the tree to the point that Tapu Bulu held it, then the first sprouting from the deity’s own black skin as well. Immediately Tapu Bulu dropped the tree, which was succumbing to such intense fungal growth
that the wood was beginning to mush, becoming a single sludge of mycelium rapidly consuming itself.

Pulling back Tapu Bulu smacked at the mushroom growing from its body, a glow within it of pure power causing the fungus to dissolve away. But now the entire grassy field that covered the battlefield of the League Stadium was beginning to change, the seeding and growth power taking effect. Trees were still rising, Trevenant investing the power to begin the growth of each, but each was laced with mushroom growth, only increasing the density of spores in the air further. An environment perhaps even Tapu Bulu could not control.

That was the design Mallow had sought.

The Tapu, as if realising at last the depth of what its opponent had wrought, gave a louder braying cry and charged into Trevenant at full speed, pushing the Elder Tree Pokemon against the barrier wall of the arena, before grabbing and hauling it overhead, slamming the Pokemon down upon the ground. Pulling further Tapu Bulu did not release its grip, swinging the Pokemon around and slamming it into the barrier again, a shockwave racing across its mostly transparent surface, before smashing Trevenant down upon its head. Pulling back, huffing out, Tapu Bulu waited as the judge overseeing this match pronounced the unmoving Trevenant as unable to continue battling. Mallow was already calling it back.

Yeah, so, that’s how it went. Lots of tricks and plans and then Tapu Bulu just brute-forces one of her Pokemon into unconsciousness. But the wild fungal growth beneath Tapu Bulu was still growing and, still confident in her plan – what was even the end goal, she knew she couldn’t win – Mallow unleashed her third.

Comfey, the Posy Picker Pokemon, was a pure Fairy-type despite its flowery appearance, a tiny Pokemon consisting of a small and round green body that trailed a single vine from its back it attached flowers of interest to. That Mallow was comfortable with four Pokemon, one of a Type not her own Grass-bias, said that if she tried she could easily move up to five. But... she didn’t really want to. Battling wasn’t her end goal. Keeping four Pokemon, looking after nature with them, staying active, that was enough for her.

She was happy to appear on this stage as a representative of Alola, one of its seven Captains, but as a Trainer... well, Lana would probably motivate Mallow to compete again in future Leagues. She was just like that.

Mallow didn’t mind at all.

“I’ve seen Pokemon create twisted environments as part of battles before,” Alexa was commentating here, using her experience of Leagues past to speak, “but I have to say, this might be one of the scariest of them all. I would not want to be anywhere near that, you know?”

Most did. The rampant fungal growth created from Mallow’s Pokemon affecting the terrain of Tapu Bulu held a deeply frightening appearance, the spores in the air thickening to a purple mist now, what plants were growing tall so weighed down by mushroom colonies they were already bent double. Protected by its own personal aura of healthy growth, Comfey flew confidently into the mass and out of sight. Smallest and fastest of Mallow’s Pokemon, now the goal would be to lead Tapu Bulu on, make it spend power, and expose it to more and more of what Mallow and her partners had made.

Those who cleaned the battlefield after each match were already organising Flying-type Pokemon to keep the spores contained by wind and Fire-type Pokemon to burn it all away.
Tapu Bulu jerked a hand and grew a tree that towered over the mushroom mass. Spore-emitting stalks reached out from its boughs towards the deity, seeking the power of growth it exuded. Pulling back, Tapu Bulu watched over the mess beneath it as the tree collapsed as fast as it had grown. The growth it started grew wildly without command, and little did Tapu Bulu pay that growth mind, but this was something strange and upsetting. Pulling back one of its hooved hands, the deity spent a moment in silence, floating over the field.

Then thrust its hand forward and left a grand imprint of its hoof in the overgrown mass, all the way down to the soft earth beneath.

“Tapu Bulu’s becoming agitated.” Olivia might not be the partner to this specific Island Deity, but she knew their overall temperament enough to say that. “The way it fought before was the type of play-fighting the Tapu do, which is strong enough to injure most normal Pokemon. But now... it’s actively trying to end the battle. Mallow’s strategy has left it profoundly uncomfortable.”

Time and time again Tapu Bulu pulled back an arm then thrust it forward, another massive hoofprint impacting upon the earth, flattening and crushing the mushroom mass underneath. Mallow’s partner Comfey, quick to move and dodge, making use of the comfort Mallow was sending it through their Bond, kept out of reach. That technique Tapu Bulu was using, Mallow would bet on it being aligned with the Fighting-type, something Comfey would in theory be resistant to, but the level of power was... probably more than enough to close that gap. One direct hit and that was definitely it. And if Comfey was hit within that fungus mass...

She was nervous about that. Shiinotic was Mallow’s sole partner who could traverse this environment unharmed, but Shiinotic had been necessary to start this all to begin with. A Parasect, perhaps, would have been perfect here. But no, Tapu Bulu would have easily struck that down. Mallow, she... wasn’t quite sure how to be safe in this fight. As if you could be when battling one of the Tapu. Keeping her focus on where her partner was, Mallow watched that specific point perhaps too keenly.

Tapu Bulu, above, noticed the path of her vision and attacked in that direction without pause.

It took three more. Two of the projected strikes dodged before the third finally hit. The judge, rapidly circling the field to get a good look at the impact as Mallow moved her Pokeball up, was able to declare Comfey unable to continue.

Another hoofprint formed in the earth seconds after Mallow called her third partner back to her.

Noise circulated now, concern about the aggressive power that Tapu Bulu was demonstrating. If Comfey hadn’t been called back sooner... that could have been very bad. Was it right for a Pokemon to fight in such a brutal manner here? Old scarred over wounds left by Tapu Bulu’s viciousness in the past began to bleed again.

The fourth from Mallow was her signature partner, the one all who knew her knew she had. From a young girl given her first partner by her own mother, a freshly caught Bounsweet from the wild, raised today into Tsareena, the Fruit Pokemon, a confident and powerful humanoid of red and white body, long green hair trailing to its feet, and a vicious disposition all of its own.

The Grassium-Z had been in Mallow’s Z-Ring from the very beginning. Now that she’d pushed Tapu Bulu as far as she could, it was time for her last move. To use the Z-Move Bloom Doom to set off and overgrow this entire mass even further, so high and charged full of Z-Power that it would ensnare even Tapu Bulu in its hold. If she landed this, if the growth reached, if everything was perfect, maybe, maybe...
Maybe... she could win?

A deep echoing cry resounded across the stadium as Tapu Bulu slammed its two hooved hands together, the ring of metal impacting mixing into the sound of the great bell set around its tail crashing from side to side. The sound of its warning. Acerola, in the competitor’s stands, grabbed at her ears and pulled her legs up to her chest, trying to compress down from that noise she hadn’t heard in almost eleven years now. Plumeria, who’d heard the same back then, stared with eyes unblinking at the battle Mallow had fought. Taking everything from it she could.

Everyone who’d been there, in Tapu Village that day, felt their hearts seize with fear and pain at this sound. The sound of Tapu Bulu’s rage.

Then the deity lifted its arms and howled and the earth exploded beneath it, towering trees rising up one after the other, row after row, tearing apart the mushroom mass and sending out a surging wind from the speed at which they displaced the air around them. In a second it was over, in a second from a mass of fungal plantlife to a forest thick and all consuming. Tsareena, strongest partner of Mallow, the one she was relying on to finish this with everything they could give, remained unmoving, pinned between a risen tree beneath it and the barrier ceiling overhead.

After a moment of shocked silence passed, a bitter cry forced its way from Mallow’s lips. She hadn’t... she hadn’t intended to win. She knew she couldn’t. She’d just wanted to... to do what she could. Show what she could do. It had worked. She had felt good. Confident even. The final moment had come and she had been ready for it. She and her partner had been ready.

Then been denied satisfaction.

When the barrier was deactivated Tapu Bulu left without pause, floating back to the south-east pillar upon which it would rest. Tsareena, knocked immediately unconscious by the pressure of being slammed up against the barrier’s roof, slipped from the tree once the barrier was gone and fell, Mallow catching the Pokemon with the beam from its Pokeball to call it back before it could hit the ground. Immediately she turned and raced off, back towards the staging grounds and the path to the League Pokemon Center.

No-one held complaints for her immediate exit.

No-one held celebration for the victor of this battle either.

So ended the first day of the first Alolan Pokemon League. Reports, broadcasts in timezones better fitting other regions across the world, discussion of all seen within flared as the evening and night in Alola passed by. Foremost in topic were the actions of Moon, the revelation of Ultra Evolution, a power never before seen. Second came the other great powers seen in this League: the Tapu, Guardian Deities of Alola, Olivia, who had bested one in the most perfect display of prediction overcoming power there could ever be, and the ancient Hydreigon revealed by Ryuki Oda, Trainer from afar.

The next day of the Pokemon League dawned bright and clear, the same as the last, as the early morning passed by and the second half of the first round of the League approached. The battlefield was cleaned and restored, no sign of Tapu Bulu’s overgrowth left to be seen, as Anna and Alexa took charge of recapping yesterday’s battles, and the battles of Red and Yellow Block that would be seen today.
The first, Kahuna Hala facing Asuka, Head of the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola and Principal of the Pokemon School in Hau‘oli City, would be narrated by Anna and Alexa alongside Kahuna Olivia, called to speak again. Jackson had been asked first, as he was considered part of a pair with Asuka as far as Trainers invited to the League went, but hadn’t felt comfortable taking such a public facing position.

Talking in front of a crowd wasn’t a strong point of his.

“Kahuna Hala is the eldest of the four Alolan Kahuna, the acting community leader of Melemele Island, and partner of Tapu Koko. A master of the Fighting-type, he remains one of Alola’s most powerful Trainers over many decades now, and will be an overwhelming force no matter who he meets in the League.”

Taking both introductions this time, Anna spent a moment before continuing on.

“Asuka, who heads the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola, held a title as one of Alola’s most famous Trainers two decades ago. Retiring from the battling scene, which took her to regions across the world, she has assisted in helping new talents bloom across Alola, as well as caring for the growth of our children. She’s a famous and respected face across the region, and while it’s been a long time since she was last on the field, the abilities she’s shown before still lurk within her! For older Alolans and League fans around the world, her showings today might just evoke old memories! We’ll see how this goes!”

Quite a pointed but polite introduction, Asuka considered, leaning upon the cane she used to steady the never-properly healed damage her right leg had sustained once upon a time. While stating the facts, Anna had neatly avoided directly calling Asuka ‘out of her prime’. It was true though. Back then... she’d have been delighted to face Hala. Thrilled at the prospect of matching up against him. Now it was just... resignation. An understanding of what was going to happen, and a simple desire to show the best of what she could regardless.

Asuka found herself sympathising quite deeply with the Akalan Captain Mallow in her battle the day before.

“Trainers at the ready!”

It was to be a four against four, that the number of Pokemon Asuka kept. For the longest time it had been just three, and only one from her oldest days – the others raised in the time since her retirement – but after the invitation to take part in the League Asuka had gone out and found herself a fourth. All of the same theme, though not Type, as was her wont. Enough for her to enjoy the feeling of going all out in a battle, the way she used to do. It wasn’t a focus for her any more, not the path she’d found in life, but going back just this once... she didn’t mind that either.

With Kahuna Hala before her, she was confident they’d make a show of this.

So then, let them dance.

“Begin!”
Asuka’s theme in the Pokemon she kept was dogs, her partners those that many she had taught knew and had befriended. The sight of each of her partners evoked memories in all the students Asuka had cared for over the decades since her taking on the role of head of the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola.

But the sight of them in battle the way they were today was something quite different altogether.

Arcanine, by title the Legendary Pokemon, an archaic name from an age where it was considered such before more common understanding of its evolution through Fire Stones was known. A Fire-type and Asuka’s oldest partner, who had battled alongside her in Leagues of other regions past. The Ultra Beast Invasion, and the defeat of Asuka and her partner at the hands of a singular Buzzwole, had been sobering for her indeed. Hard had Asuka worked in the months since to regain a better level of confidence and skill. Ultra Beasts were terrifying monsters, but if one appeared again... well, she’d rather not. But if she had to oppose it, Asuka felt she would do far better this time.

Granbull, the Fairy Pokemon. Compared to the one exhibited by Mina yesterday, Asuka’s had an even more timid disposition, shying away from all foes. A Pokemon Asuka focused more on disrupting opponents with than conflicting against them directly, it would only battle for single minutes at a time, emerging to change the pace more in her favour then disappearing again for the next to take the advantage made.

Stoutland, the Big-Hearted Pokemon, Normal-type. Another large canine, gaining popularity in Alola as a Ride Pokemon used for treasure hunts and more relaxed riding than Tauros, Asuka had adopted a Herdier from a student whose failing health had left them unable to care for it, and raised the Pokemon in their place. It had never seen true battles the way Arcanine had, but seemed to admire the Pokemon deeply because of that, and always sought to prove itself against it. Thanks to Jackson’s help as a training partner, Asuka had sharpened each of the Pokemon she’d kept as company in the life she lived.

Fourth was Furfrou, the Poodle Pokemon, Normal-type again. Only captured in recent months, it was still too rowdy to enjoy having its fur styled in any way, preferring to be in battle more than at peace. Theirs were a resilient and powerful breed, and Asuka had enjoyed the experience of raising a wild one into battling condition again after so long.

It was good to return to one’s roots now and again.

These were the four Pokemon Asuka brought to this battle, and the four she displayed in full against Kahuna Hala – a lengthy match of great technical skill, the Kahuna graciously meeting Asuka’s level
of strength so the two might have as equal a battle as could be. The concession was not insulting –
neither competitor had any delusions about how this would go – and Asuka found herself only
happy with the battle she was able to have here upon the stage of the first Alolan Pokemon League.
This would be the only time she herself stood upon it, but the fire it lit within her to ensure her
students would have the same opportunity in the Leagues to follow burned bright.

And all those who witnessed her in battle understood the Trainer she was and had been.

Each of Hala’s Pokemon met her own. His Hariyama, most commonly seen of the Kahuna of
Melemele’s team, battled Arcanine to a standstill, both Pokemon clearly deeply enjoying the fight.
Crabominable, a Pokemon that in Alola could only evolve from Crabrawler upon the slopes of
Mount Lanakila, weathered Granbull’s first appearance before fighting Stoutland to a stop. Bewear,
another famous and fearsome Alolan Pokemon, considered one of the region’s most dangerous,
spared no concern in chasing Granbull off when it reared its head again, then fought down Furfrou
as well. The final appearance of Granbull, wherein Asuka performed the Fairy-type Z-Pose,
balancing on her left leg apparently suitable for the pose itself, successfully allowed the Fairy
Pokemon to match Hala’s fourth, the Pig Monkey Pokemon Primeape, whose ferocity and fury after
suffering the Z-Move, while still fearsome to Granbull, was also belaboured by the attack taken.
Primeape was the only one of Hala’s four Pokemon Asuka defeated, before Hariyama returned and
ended the battle in full.

Asuka had no complaints with the way it did.

The shake of her hand and Hala’s after the battle was completed was met with applause, the battle
shown one not of the intense highs that had opened the League yesterday, but one that showed a
level of skill, respect, and sportsmanship that defined what people considered a true Pokemon Battle
to be.

With as set as the battle had been in Asuka’s mind, it playing out as expected did not upset her at all.
She was happy to know the sight of this battle would serve as inspiration for those seeking to rise up
to the Leagues to come.

Her role in guiding the next generations continuing ever on.

“I must say, though he was a few years older than you when he visited Alola, you bear a striking
resemblance to your grandfather. I can only imagine he is proud of you for all you have done.”

Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, stood before a smiling youth, a boy just nearing
the end of his teens. Sporting a vibrant crest of red hair and a wide grin always, Benga still tilted his
head at the older woman’s words.

“You know my gramps?”

“I do,” Pitaya nodded in response, a gentle smile on her face. “I remember clearly his many attempts
to flirt with me during his time here. Quite the silver-tongued gentleman, I must admit.”

Benga, whose list of priorities had 'hearing about my grandpa flirting with people' right near the
bottom, groaned. Pitaya smiled a little wider at the response.

“But I must admit what caught my interest most was that he held and commanded a Dragon
Pokemon without issue. I dearly hope you have taken after him in that regard.”
“More than!” Eager to get away from the previous topic, Benga raised a hand and three fingers of that hand. “I’ve got three!” The look on Pitaya’s face was one absolutely delighted.

“That is wonderful, I so dearly wish to see them. Shall we do a battle of three then?”

“Hmmm,” pausing for a moment, Benga kept the tilt of his head. “Nah let’s go all out, I’ve got five so let’s do five!”

“Are you sure?” Pitaya spoke evenly. “The decision to show your full hand in the opening round of a League such as this will prepare future opponents for all you can do. You do not wish to keep any mystery?”

“Nah,” Benga shook his head. “You got the smell of a tough Trainer and if you’re tough and old like my gramps I gotta go all out to win! Let’s do that!”

“Well now,” surprised by Benga’s assertion, Pitaya’s gaze drifted to the judge waiting for them to make their choice. “I suppose it is only right to meet such a request. Five it is. Though Benga,” a sharpness to her smile coming through, Pitaya addressed the youth before her, “I would very much like it if after this League is done you paid visit to the Dragon Tamers here – it would be good for my students to get the chance to spend time with you, and I am sure you will benefit from the experience as well.”

“Uhhh,” with no real plans beyond coming here to battle in the League, Benga found the invitation slightly off-putting. “Let’s do the battle first, okay?”

A small laugh came from the older Dragon Tamer. “Very well.” Turning, Pitaya set off upon the path to the League stage. “I am looking forward to it.”

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“Sabrina, thank you for joining us.”

Invited to oversee this battle, featuring the second of the two Trainers invited from Unova to attend this Pokemon League, Sabrina nodded her head as Anna introduced her as third commentator to the crowd.

“Thank you for inviting me.”

“This battle,” Anna continued introductions, “is between Pitaya of Alola and Benga of Unova. Pitaya is the long-standing Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, a subset of those who care for and guide Pokemon Trainers with Dragon-type Pokemon around the world. An active Trainer and
teacher for many decades now, Pitaya holds title as one of Alola’s most powerful Pokemon Trainers, although unlike others has not ventured abroad to take part in Leagues. We’ll no doubt be seeing sign of her full abilities today!”

“Facing Pitaya is Benga, who was nominated by Professor Juniper of Unova to take part in this League.” Alexa took the role of introducing the second half of the coming fight. “Grandson to the former Unova Champion Alder, Benga has achieved great things already in tournaments across that region, including placing high in Unova’s own Pokemon League! He’s no slouch of a Trainer and shouldn’t be underestimated! I’m looking forward to seeing just what he’ll do!”

Turning, both women nodded to Sabrina for her own thoughts. The Kanto-born psychic spoke clearly and without pause.

“Benga is strong.” Standing opposite Pitaya, on the west side of the field, Benga couldn’t help the smile on his face at Sabrina’s words. “His battle experience goes beyond most his age, and I would be surprised to see him beaten by any of similar youth, including the Captains I have seen in this League.” Ilima, in the stands, made a mental note that he very much wanted to battle Benga to find out if that was true.

“However,” the strength of that 'however' hung in the air, “he is not facing someone his own age. There is a focus and power about Pitaya that shows she has spent her life honing incredible strength. You are not wrong, Anna, to think of her as one of Alola’s strongest, or suspect she has every chance of taking the title of first League Champion.”

Anna stared blankly for a moment. She was... pretty sure she hadn’t said that last part out loud. Only thought it. Oh wait.

“Ahaha, well, that’s what I get for inviting a master psychic to join us, isn’t that right folks?” A slightly nervous chuckle from the crowd in response to her words. Sabrina didn’t seem to pay attention to the energy following her statement.

“The odds of this battle are against Benga. Though I have experienced more than enough times in my life those who defy such odds. We will see what each does.”

And that was that. Called to be ready, each Trainer chose their Pokemon, Ultra Balls held in hand. The judge overseeing raised a hand to each Trainer, and spent only a moment more before she dropped them and announced. It was time.

“Begin!”

From Pitaya came Druddigon, the Cave Pokemon, a bipedal Dragon of blue body and bright red head, sharp spines and craggy rock-like shapes defining its form. Clashing its jaws together it flexed and opened its short wings, immediately basking in the morning sunlight of Alola. A partner Pitaya had captured long ago in the depths of the caverns beneath Poni Island. A reliable friend.

Now to see what Benga would do.

Benga’s choice, to Pitaya’s delight, was the first of the three Dragons he had claimed to have. Dragonite, the Dragon Pokemon, a large orange-bodied Dragon and Flying-type, flexed its own short wings upon manifestation. Ryuki in the stands pointed happily while turning to look for the attention of either Moon, Hau, or the three Akalan Captains, who all knew about Serena. None of them were looking at him though. He let his arm fall and shifted back into his seat.

The battle between Dragonite and Druddigon immediately captured the attention of those watching,
for how equal and intense it proved. Each of the dragons attacked freely, dodging, blocking, and counting the other, the battle spiralling on as Benga wildly pushed every strategy, idea, and instinct he had. Pitaya, watching this all, stayed quiet. Thought and focused. And enjoyed.

That Dragonite wasn’t bad. Its tail balance was a little off, slowing down follow-through on attacks, and its aggressive pace clashed slightly with the Pokemon’s natural stamina for long lasting flights with minimal movement, but it had a good Bond with Benga and the two were doing quite well. Cataloguing the advice she could give, the training she would put Benga through to strengthen the two, Pitaya kept her calm as her partner followed her commands, always giving the lead to the Dragonite so she could see and experience more of it, but maintaining an aggressive pace to keep the battle moving all the same.

Those who knew Pitaya, those of the Dragon Tamers and Moon watching as well, all realised what the Guildmaster was doing. Because of course she was.

She really couldn’t help herself at all.

The battle ended after a long drawn-out conflict, Pitaya’s partner more experienced, more trained, and with a fighting style that better suited its body and nature than the Dragonite of Benga. Calling his partner back, not shying from the great challenge before him at all, Benga next chose another. Escavalier, the Cavalry Pokemon, was a Bug and Steel-type, a meter tall Pokemon and the evolved form of Karrablast, an insect wreathed in iron armour and weaponry both.

Alder, Benga’s grandfather, had raised and used Escavalier to great effect as well in his time, and this was one of the Pokemon of Alder that Benga had followed in the use of.

This and one other.

Pitaya, seeing the first of Benga’s non-Dragons emerge, changed her expression from focused study to intensity. Druddigon responded in turn.

This battle was not like the one to come before. Against the Dragonite of Benga the Druddigon of Pitaya had been only reactionary, allowing its opponent the freedom to act and countering slowly but surely, wearing the great Dragon Pokemon down over a long battle. This time, as Escavalier closed the distance between the two, lashing out with one of the twin iron lances it carried, things were different.

Strong were the claws of Druddigon as they grabbed the outstretched lance, hauling with great force the Cavalry Pokemon overhead, slamming it down upon the ground. That wasn’t nearly enough to stop the heavily armoured Bug. Druddigon continued its attack.

A swinging foot crashed into the part Steel-type Pokemon and sent it rolling along the ground. As Escavalier rose up Druddigon had already closed the distance, slamming a claw into either side of the armoured head of its foe before ramming its own craggy head upon its opponent’s shell. Lashes of Escavalier’s lances were either brushed aside or ignored by Druddigon’s own heavy hide as the Cave Pokemon continued a relentless assault.

Sabrina, who’d already parsed what the motives here were, held off on saying it, knowing the response it would bring. But really, that Pitaya... she should know what doing things this way would bring.

The battle against the Dragonite had been enough to wear Druddigon down, but still the difference was clear. When it fell to its knees, clawed hands pushed against the ground, the Escavalier of Benga dropped too. Both exhausted now, the constant assault from Benga’s Pokemon wearing it down far
more than expected. Each Trainer called their partner back and selected another.

From Pitaya Kommo-o, Scaly Pokemon, Dragon and Fighting-type, a signature Pokemon of her and Alola both.

From Benga Garchomp, Mach Pokemon, Dragon and Ground-type. A fearsome creature that appeared only rarely in Alola’s Haina Desert, it was more common in other regions around the world. Ryuki went to point again if Moon was looking at him.

She wasn’t.

Pitaya’s expression changed back to what it was before.

It didn’t take long for everyone to realise now. To see, as the Kommo-o of Pitaya played defensive so the Garchomp of Benga might do everything its Trainer would command, that this was Pitaya’s choice for some reason. That against these dragons she was... observing? Studying? Playing? It felt clear, well and truly, that this to her was not a battle of the Pokemon League.

This was an interest of curiosity to a Dragon Tamer. The mood of the crowd began to go against her for this choice. Benga raised his voice with something to say.

“Hey!” His loud cry was heard by all, cameras set up on the ground level of the League able to hear the battling Trainers should they speak loudly enough. Pitaya, who heard Benga as well, looked past the battling dragons at her opponent opposite. Benga wasn’t smiling. “I’m a Pokemon Trainer at a Pokemon League! We’re meant to be fighting! Stop making fun of me!”

Clear was the expression of shock on Pitaya’s face, as if those were the last words she had ever expected to hear. But as the cameras focused on her, Benga’s words heard and understood by the crowd that the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster was essentially mocking this youth by fighting to simply examine his dragons, comprehension began to dawn upon her face. A realisation of just what she had been doing. The degree to which she’d insulted this young man. The interest she always held, she’d let it out in a way that was quite harmful. She bowed her head to her opponent.

Then raised it and spoke clearly.

“I apologise for my disrespect. Please, allow me to show no more!”

A switch of the camera to Benga’s face showed the beginnings of a smile reforming. Okay then, he nodded, let’s see it!

Pitaya smiled as well and gave her full intent.

The difference between the Pokemon of Pitaya and the Pokemon of Benga was decades. It really was just like battling with his gramps. No wait, like battling with his gramps if his gramps were really going all out! Benga didn’t get that experience from him – Alder not showing that face to anyone these days – but Pitaya, she was. She was showing a real Pokemon Trainer’s face fitting for a Pokemon League. Good. Benga’s smile returned in full even as the battle turned against him.

This was what he’d really wanted to see.

Every action of the Garchomp of Benga was unable to overwhelm the Kommo-o of Pitaya, too great was the difference between them. Steadily, unerringly, unrelentingly, the Scaly Pokemon partner of Pitaya beat down the opponent before it. Struck and struck and struck again, blow after blow that hit faster, clearer, and with more focus. A difference plain for all to see. This battle now was far less even, far less an exchange and exciting conflict between two Pokemon but... it was purer. Forged of
respect. And all watching felt that.

The momentary push against Pitaya’s poor attitude faded away as she demonstrated exactly who the Guildmaster of Alola’s Dragon Tamers was.

To follow the Garchomp was a Haxorus, Axe Jaw Pokemon, third of Benga’s Dragons and an Unovan native species. Another dragon taller than Kommo-o, its thick dull gold scale-plating over black body was highlighted by the red of the Pokemon’s claws, talons, and the signature wide jaw blades emerging from the sides of its mouth. Benga, four Pokemon in now, still showed no changes to his pace, an endless energy that drew respect from all – most especially those who understood just what a drain those Pokemon should be to maintain. But the difference in level was still too much to overcome.

There was no Z-Move shown. Pitaya did not step beyond the bounds of an equal fight, Benga practising no Mega Evolution himself within it, but within those bounds she exceeded her opponent. A simple difference between them that could not in this battle be overcome.

Yet though the Kommo-o remained standing as its Haxorus opponent fell, Pitaya did call it back this time. For each of her Pokemon she had bested two of her foe. Such a clear distinction.

Third she chose Flygon, the Mystic Pokemon, a Ground and Dragon-type dragonfly-like Pokemon – another she was known for on more public grounds. Her battles during the Ultra Beast Invasion last year had been commonly with this Pokemon. It was a symbol of her presence as one of the strongest of Alola’s Trainers.

No easy foe at all.

Fifth and finally from Benga was his own eldest partner. Given to him by his grandfather in its unevolved form, over the length of his life thus far Benga had grown alongside it and helped it gain the power to evolve. Loud was the voice of the crowd to see the Sun Pokemon Volcarona appear in a second battle of this League’s first round. Moon, who had been watching this battle intently from the beginning, felt her focus intensify to a degree that blocked out all else. Her own partner Volcarona, so strong but so restricted in the abilities it had learned to express, if she could take anything from this fight...

She wouldn’t blink for even a second of it.

Alder, watching this battle from Unova, aware of the intense wall his grandson had been placed before, still felt pride in seeing what he had shown so far. And a sense of anticipation for how far Benga and his own Volcarona would go.

A Pokemon the man held a deep love for and felt only thankfulness that his grandson felt the same.

In seconds fire fell as rain from the air, the scattered scales of this Volcarona igniting just as Moon’s had the day before. But further they spread, each beat of the Sun Pokemon’s six red wings throwing them outward, sheets of flame igniting across the field. Unconcerned by fire the Flygon of Pitaya flew in with claws glowing blue to make the first attack.

Moon, watching for anything that stood out at all, saw the compressed mass of scales drift from the Sun Pokemon’s back.

Immediate was the explosion, a wave of flame heat and force racing out behind it as the Volcarona wrapped its six wings around itself, dropping into a dive propelled by explosive force, rocketing down into an impossibly steep descent before opening its wings seconds before hitting the ground,
the heat rising from the flames coating the field immediately buoying it and causing it to ascend back up in almost as steep a climb, the Sun Pokemon in seconds going from before its Flygon foe to behind its back.

Radiating heat the Bug and Fire-type Pokemon’s beating wings blew waves of flame to wash over the Flygon as it wheeled around, the high song played by the Mystic Pokemon's wings mixing into the crackle of the flame, a tune of intense duelling as the Flygon pushed through to pursue its foe.

Once again Volcarona dropped, pulling in its wings, another explosion of fire changing its trajectory as Flygon pursued, the two flying powers chasing after one another, fire and summoned sand beginning to mix in the air into a storm of both, each Pokemon slipping through the vortex while unleashing their attacks.

The Volcarona of Benga held far more control over its scales than Moon’s, compressing them into clusters that detonated with intense force, beating them out as sheets of igniting flame, and simply spreading them in a far more aggressive manner than Moon’s passive ignition of the battlefield before. Alongside that constant flame – the signature of the Sun Pokemon – Volcarona also unleashed differing powers with each beat of its wings – power that could as easily be of the Fire-type as it was Flying or Bug. Indeed each of the three had differing purposes – the first the most aggressive in attack, the second as much for allowing Volcarona to move as it was to strike opponents, and the third seeming to direct and control the scales before they turned to flame.

Spinning rapidly in a dive from just shy of the barrier surrounding the battlefield’s roof, the Volcarona achieved what it and its partner had worked so hard to do: the technique his grandfather had forged with his own and stood as the greatest master of. Thrilled to follow in his footsteps, Benga celebrated to see this fight push him and his partner far enough they could once more find the focus and state of mind to combine all three powers into one and cause Volcarona to spin and release flame, guided as if seeking bolts, boosted by the speed of the wind, to wash out and chase down its Flygon foe.

A perfect fiery dance.

Pitaya’s partner Flygon held decades of experience too. Even the least tenured of her partners had over ten years alongside her to their name, her endless training with the countless Trainers to pass through the Dragon Tamers’ hall constantly keeping them sharp. Though she didn’t exactly have the luxury the Kahuna did of being tasked to sate the Tapu’s hunger for battle whenever they should desire, Pitaya had still found those to conflict with again and again. To say she was strong was an understatement. It was no boast for her to claim her place as one of Alola’s strongest Trainers.

And so with that understanding in her heart, not arrogance but simple truth, Pitaya found herself deeply respecting the power of the eldest partner of Benga of Unova.

The two Pokemon, Mystic and Sun, duelled well. Danced in the air as sand and fire flowed, mixing into streams of molten material that coursed around them, their attacks exchanged in equal blows. The powers of Flygon, able to manifest sand, release bursts of howling noise from its beating wings, and strike with draconic energy built up within its body, matched well against its opponent’s flames, carried by wind and born from scale. The initial battle between Druddigon and Dragonite, it had been equal, but controlled.

This was equal and wild and the crowd adored it.

This was a true battle of a Pokemon League.

Eventually the battle came to a close. Eventually the Flygon of Pitaya struck a decisive blow, one of
countless exchanged, and the Volcarona slowed, was pummelled again in that moment of weakness, and dropped, the judge raising a hand and calling the victor as Pitaya. But from the minds of all witness had Pitaya’s prior indiscretions been wiped. She and Benga had joined together to display a fight between two Pokemon that was a peak of battling to be seen. A conflict of powers so great and so beautiful that the only thing that could result was awe.

With the battle called the two Trainers were asked to step forward and shake hands, a sign of respect shared for a battle well fought. Pitaya smiled more sombrelly than Benga’s own wide.

“I had hoped to tempt you to the Dragon Tamers here, but instead insulted you. I do deeply apologise. I have done wrong by you.”

“Don’t worry about it!” Benga’s grip was strong on the older woman’s hand. “We got to go all out in the end! And my partner really enjoyed this! So it’s okay! I’d like to do that again too! So maybe I’ll stop by! But you gotta be this cool to all my team, not just the Dragons, okay?”

“Hah,” with a nod, Pitaya tightened her own grip to match the one she was given. “It is a deal.”

Okay. Acerola had her three Pokemon figured out. She was banking on Hapu leaning hard into her Ground-type bias but really, that wasn’t a risky bet to make. For the longest time it had just been Hapu and Mudsdale, and while Hapu now had the minimum three the League required, there was no way the other two were anywhere near as strong as the first. Or as strong as Acerola’s own. She had pretty good odds on that.

So what would Acerola do if she were in Hapu’s position? Facing a stronger Trainer – she wasn’t talking herself up here, this was the real situation as far as she saw it – with the same number of Pokemon, one of her Pokemon supremely strong, the other two less so? If it were Acerola... she’d use those other Pokemon to weaken opponents, then bring in Mudsdale each time to finish them off.

Ilima, invited to be third announcer for this one, was recapping Acerola and Hapu’s positions for the crowd. Acerola as the only other of Alola’s Captains with six Pokemon to her name, a feat she’d achieved a lot younger then Ilima had. Not that her accomplishments held a candle to some people Acerola could mention, but that was how it went. You beat someone’s record and then someone else comes along and beats that. Though this time around... Acerola didn’t think this one would be broken in a hurry.

Not what Moon and Hau had done.

Hapu’s introduction started with her grandfather Koa, former Kahuna to Poni Island, and led on to Hapu’s inheritance of that title by effort beyond belief. To take on the full weight of that Mudsdale Koa had raised, then forge herself to the degree she could perform the Z-Move Guardian of Alola with Tapu Fini, that was... Alola was just bursting with youths of incredible ability. In the months since her ascent to Kahuna, Hapu had spent much time with the others, learning from them as best she could to fulfil her role and, in the time remaining not performing her duties, focused on improving herself as a Pokemon Trainer. Acerola knew she had the advantage, it was a simple matter of age and experience, but also knew not to underestimate Hapu at all.

If she did the win might be taken out from underneath her.

So what was the plan? She’d chosen the partners best able to stand against the predicted Pokemon of Hapu, but how to make use of them? Hapu was going to lead with one of the two that wasn’t
Mudsdale, and try to weaken whoever it was against enough for Mudsdale to sweep in and polish it off. There was definitely no way Mudsdale, even as strong as she was, could take all three of Acerola’s Pokémon alone. No, in a battle like that Acerola definitely had it. So to secure victory, she needed to stop those other Pokémon before they could make things difficult for her.

And... honestly...

Yeah, Acerola nodded as the judge directed her and Hapu to both prepare their Pokémon for the battle to begin, she knew exactly how she’d do that. Chose a Z-Crystal at the same time as a Pokémon. Okay.

Let’s do this.

“Begin!”

The Sea Creeper Pokémon Dhelmise, Ghost and Grass-type, was not a common starter of Acerola’s battles, but mixing things up was never a bad idea. Given Acerola’s knowledge of Ground-type Pokémon in Alola, she wouldn’t bet against a Dugtrio in Hapu’s team; and so leading with Froslass like she’d considered would’ve gone over as terribly as could be. Dhelmise, of all Acerola’s team, was the most resistant to whatever Hapu could bring. A good starter to feel out the Poni Island Kahuna’s team.

At least that’s what Acerola would have it look like on the surface.

Hapu’s choice was not what Acerola had predicted. It wasn’t Mudsdale, that was true – instead one of the two others the Kahuna had raised. But to raise that one specifically... Acerola hummed lightly to hide how offput she was. As Captain of Ula’ula Island’s south, she knew its ecology well. Had spent plenty of time in Haina Desert. Had observed the occasional Golett amongst the sands, an ancient Pokémon found scattered across the world.

But for Hapu to have gone and caught one on her own, then over the past half year raised it to its evolved form, the Ground and Ghost-type Automaton Pokémon Golurk, that was really throwing Acerola off. Every time she thought ‘wow these young Trainers are crazy strong!’ it just got worse and worse! Seriously, what was with those three!

Standing over nine feet tall the gigantic humanoid, body of teal stone and bronze metal, yellow light shining through patterns revealing the energy burning within, opposed Acerola’s choice. Okay, the Captain of Tapu Village breathed out, okay okay okay. No worries no worries! Smiling, Acerola set
her mind forward and commanded her Pokemon to attack. Just follow the plan all the same! That Golurk would still be weak to the Z-Move Acerola had chosen, the Grassium-Z set into her Z-Ring, and hitting something this big and strong – there was no way Hapu’s third could compare to this at all – with a Z-Move right in the opening, it would totally set the flow of the battle in Acerola’s favour!

Dhelmise launched itself through the air, seaweed wrapped around its body extending out in tendrils to grasp at the giant before it, wrapping tight and binding the two together. Sure Hapu having a Pokemon part Ghost-type was unexpected but even still, Acerola beginning the Z-Pose for the Grassium-Z, she had this! It would all go her way just as planned. Take the advantage with an immediate attack so crazy that it took everyone by surprise! That giant hadn’t even moved yet! Probably took forever to get revved up. No worries no worries no worri-

“Hapu is also performing a Z-Move!”

Wait what?

As Hapu completed the Z-Pose to unleash the power of the Ghostium-Z, performing the Z-Move Never-Ending Nightmare as she’d intended from before the battle began, twin lights bloomed from the two Pokemon bound together. A bright gold shone and emerged from Dhelmise, binding itself to Golurk, the Grass-type Z-Move Bloom Doom already expanding.

But the dark and twisting hands bursting from a pool of shadow manifested around the Automaton Pokemon were just as intent. Aimed solely for the target in their midst, their source immune to that strength. Into the mixing orb of light and darkness all eyes stared, the rapidity of this opening move a surprise beyond belief.

Acerola struggled with not being the only one to plan that aggressive a lead.

There was no way that Z-Move from Hapu would’ve worked if it were in response to Acerola’s own. There would’ve been way too slow a delay! Hapu had to have started it on her own before Acerola had even hinted at her plan. They’d just had the exact same idea? Immediate first-turn Z-Moves? Ohhh that was a problem. That was way more aggressive than Acerola had guessed her opponent would do and now... and now...

Now she didn’t know quite what, the mixed Z-Power of the two Z-Moves flickering and flaring before her eyes. Something about Hapu using the Ghost-type Z-Move against her really got to Acerola. She liked doing that Z-Move! Just hadn’t prepared it because she’d planned a different one she’d bet on being more effective. Now she could’ve used it and didn’t get to and Hapu did and- Dhelmise thudded off the ground, pulled and thrown free of the Golurk, the Sea Creeper Pokemon rebalancing itself and remaining alert but clearly to Acerola’s senses doing pretty bad. I mean, who wouldn’t be?

Hapu’s partner Golurk took a heavy step forward.

Ohhhhhh. Right. Those Pokemon specifically didn’t show a difference between one hundred and one percent. Until it dropped it’d fight the same as ever the whole way through. Hey uhhhh, this was bad. Hapu and Acerola had both chosen to take the most aggressive opening possible without any care of defense and that had backfired way harder on Acerola than it had against Hapu. She’d really thought she’d get an edge out of this! She shouldn’t have guessed Hapu would go this wild! How could she though? Acerola of all people knew how to get out of the Ghost-type Z-Move best. No-one thinking straight should’ve tried that on her.

And cause of all that the advantage was now well and truly Hapu’s own.
Okay no worries! Just attack from range, which Acerola and Dhelmise had going in their favour! A few Shadow and Energy Balls thrown Golurk’s way and the Automaton Pokemon would be down and out in no time at all! Recovering her confidence, Acerola gave those commands and her Pokemon formed and released the attacks. Unmoving from its position the Golurk of Hapu took each hit while its raised hands glowed darkly and the air around Dhelmise – remaining still as it attacked – quaked and twisted inwards. That exchange was enough, the earth shaking as the Golurk partner of Hapu dropped flat, falling as if a great oak felled. But that attack received in response, the Golurk never once considering defense or evasion, did what Hapu intended as well. The Dhelmise of Acerola had fallen too.

An equal exchange of powers that Ilima, making his observations known, admitted to being impressed by, given the difference in experience between Hapu and Acerola as Trainers. Hapu had evened the odds against her immensely by performing such.

Now to see what would come next.

Bad bad bad bad bad. One to one knockouts were not in Acerola’s favour – if Hapu managed a second one then it would be Acerola’s third Pokemon against that Mudsdale alone and that was not a battle Acerola could win. Darn it! Darn it darn it darn it! Hapu had gone way wilder and more risky than Acerola had expected and Acerola had gotten so punished for it! Come on!

Choosing her next Pokemon, Acerola put on a smile and made her next prediction. Hapu would bring out the other non-Mudsdale next, and attempt to maybe do the same, or maybe go back to the strategy Acerola had predicted before. Two against two favoured Hapu and that idea a lot better than three against three, so Acerola would need to work twice as hard to catch up now!

So she and Froslass, the Snow Land Pokemon immediately summoning a gale of frost and snow upon release, would need to give it all they’ve got to win!

Hapu’s steady expression didn’t shift, no sign of the exhaustion from her Z-Move did she show, as she unleashed her dearest partner, the Draft Horse Pokemon Mudsdale, to take the second battle in hand.

What.

Bad! Bad bad bad bad! Acerola’s eyes boggled as yet again Hapu made a choice completely against Acerola’s attempts to predict her. She’d hung out with Hapu a fair bunch! Sure they’d never really battled all out – and Acerola had never seen any of Hapu’s other Pokemon before – but they still knew each other! Not enough, apparently. Not enough for Acerola to predict at all the way Hapu as a Trainer fought.

Okay. Okay okay okay! She still had this! Of all of Hapu’s Pokemon Froslass was the best at dealing with straightforward attackers like Hapu favoured, creating fields of ice to evade amongst while lashing out with countless beguiling and harmful effects. And yep, there that Mudsdale went, stomping on forward uncaring! So Froslass would strike it from the sides and keep wearing it down. It had worked against Moon’s Bisharp and that thing was a monster too!

So it should work here, right?

Right.

Wrong.

Hapu and Acerola had both chosen to unleash Z-Moves early on in this fight. Neither was so fresh a
Trainer that the experience of performing one would lay them low, but neither also was either so experienced that it meant nothing to them. There was a drag on the both of them, a slight delay in their thoughts and the strength they gave through their Bonds, that made this battle between Mudsdale and Froslass far more about the Pokemon themselves than their Trainers.

And the distinction between those two Pokemon was a far wider gap than tactics and trickery could cross.

Ice was an effective type when combating Ground-type opponents. The frost and blizzard summoned by Froslass certainly had its effects, but the Mudsdale had an effective technique of her own. Steel in type, Heavy Slam in name, it was a technique that converted the great weight of a Pokemon into an even greater force and slammed it down upon its opponent. And with the difference in weight between the massive muscle-bound Draft Horse and the pale and ghostly Snow Land Pokemon, well, all it took was one strike to land.

Eventually, powering through all attacks against it and pushing the Froslass back up against the barrier wall, Mudsdale did so. The second of Acerola’s Pokemon brought down.

The odds turning further and further away.

Continuing his commentary Ilima outlined how clearly Hapu’s choices had favoured her. A strong part of Pokemon Battling was predicting and reacting to your opponents, and that element had been in Hapu’s favour from the very beginning. Which, he admitted with a smile, came as a surprise as on paper he would have very clearly called this battle as Acerola’s win. It just went to show you truly couldn’t predict what would happen when two Trainers met going all out.

But picking up that she’d been expected to do way better than she had – as she heard it – still really hurt Acerola’s pride.

It was still okay! Sure two versus one where one of the two was that Mudsdale was bad, but also that Mudsdale had taken so many hits from Froslass! It never really showed how hurt it was, kinda like the Golurk as well, but definitely it was! Acerola, sending out her signature partner Drifblim, the Ghost and Flying-type Blimp Pokemon, stayed confident. Hapu was changing her partner too, and that was fine! Beat whatever this was, then finish off Mudsdale too! Still possible! Still a chance! Stay on it!

Don’t give up!

Hapu’s third Pokemon was a Poni Island native, unlike the Golurk she had gone afield to seek out, having seen the Pokemon’s pre-evolution in her time training in Haina Desert before. The Sea Slug Pokemon Gastroadon, as Alexa took charge of pointing out, had varied appearances based on the location it was found, those that appeared in Alola sporting the East Sea colouring that left them with a green body and teal underside. Water and Ground-type, they were common sights in the right season across the shores of Poni Island, the Pokemon emerging from the sea to breed. Given the timing of when Hapu became Kahuna, she had to have picked that one up real soon after. Probably as soon as she earned Tapu Fini’s approval she went and caught the Pokemon to maintain as much Bond strength given as she could.

Okay, Acerola closed her eyes for a second, breathe in, out. Drifblim can fight a Gastroadon, that’s fine. It’s fine! Focusing again, Acerola sent commands, and her partner quickly began to move with a storm of wind surrounding it. Yeah! Yeah! No way that Pokemon of Hapu’s was anywhere as strong as the Golurk had been! And this time Acerola wouldn’t underestimate it! She’d treat it like it was! She’s got this!
The beam of ice, emerging from the Gastropod and lancing through the air, leaving a trail of frost shimmering along the barrier wall, said all Acerola needed to know. Yeah taking a hit of that would be a game-ender. But that was fine! Drifblim could dodge that! And yeah the beams kept coming, keeping Drifblim moving such that it couldn’t unleash its full power on the land-locked foe, but still! Still Drifblim was unleashing what attacks it could, and they were hitting, and that Gastropod was being worn down. So yeah! Yeah Acerola had this one! Even if it was a lot of dodging. And her partner was maintaining a lot of wind to keep that up because Hapu’s down there was really soaking up the punishment.

And who knew how tired Drifblim would be after compared to the Mudsdale that came next...

Ah.

Crap.

Okay! Okay okay okay! That was like, a gamble though, right? Mudsdale definitely took a bunch of hits from Froslass. Who’s to say it had a chance of hitting Drifblim after this Gastropod was done? Well, Hapu would know. Hapu would definitely know if she’d win or lose here. But Acerola... wow Hapu’s expression was not changing, huh? There was no way to read her face at all. So Acerola didn’t know. Hapu knew if this was win or lose. If after Gastropod was done Mudsdale could stop Drifblim or not. But Acerola didn’t.

Not knowing was driving her nuts.

Drifblim beat Gastropod and that was the least surprising part of this entire battle. There was a clear difference in age, experience, and power there. So yeah! Acerola won that fair and square! Just... now what? The Mudsdale partner of Hapu back on the field. Raising its front hooves high as Acerola kept Drifblim ready to dodge through whatever came next and counter-attack.

Then down the Mudsdale stomped and the earth around it shattered into flying shards each infused with Rock-type energy that shot up into the sky. Rock-type move, okay, Acerola had expected that. So dodge. Dodge dodge dodge! If you don’t dodge them all she’ll definitely lose! If she does and hits back, yeah, that has to be it! That has to be it!

Drifblim just needed to dodge every last shot!

It didn’t.

That defined it. Just one hit, tired as the Drifblim was, tired as Acerola was by the Z-Move and intensity of this fight, slammed the Blimp Pokemon against the barrier wall before another wave of the rock projectiles fell upon it again. The judge raising an arm even before Drifblim hit the ground. Ilima remarking again on how impressive a battle Hapu had fought, and how close at the end it had been.

Acerola just stared. She’d... really lost, huh? She really hadn’t expected that. It was kind of rocking her world right now. That battle, Hapu had given her all to it and really gone beyond. Cool. Cool? Cool. The beginnings of a smile returned to Acerola’s face. Wow. That had been a really awesome fight. Striding forward over the cracked and still frost-touched arena floor, she held out a hand to Hapu before her, one Hapu met strongly with her own.

“That was awesome.”

“Thank you for this battle.”

Yeah, okay, Acerola smiled. She really couldn’t complain about a fight as good as this.
“Trainer Hau. Trainer Riley. You are to decide upon-”

“Three.” Riley’s brusque interruption cut off the judge before her and Hau. “I’ve only got three. So three.”

A brief moment lingered, as the judge composed themselves, before they nodded. “Very well. Please make your way to the stadium entrance.” Turning away, the judge left first, Riley almost immediately following after.

Hau reached out to her.

“Hey Riley-”

“Don’t!” Quick to jerk her arm and pull away, Riley stared venom at Hau. “I don’t want to hear it. Just don’t talk to me. I’ve got nothing to say.”

Left standing there as Riley paced away, Hau slowly lowered his hand.

—

“Hiiiii everyone! It’s Captain Acerola joining you to talk about this next match!”

The voice of Alola’s youngest Captain radiated from the speakers across the League dome, heads raising to hear her enthusiastic announcement not even a half hour after her prior defeat. Immediately another of the announcer’s voices followed after.

“Captain Acerola,” Anna’s voice had the slightest tone of trying to put her foot down, “thank you for coming up to join us for this next battle.”

“No problem!” Acerola was as chipper as could be. “I’m the best for talking about these two so I thought hey! I should go help out! Lemme tell you about them!”

Inside the announcer’s box Alexa was doing her very best not to laugh at the expression of lost control on Anna’s face as Acerola played with the third microphone available. The young Captain had shown up unannounced before Anna and Alexa could even go out to get their planned third and said she would be. Hard to argue with that.

“So that’s Hau on the right side-” “East.” “-east side of the field, he’s the grandson of Kahuna Hala
and also probably the strongest eleven year-old Trainer in the world. Top five at least I’d bet.”

Acknowledgements amongst the voices of the crowd reacted to that strongly. Hau, knowing Acerola could only say that because Moon’s birthday had already come, didn’t dwell on it. “Hau’s the record-holder for fastest completion of an Island Challenge from first Bond to Final Trials, in just eight and a half months! That’s really crazy! Super super crazy! I just wanna say that! And it’s really important too because the Island Challenge isn’t just about having strong Pokemon, it’s about being a strong Trainer and a part of Alola too! He’s great!”

Compared to those adults invited to discuss the competitions ahead, Acerola had no interest in holding back her thoughts or avoiding accusations of bias.

“Then on the left-” “West.” “-west side is Riley! She’s a Mahihinu Trainer, who completed her Final Trials this year too! Riley’s strong, and I’ve known her a long time, so don’t count her out! They’re both strong! Cause that’s what it means to be an Island Challenge Champion and make it here!”

Attention on Riley drifted to her choice in clothing, something similar enough to the outfit of the former Team Skull’s members to draw comparisons. Anna, who didn’t know Riley at all – she the biggest unknown of all the League competitors – considered that.

“Is there anything else?” If Acerola knew Riley that well, surely she had more to say. Acerola smiled wide.

“Nope!”

Riley, down on the stage, huffed loudly before raising her voice, picked up by the listening microphones around the field. Acerola flinched as soon as she heard it.

“I’m Team Skull!” Riley’s loud announcement immediately shifted the voices of the crowd. She didn’t care. “Just cause there isn’t one anymore don’t mean the reason there was has changed! Don’t go trying to pretend none of that didn’t happen!”

Her words carrying to all watching, Riley’s yell caused the attention of those beyond Alola to wonder at their source. What was the story of Team Skull, watchers began to ask. Those of Alola, many trying to pretend such negatives about their region hadn’t been, hissed at Riley’s blatant appearance and announcement. Anna glanced at Acerola, who had been hoping to just smooth all that over, as she had with many reintegrating members of Team Skull.

But of course Riley would do that. That was just who she was. The Captain sighed.

“Riley,” she strongly said her name so Riley would at least feel it as well, though being younger than her meant Acerola didn’t have the greatest of pulls, “completed her Island Challenge. That means all seven Captains and all four Kahuna acknowledged her. She was invited to the League as an Island Challenge Champion. Okay?”

An argument held between a League competitor and an announcer – even if it was a barely official one – still got attention. Riley at least didn’t push this any further. The judge called for her and Hau to ready their Pokemon to begin.

In Riley’s hand a simple red and white Pokeball, tied to a Pokemon she’d caught around the middle of last year. In Hau’s a green and white Friend Ball, the time since catching its occupant similar. So much similar about them both. Caught at similar times. Raised at similar paces. Evolved on similar paths.

Manifest for this battle as similar Pokemon.
The Hard Scale Pokemon Golisopod stood menacingly tall, heavy scale plates of silver lining its body, two massive forearms ending in jagged claws, four more smaller still tipped by threatening points. Atop two hefty legs the Pokemon stretched, mandibled jaws clicking, and stared down its opponent.

The one that looked so much like itself.

“Hau and Riley have both led with the Hard Scale Pokemon Golisopod!” Anna’s announcement mixed with the sudden boost in the crowd’s mood, the beginning of this Pokemon Battle immediately drawing note. Seeing two of the same species of Pokemon facing off often led to grand battles, but Golisopod especially, an Alolan native and powerhouse, could only mean greatness would follow. And for each Trainer to have one, Hau especially in so short a time, wow, that really meant something.

The pushback against Riley’s claim quickly faded away.

Hau struggled, impressed by Riley’s feat, raising her partner to this stage, yet knowing she would never accept his praise. She didn’t seem to want to accept anything from him at all. He didn’t understand her, not any. Wanted to but she wouldn’t let him. What could he even do? Well, they were both here now on this stage, both chosen to come here to this fight. So he’d do what he could to reach her, the way all the greatest Trainers communicated with one another.

Setting a smile on his face, Hau focused on the partner before him. Okay then.

“Golisopod!”

The voice of Riley spoke in the same moment as Hau’s.

“First-”

“-Impression!”

Beneath each hulking Hard Scale Pokemon the earth shattered, their sudden acceleration leaving only cracks and dust in their wake as both Golisopod immediately crossed the field, closing the distance between one another in a single moment, a heavy right arm swinging around from each. Such was the most powerful move of this Pokemon, an attack which could only be performed before a single mote of their strength had been spent.

In return the power to be expressed was...

A wave of wind blew out from the two, the impact of each’s clawed hand upon the other’s skull heavy, the pair of Pokemon struggling against the blow taken, pushing back to resist the force with which they had been struck. As the cheers of the crowd intensified the two Pokemon broke apart and stepped back, for one single second, before returning to the fray. Lashes of heavy clawed hands sparked bright as each swung at the other, claws grinding against plates, each strike so powerful but resisted so ably. Those two, they were more than just the same species, they were of similar strength too.

A battle the likes of which you’d rarely ever see.

Hau and Riley both kept their spirits high, calling support for their partners, the two Hard Scale Pokemon circling around one another, powerful strikes of their claws deflected, evaded, and took, those blows reaching through punished with vicious counters in return. Once long ago these two in another form had met, conflicted, and one had lost to the other. Both remembered. Both knew the other.
Both intended for things to go the same/be different.

Both unrelenting.

“Liquidation!”

Another leap back for the two to separate and as they raised their arms jets of water surged out, wrapped by energy to form long blades that met one another as the two closed the distance yet again. Rapid slashes from each clashed and sent spray across the battlefield, blade meeting blade in an extreme exchange of blows. The crowd, cheering wildly, barely comprehended the report Anna was making.

“Golisopod are risky Pokemon to use in battles with timers for switching Pokemon, as they are a surprisingly cautious species, and tend to retreat immediately upon taking significant damage. That Hau and Riley both decided to use these Pokemon, where if either retreats before the sixty second limit is up, shows each’s confidence in their partner! And perhaps how determined their partner is to push beyond their own nature!”

On electronic boards surrounding the League Stage numbers ticked down, alongside a circle slowly filling that would change colour once the minimum time for a switch had passed. Hau and Riley both kept awareness of that, but only barely. The majority of their focus on the fight.

As their partners had wished.

Their blades of water broken upon each other the two Golisopod had returned to exchanges of claws instead, each holding the other’s up as their smaller arms slashed at the other. Pushing their full weight against each other, small limbs reaching out to try and slash at faces and force their opponent to flinch, the two Golisopod struggled with all their might. A battle of full intensity indeed.

Yet as the timer passed its sixtieth second and Hau and Riley raised their partner’s Pokeball each, still the two broke back, spent a moment staring the other down, then retreated. The combination of their will to battle and the intent of their partners had suppressed the desire to retreat, but would not forever. Both Hau and Riley understood their partner well enough to know each needed a moment to breathe.

Given Golisopod were by no means considered easy Pokemon to care for and work alongside, as a sign of each’s skill there could be little better.

Next from Riley was the other of her Pokemon Moon knew the girl to have, the Pinsir that had battled Moon’s Larvesta on Poni Island those months ago. Moon knew some things about Hau’s team, but not nearly enough to have foreseen the battle so far. He and his partners... they were strong. Very strong.

Her pride in him as her friend was second only to her desire to battle him going all out, as they’d always promised to do.

In counter to the Stag Beetle Pokemon of Riley, Hau chose one Riley had seen in a previous state as well. In Malie City Hau had been given a Pancham, a Pokemon once attacked by Team Skull, taken in and cared for by the Aether Foundation, but proved unable to return to the wild. He’d met Riley there soon after, and made sure she was not the one to have hurt it so. She’d said she hadn’t been. He’d believed her.

A cautious Pokemon likely due to the attacks she had suffered, the Pancham still grew to trust in Hau, and join him in Pokemon Battles he sought in the time after. She’d grown alongside his team,
as part of it, and become strong. And, thanks to the help of Grimsley, who’d always been around in
the times Hau had been training with Acerola in Mahihinu, achieved the form she now held. The
towering, almost seven foot Daunting Pokemon Pangoro, Fighting and Dark-type. Another power
that to see alongside Hau meant so much.

Riley, caught between thinking that this Pokemon was no longer the cute little Pancham but also the
giant Pangoro was kind of cool, wasted no time in commanding her Pinsir forward.

Moon knew. She knew Riley’s partner was strong, and could tell it was even stronger than when
she’d fought it before. The way that Stag Beetle Pokemon fought, always staying close to its
opponent, never allowing a second of advantage to be found, it was relentless. The sort of foe Moon
would never find the opening to use a Z-Move against.

But that wasn’t what Hau was looking for at all.

Equal in aggression and power was Pangoro, striking with blows that split the earth, lashing out with
all manner of attacks – strikes and chops, lashing kicks and grasping throws, even ferocious
headbutts all means to continue its assault. Just as the battle between the two Golisopod had been
before, this was two incredible powers meeting one another going all out. The elegance of their
dance buried beneath the savagery and strength expressed.

But to fight this well both Trainers still so clearly had to be hearing the song.

This exchange ended in Riley’s favour. Just. Pinsir was her oldest partner, and she’d been a Trainer
for around five years now, so it made sense she’d win. Not that it would be this close though. Riley’s
narrowed eyes and obvious scowl said clearly she’d wanted this to be far better than it was. Calling
back the Pinsir too, she went for her third partner. Running around with Team Skull she’d only had
Pinsir for the longest time. Gone out to get a Wimpod once she heard about them showing up in
Brooklet Hill, so she could be a little more like the boss. Number three was even more recent than
that, Riley knowing that if she was gonna pass her Island Challenge she’d need even more.

Actually it was Plumeria who’d specifically advised her that but whatever. Big Sis had her own
troubles right now. Just remembering what was up next for her made Riley’s expression go even
darker. Didn’t matter if whatever Hau brought next was stronger. Riley would still fight. She was
here for her own reasons first, even if it had begun by following Plumeria after Team Skull’s fall.
Right now she was here to carve her name and appearance as Riley of Team Skull into the first
Alolan Pokemon League.

So she and Heracross, the Single Horn Pokemon, her third partner, would do just that.

Bug and Fighting-type, the Single Horn Pokemon was a blue-shelled bipedal insect, claws on hands
and feet ideal for latching onto trees, wings beneath its back carapace ready to lift it into the air at a
moment’s notice. And, of course, the single huge horn stretching up from its head, ending in a fork.
The power by which it fought best. That was what Riley brought to the field.

Hau’s partner eclipsed all attention on her in an instant.

Moon had done the impossible in a long series of doing the impossible. Raised from the day it was
given to her her partner Pokemon, Rowlet, to its final evolution in less than three months. A feat for
her age considered beyond belief.

For Hau, things had been different. Popplio, his own starter Pokemon, had evolved into Brionne in
under a month as well. Just slightly longer in time than Rowlet to Dartrix. Proof that Hau himself
was incredible too.
But then the difference. Moon evolved Dartrix into Decidueye. Brionne... remained the same.

Months passed by, long after the Ultra Beast’s siege. Even as the other partners of Hau began to grow stronger, to change, still Brionne remained the same. The two gave everything they had every day, and Hau knew his partner was growing stronger too, but the final barrier, he couldn’t understand how to pass it. And not how Moon had either.

Until, one day, he did.

A day swimming together in the sea. Battling against Acerola once more. Practising Z-Moves. So many things the same as always. But different in one other as, running high on adrenaline and emotion from one of their best battles yet, Hau had promised his partner he’d do everything he could for them to make it to the Pokemon League. To go all the way they could and beyond even that. His honesty, his belief, his love and determination, pushed through that final barrier with ease.

And in response Brionne had shone bright and left that form behind to continue on at Hau’s side.

The Soloist Pokemon Primarina, evolution of Brionne, final form of the Alolan Starter Pokemon Popplio, drew all eyes as Hau unleashed it to this fight. The Water and Fairy-type stretched, white seal-like upper body changing over to a deep blue and lengthy fish-like tail, teal hair flowing from the back of its head adorned by white pearls. Opening wide its mouth in a great smile, the first notes of a voiced song emerged.

Hau smiled too and sent his full will to join his partner in the announcement of their form.

This battle was not equal. Disadvantaged already by the difference in Type between the two, the Heracross of Riley held no ground against the Primarina of Hau, the Soloist Pokemon singing a constant song as it dove and wound its way around the battlefield, waves of water manifesting and flowing with it, this battle an elegant performance in which it took centre stage.

Moon knew. Hau had taken her out to Mahihinu again, even with winter so close, to show her. One of the few times she’d managed to lift him up instead of the reverse, overcome with delight and Hau so sheepish but proud. They’d both go as far as they could go, each had promised the other, again and again. And now here they were. Here they both were. Fulfilling that promise without pause.

No holding back.

Riley chose Golisopod again. Hau changed Primarina back for his own. Once again the two met, each now rested enough to have their confidence returned. They’d clash again and go all the way this time. Their partners behind them acknowledged that and prepared to do the same.

Each kept focus on the Buginium-Z set into their Z and Z-Power Rings.

The Golisopods met and fought. Clashed and crashed and sent sparks flying from claws scraping against hard scales, their movements, their aggressions, as equal as before. With one Pokemon each of Hau and Riley defeated, the battle was still in full swing, but the writing still showed on the wall. These two were equal. And of the last remaining, the Pinsir of Riley had gone through far more than the Primarina of Hau. If those two fought most everyone believed the result would go only one way.

Acerola’s claim of Hau as a young Trainer of incredible strength was not one falsely made.

Then came the moment, when the two’s claws had struck at the same time, power reflected from each and each stepping back, that both Hau and Riley burst into movement. Swung their arms from waist to over their head, then made a cutting motion with their right! Immediately both shone, Z-Power manifesting, flowing through the Bonds between them and the so similar partners before
them. Each Golisopod glowed in turn. Lashed out an arm, Z-Power infused thread forming and stretching out, wrapping around and binding the other. Forward each was pulled, closer together, as their other arms raised aglow too. A battle of speed where, once pulled close enough, who would hit the other first.

The difference came down to far less than a second could ever express.

With a heavy slam a Golisopod hit the ground, the full force of a Z-Move having struck it the barest instant faster than it had struck its foe. Its Trainer raised a Pokeball, calling it back. As did that Trainer’s opponent.

The boards displaying Hau and Riley’s counts changed as the second of Riley’s Pokemon was marked defeated in this match.

Riley did not gallantly call the battle then. Pinsir emerged once more, Hau choosing Primarina again to oppose. Until the bitter end the former member of Team Skull struggled, but still the end did come. A third Pokemon marked defeated. A hand raised to the east. And the announcement of the judge overseeing.

“The winner is: Hau!”

Loud was the crowd’s celebration, applause for both Trainers strong. Uncaring of Riley’s claim as Team Skull, she was celebrated now, for a showing of a great Alolan Trainer such as she washed away such thoughts. She wore no smile walking forward, towards Hau as he walked towards her, each Trainer tasked to shake hands after a battle as acknowledgement of a fight well fought.

Little energy she put into it.

“Hey, Riley-”

“Stop trying to talk to me.” Her snap was still sharp, even after all of this. “You don’t have anything to do with me. Back off.”

Hau, staring at her, felt something beneath his ocean of good will shift. He frowned.

“Hey what’s with you?” His snap back surprised Riley, who couldn’t quite take a step back with their hands still clasped. “You’re always like this, trying to push me away! What’s your problem already?”

“My problem?” Those observing began to question the visible energy of the conversation no-one was able to overhear. “What’s your problem that you keep trying to talk to me? Back off already, it’s none of your business.”

“That’s not true!” Hau released his grip, Riley quickly pulling her hand from his and stepping back, but not turning and leaving immediately after. “It is! You’re a part of Alola and if you’ve got troubles then I can hear you out and help! That’s what a Kahuna does and I’m gonna be one one day, so there!”

Staring, Riley couldn’t stop the twitch of her lips. “Are you now?” Staring coolly, she couldn’t break through Hau’s grin after that announcement. This kid...

“How about you make something of yourself before talking yourself up like that. Beating me doesn’t even begin to make you a Kahuna. Go way further than this first, then I might hear you out. Might. Don’t count on it though.”
“I will!” Hau’s call was to Riley’s back, as she turned to walk away. “I’ll go even further and then I’ll hear you out and help! I will! Count on it!”

In response as she left the field, Riley simply raised a hand in absent wave.

And so the first half of the second day of the first Alolan Pokemon League came to a close. The four battles of Red Block concluded, the four battles of Yellow Block still to come. The crowd and Trainers both took the time to eat, to refresh, to settle after the battles seen thus far.

And to prepare for what would come next.

The final four fights of this first round.

Those to take part ready to go on.

Chapter End Notes

One last time, credit to @milkychai for the Jace art and Pitaya art found in their respective battle banners. I'm so thankful to Chai for being so open to my requests to mimic the Sun/Moon artstyle to create the necessary artworks to make this league arc shine. Truly I am.

And so, following on from the Ilima and Moon battle that got way out of hand in chapter 50, I have successfully brought this arc back into pace with my projected outline. Four fight per chapter territory at last. Enough time to spend good with each, but not to be overwhelming. This chapter I think is SLIGHTLY bigger than the Siege of Alola, which makes it the largest in Eldritch thus far, but also thanks to being smoothly subdivided into six fights I THINK (hope) it's not that bad to handle. And honestly? I'm really happy with the fights in this chapter! Each had a different style behind it, showing that my writing style is able to try out new things and experiment, and I think they all had good to them. Special shoutouts to Mallow vs Tapu Bulu which ended up WAY more interesting than I initially thought it would be. Mallow engaged Tapu Bulu on a completely different field than outright battling and did an incredible job because of it. I'm super proud of her.

Though as should be I think Hau vs Riley ended up my favourite fight of this chapter after all.

Thank you as always to all readers and commentors, you mean the world to me that even this deep into this giant tale I'm telling, you're still enjoying it so much as to ride along with me on it. We've got four exciting matches left of the first round, and then we can go on to the second and hoo boy, folks, there will be some MOMENTS there. As I'm sure you can imagine. Look forward to them.

Finally, for those able, if you can consider sharing either of the following advertising posts for Eldritch, it would be deeply appreciated, as it helps me bring this fic to even more potential readers, and that's just so incredibly important to me.
twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

That's it for this chapter, I will return with the next when the time comes for it to be
done. See you all then.
Howling winds lashed plumes of snow across the transparent rooftop of the Pokemon League dome in Alola, clouds rising above the mountain’s peak as the morning moved into afternoon. Within the dome all were warm, the entire sprawling complex well heated, but the sight of the furious storm just beyond still reminded all present of the power of nature – a rival to even the greatest of Pokemon Battles with ease.

Inside of the staging grounds, the location within the Pokemon League dome where competitors would rest and prepare before walking the path to the battlefield beyond, only a few were gathered. Most prominent were two: Professor Kukui of Alola, and head of the Hokulani Observatory Molayne. A judge waited patiently for the two friends to come to their decision.

“I can’t say I expected this one,” Kukui wore an easy smile as always. “Getting matched up like this in the first round, some luck, huh cousin?”

“It could be worse,” Molayne’s smile was similar to Kukui’s own. “Imagine if I’d gotten matched up against one of the Tapu right away, without even being warned they’d be here. After spending so long trying to avoid them, I’d probably have lost it.”

Kukui’s smile faltered slightly.

“Uhh, hey, Molayn-”

“I can’t feel too bad though, not compared to some people.” Molayne’s smile was still on his face but so obviously nowhere near his eyes. “Look at Plumeria. I don’t know how she’s keeping it together with what she’ll be up against next. Being put into that situation, it’s just truly awful, isn’t it, Kukui?”

“So-”

“Anyway we need to pick a number, right? I’ve still only got five – you were the only one of us to make it to six after all. Don’t think Guzma ever forgave you for that. Among other things.”

Kukui actively flinched. Molayne continued unabated.

“So yeah, let’s do a full five. How long’s it been since our last all-out battle after all? Almost eleven years now, right?” Placing a hand on Kukui’s shoulder as he stepped past him, Molayne nodded to the judge to make sure they were aware of this choice before leaving one last whisper in his best friend’s ear.

“I really hope to understand just what you’re thinking once we’re both out there on that stage.”
“I hope everyone’s all charged up after the break for another exciting batch of battles! The final four of the League’s first round are just about to start, kicking off with a clash between good friends and powerful Trainers! First on the east side we have Alola’s very own Professor Kukui! A certified Pokemon Professor who specialises in studying Pokemon Moves, Kukui works alongside the Kahuna to help Pokemon Trainers begin their Island Challenges, while continuing to advance the understanding of Pokemon through his studies focused on Z-Moves!”

Anna’s excitement to make introductions carried through the crowd, Kukui’s name well repaired over the past eleven years, his efforts for Alola and genuine penitence shown turning all opinions on him around.

Good and bad.

“On the western side is Molayne, who we had commentating a battle yesterday. Once again, Molayne is a former Captain, head of the Hokulani Observatory Team, and overseer for the Pokemon Storage System in Alola! Molayne and Kukui are long time friends who took their Island Challenges together and are both excellent Trainers, so we’re sure to see each of them striving to do their best against the other today!”

Passing off to Alexa after introducing the competitors, the Kalosian reporter took charge of introducing their next third.

“Joining us for this battle is again Guildmaster Pitaya, thank you for agreeing to commentate with us.”

“Thank you for your invitation.” The calm and direct voice of the Guildmaster settled easily as counterpoint to the energy Anna and Alexa were putting out. “This is a battle I will admit to significant interest in.”

“Is that so?” Alexa moved to prompt further thoughts. “What are you thinking going into it?”

“Kukui, as I am sure much of Alola knows, is a Trainer who best reflects his opponents. Because of that, combined with his own natural draw towards powerful techniques, Pokemon Battles he is involved in quickly grow to be significantly destructive things. It makes him difficult to predict for most, as he is constantly changing based on what his opponents do without a specific style of his own. Yet Molayne of perhaps all people knows how Kukui battles best and will move in specific ways because of that. The complexity of what will come of these two thinking, adjusting, and reacting to one another, promises a battle of true depth. I am deeply interested to see just what comes
So the audience agreed. The times Kukui had taken part in notable battles, competitions amongst Alola's stronger Trainers, a match against Kahuna Olivia some years back drawing particular note before, during, and after, had all cemented the understanding that any Pokemon Battle the good Professor was involved in could become a truly destructive thing.

The technicians monitoring the barrier surrounding the League stage remained on high alert.

“Trainers at the ready!” The judge’s call was reflected in Kukui and Molayne each raising a Pokeball up. Each had made their first choice, one in response to the belief of what the other would bring.

And then...

“Begin!”

Molayne’s choice was the Alolan Form of Dugtrio, the Ground and Steel-type Mole Pokemon famed for the appearance of luscious golden hair cascading from each of its three rounded heads, all that was ever seen of the Pokemon with the rest of its body buried beneath the earth. It was a counter-pick, yes, Molayne knowing Kukui to often lead battles with his partner Lycanroc, but a good Pokemon in general if Kukui chose to go with another as well. Of the Professor’s Pokemon, Molayne knew the one he wouldn’t be seeing today was Kukui’s Alolan Ninetales, the Ice and Fairy-type far too vulnerable to Molayne’s Steel-type team.

And thus knew with full confidence the actions of the five others he’d face.

Right up until the point of seeing Kukui’s choice.

“And the first Pokemon have been chosen! From Kukui the Normal-type Snorlax, from Molayne the Ground and Steel-type Alolan Dugtrio! Immediately Molayne has an advantage here, in speed and Typing! How will Kukui move to handle this?”

That... was different. Molayne frowned. Kukui liked to lead battles with fast partners, his Lycanroc and Braviary most often, the massive bodied Sleeping Pokemon Snorlax requiring significant force of will to drive it to battle. Often it would be the last of Kukui’s Pokemon in a full fight, once the man was sufficiently worked into excitement with the battle to motivate his partner through their Bond. Leading with Snorlax was... odd. Molayne didn’t understand it and given he’d banked his entire approach here on understanding and predicting Kukui, since Molayne firmly understood Kukui to be the stronger Trainer, it was concerning.

Giving starting directions to his Dugtrio to begin cracking and unsettling the battlefield, which would prove even more disadvantageous than usual for their heavy-bodied opponent, Molayne maintained caution for what Kukui would do in return.

Kukui stood silent, for a moment. Molayne’s words had hurt but... were not unfairly given. He wasn’t wrong to have said what he had. But even then it didn’t change Kukui’s own intentions in the least. He’d known what he would have to do from the very beginning, long before the draws were set. The same regardless of who he faced.

What was necessary to go on.

Clenching his fist, Kukui looked up with bright eyes at the field.

“Oh? Kukui’s partner Snorlax is already moving!” Anna’s observation mixed with the crowd’s interest as the Snorlax of Kukui shifted and rolled, attempting to make it to its feet. “That’s eager for
a Pokemon that rarely exerts itself, a sign of the powerful Bond the two must share!”

“Different.” Pitaya’s calm voice still drew all attention, Anna and Alexa each turning to look at the older woman. She seemed contemplative. “That is not what I would have expected Kukui to begin with. In a battle like this, having the necessary intent to command a Snorlax right away, it is a significant statement Kukui is attempting to make. I would not have expected that from him.”

Voices in agreement circled the battlefield, the crowd all wondering as to Kukui’s choice. Molayne too wondered, even as his partner dug through the earth, unsettling it so that the Snorlax’s great weight would limit the ways it could safely move. This might be a strange opening, but even still it didn’t change Molayne’s intent.

He was going to give this fight everything he had.

So was Kukui.

The act of a Trainer mirroring the motions of their partner, it was a means of furthering the strength given through their Bond, the feeling of shared movement allowing even more intent to flow. Trainers of Fighting-type Pokemon, for example, would perform the same motions as their partners, lending even more power to each blow. Sometimes motion would be more abstract for Pokemon of more inhuman form, but the intent behind it was still the same. Still gave strength.

With his partner now risen to its feet, Kukui raised a leg clearly, holding it for a moment in the air as Snorlax did the same, the two aligning together in this moment. Okay, Kukui slowly breathed out, the expression on his partner's face serene, time to begin.

And as one both Trainer and partner stomped heavy down upon the ground.

The thud of impact lifted many in their seats.

“Huh?”

That was all the reaction that could be managed in the wake of that one stomp. All the crowd could think, all Alexa could say as Anna and Pitaya stared, all Molayne could process as the field before him cracked and shattered, earth splitting into shards jutting up into the sky. ...it wasn’t an unheard of thing, for a Snorlax especially to express enough power to sunder a field, but the scale and immediacy was... off. Something like that as an opening move was launching itself with great speed the Snorlax partner of Kukui sunk a glowing fist into the ground before it, the split earth displacing further and higher as the Dugtrio partner of Molayne dashed away from the strike, shocked by being chased down so fast. Turning its head into the direction the Dugtrio was fleeing, Snorlax opened its mouth wide as a great boom of sound tore the earth further, the shockwave chasing after its fleeing foe. Without pause the Snorlax, energetic far beyond their species’ known state, pushed and tore through the cracked and shattered earth, Molayne feeling keenly the sudden intense panic in his partner’s heart. What... was happening?

No-one could understand.

“With an incredible display Kukui has opened this battle at full power!” Recovering quickly, Alexa excitedly continued her commentary. “Battling at what has to be its full strength immediately upon release, that Snorlax has completely overshadowed Molayne’s Dugtrio partner by reshaping the battlefield with ease! It’s not anything less than an amazing Pokemon Trainer who can unleash something that strong that fast in a fight! And completely different from everyone’s expectations going in!”
The voice of the crowd surged over Pitaya agreeing with that point. This wasn’t like anything expected.

And not like anything she’d thought Kukui would ever do without a mask.

All watched. All watched as the Snorlax partner of Kukui upheaved the battlefield again and again, the disturbed earth becoming more and more difficult for the Dugtrio to navigate until, finally, the Sleeping Pokemon cornered its foe. An intense Fighting-type technique was all it took. The first match called in Kukui’s favour.

First of five.

Their second match went the same. Choosing his partner Klefki, Molayne focused on what he could do. His strategy going into this fight had been to disrupt Kukui’s preference for mimicking opponents, by alternating between intense bursts of activity and long moments of recovery, throwing off Kukui’s attempts to copy the pace. But Kukui wasn’t matching Molayne here. He was fighting his own way.

Something Molayne had never expected his best friend to do with so many eyes upon him.

The crowd acknowledged it with this second fight. The Magnezone partner of Kukui, Electric and Steel-type Magnet Area Pokemon, final evolution of the Magnemite line, defined it. Molayne had his own too, but it would fight in a completely different way. For Molayne its style was in generating power, changing the battlefield, and unleashing great bolts of electricity charged by such.

But each of Kukui’s Pokemon followed the same relentless pace that required power and focus unequalled. With constant movement and attacks they drove their opponents into positions of weakness, broke their every attempt to recover, and struck with full force as soon as the moment to strike was exposed. It was precise and merciless, a brutal combat style that brokered no opponent.

For those who followed the Alolan battling scene, there was one specifically this was reminiscent of. The nature of driving opponents into no-win situations, maintaining constant pressure until victory, the battling style of Kukui was like a less showy version of the Masked Royal’s, huh?

The very last thing Molayne had ever expected to see Kukui himself express.

Magnezone defeated Klefki. Then the Midday Lycanroc partner of Kukui dispatched Molayne's Alolan Sandslash, the Ice and Steel-type variant of the usually Ground-type Mouse Pokemon. Each Trainer chose to unleash their Z-Move in the midst of that clash, Molayne's signature Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Clash stopped hard by the technique Kukui chose in counter.

Though a Z-Move with incredible forward power, Corkscrew Crash was easily disrupted by force applied from any other angle, something Kukui as an expert of all Pokemon moves knew all too well. Activating the Lycanium-Z he carried, Tristan in the competitors' stands watching eagerly the sight of Kukui's Lycanroc unleashing its full power, the Z-Move Splintered Stormshards rained down upon and broke the Z-Move of Molayne's Sandslash partner. As clear a sign of the way this battle would go as anything else. This fight, billed and expected as a meeting of friends and rivals, was instead a summary destruction. A declaration from Professor Kukui of just what he was here to do.

A sight that struck silent so many witness.

Moon stared from her seat in the stands. She’d always believed Kukui must be incredibly strong, but the actual truth was still so much more than she’d been prepared for. He was staggeringly so.
Perhaps the most of what anyone had shown so far, as a Trainer Kukui’s raw intensity was... scary.

A Trainer she wondered if there was any way to fight.

Fourth from Molayne was his own Magnezone, the commentators remarking on the two friends both having the same Pokemon species amongst their team. But Kukui’s response to that pulled all attention back to him again.

It wasn’t his strongest partner. His youngest, in fact, evolved recently at quite a rapid pace. Not quite the same as Moon or Hau had done with their partners, but even still the Heel Pokemon Incineroar, Fire and Dark-type final evolution of the Alolan starter Pokemon Litten, had done well to assume this form. Sympathetic Evolution. Knowing its fellows had already reached this stage driving it further.

Those who’d seen the Masked Royal battling with this species of Pokemon as well drew more comparisons to Kukui’s duplication of the Alolan star’s style.

Moon was sure she knew who that Pokemon truly was.

By no means did this battle define Molayne as a poor Trainer. Each time he commanded clearly and keenly, his partners reacting with skill and power both. He’d so obviously raised them well, and was so obviously an able Trainer of ability greatly honed.

But the distinction was clear. Molayne was an excellent Pokemon Trainer. Kukui was a master. Suspicions, whispered thoughts, half-wondered imaginings, had followed the few times he had fought against the best and met them so equally and destructively. But this was the first time Kukui had defined himself in so public a sphere. This was his announcement, made loud and clear.

He was here to battle to the full height of the Pokemon League.

And as Magnezone was returned and Molayne chose his last and strongest partner, the Steel and Psychic-type Iron Leg Pokemon Metagross, Kukui continued the definition of what he was here to do.

The Normal and Flying-type Valiant Pokemon Braviary was second oldest of Kukui’s partners, with him for almost as long as his partner Lycanroc. As a young child with bright eyes, a Rockruff and a Rufflet from Melemele Island and no lack of confidence, Kukui had embarked upon his Pokemon Journey. Made friends along the way, rivals to struggle against, and lived well the life of Alola.

When the wall of Ula’ula Island came for them as it did for all, the point where the only way to progress was to settle and grow before pushing onwards, Guzma stayed in Tapu Village. Spending much time with him there as well, Kukui and Molayne both learned from Kahuna Holei too. She taught all three of them. Even after that time, when their Island Challenges began to close, she still taught them. Molayne was able to become a Captain, but neither Kukui nor Guzma followed in that path. But all three still grew under her into the shape of the people they wanted to be.

Then the Thrifty Megamart expanded into Alola, and Holei approved their place in Tapu Village herself. Tapu Bulu disapproved.

Amongst the ruins of that building Holei took those who would listen to her and taught them what she already knew. How to stand up to a Tapu. How to stop them when they lashed out. How to deny the power they held.

Not one of the Tapu liked that at all.
Tapu Village gone. Holei gone. People broken, shattered, lost. Molayne had been away back then. Had agreed with Holei's point but proved unable to join them in time to learn. Wasn’t labelled the same as his friends. Kukui and Guzma, those two banished from the site of Tapu Village and Ula’ula’s south. Guzma so twisted up inside.

Kukui backed down.

Then everything flowed from there. Kukui’s time in Kanto, then return to Alola to seek apology for standing against the Tapu, the view of the masses by then being that Holei had gone against the deities and led others astray in turn. Guzma didn’t take Kukui leaving or coming back that way well. Made Team Skull instead, Plumeria and a bunch of other Tapu Village kids following after. Then more who slipped through the cracks of Alola and felt like they could never be part of the shining region the Island Challenge promised.

Molayne hadn’t really ever spoken to Kukui about this at all. Or Guzma. Or anyone. Kept silent and his own head down, which perhaps in the end made him as guilty as Kukui of running away. But he still hadn’t been able to help the spike of anger when Kukui announced the Tapu coming here, to this grand competition Kukui had made for Alola and its Trainers. Sure it was the Tapu's own capriciousness that led them to join but even still...

Breathing out a sigh Molayne shook his head, Metagross and Braviary engaged in a vicious mid-air back and forth. What had he learned in this battle at the peak of Alola, where two Trainers met one another with all the power they could muster? That Kukui had gone beyond him. Not the hugest surprise, Molayne didn’t train his team nearly as hard as Kukui did, but even still it had caught him off-guard just how willingly Kukui had shown that. That willingness to reveal his full self on such a stage as this, it had meaning, even if Molayne couldn’t figure out what that meaning was.

But even then, as Braviary dragged Ghost-infused talons across Metagross’s metallic body and the Iron Leg Pokemon dropped from the air, he’d accept it.

“The winner is: Kukui!”

Amidst cheers of the crowd, impress of the announcers at the incredible battle fought, Kukui and Molayne crossed the stadium to clasp hands, the shattered battlefield from the attacks of their Pokemon creating a warped environment around them. The grip of each’s hand upon the other was strong.

“I still don’t understand.” Molayne looked Kukui clear in the eyes, honesty his only words. “But seeing you like that, giving everything you have, I understand that whatever you’re doing it means everything to you. So I’ll have faith. Because that’s what friends do.”

The smile of relief on Kukui’s face was as clear as day. Molayne grinned back.

A good fight.

“Kiawe, Captain of Akala Island’s Wela Volcano and a Fire-type specialist Trainer, has agreed to a three against three Pokemon Battle with Sophocles, the Electric-type specialist Captain of Ula’ula Island’s Hokulani Observatory! This is our second Captain against Captain battle of the League, with no doubt both fully intending to show their best selves in this fight!”

“Currently four of Alola’s seven Captains have been eliminated during this League's first round, with this battle guaranteeing a fifth Captain eliminated and a second making it on to the second round!”
However as Trainers each Captain so far have shown tremendous aptitude for their young age well worthy of respect!”

Finishing, Anna and Alexa turned to their third commentator once again.

“Kiawe serves as the current Captain responsible for teaching perhaps the most difficult lesson of the Island Challenge,” Molayne, invited once more to commentate a battle, this time introduced properly beforehand by the two beside him, outlined his own thoughts. “With a constant immersion in Alola’s nature, he’s known for a keen sense for rhythm and flow in battle.”

Kiawe, standing on the east side of the battlefield and stretching lightly, as shirtless as ever, considered the opponent across from him. Sophocles wasn’t the most active of battlers, preferring to work in the Hokulani Observatory, but then again neither was Kiawe. Between his own work – more for financial gain than pursuing a passion – and his constant practise of dance – his actual passion the finance was necessary for – battling and training came in third for him. Fourth, really, after the duties of Captainship which were his number one.

Of the seven Captains, Ilima, Acerola, and Lana were the most talented battlers, though Tristan had shown great ability too. Kiawe wouldn’t bet too strongly on any one of them losing to him. Which meant that those to beat the prior two, Moon and Hapu, were fearsome opponents to him as well. Thinking of the young girl who had so struggled to find the song of Alola, and how perfectly she’d flowed with it in the battle against Ilima, was a point of pride in Kiawe’s heart even if he’d struggled and, ultimately, failed to be the one to teach her it. Seeing her practise such was enough.

He was happy with that.

“Sophocles has a great talent for electronic systems, and has spent much time developing and furthering the programs and machinery at the Hokulani Observatory. He has a keen strategic mind for problem-solving, that I’ve seen him put into battles many times before. This battle will be a struggle of Sophocles attempting to predict Kiawe’s actions and Kiawe seeking to move faster than Sophocles can react.”

Neither was Sophocles a great battler. He didn’t consider himself bad by any measure, compared to any other Trainer his age he’d stand pretty high up there! But Acerola and Tristan, who were his age, went beyond him. And Moon and Hau, each three years younger, were so strong too. Honestly, of everything he’d seen thus far, what had impressed Sophocles the most had been Mallow in the final battle the day before. She’d designed a system, executed it, and worked around Tapu Bulu’s incredible strength instead of against it. And controlling and unleashing a system based on living things, that was really just genuinely impressive! Honestly... he wished she’d won. Felt she’d deserved it. She hadn’t though.

Alas.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Choosing their first Pokemon each, Kiawe and Sophocles took a stance as Anna counted them in. And then...

“Begin!”
The first choice of Kiawe was the signature Pokemon by which he was known, the Alolan Form of Marowak, Bone Keeper Pokemon, a Fire and Ghost-type able to unleash great powers through the spinning of the bone it carried. Honestly the non-Alolan Form, being pure Ground-type, would have been an easier choice against the Electric-type specialist Sophocles, but Kiawe had his own Type bias. The Type of Pokemon that partnering with demanded less than others. And to carry the four he had with him, he’d needed to use every advantage he had.

Anything less and he’d never be able to bear the weight for the fight ahead.

Against the Marowak of Kiawe Sophocles chose Electivire, Thunderbolt Pokemon, evolved form of Electabuzz and pure Electric-type Pokemon. A hulking humanoid of thick yellow and black fur, the twin tails extending from its rear crackled with potent electrical force.

The battle began.

Fast and vicious was the Electivire of Sophocles, the Pokemon gripping one of its two tails with a heavy fist and charging forward, electricity exploding out around it as it thrust that fist towards its foe. Deflecting and ducking under the punch with the bone it carried the Marowak of Kiawe sunk its head into its opponent, who staggered back from the sudden impact, the electricity it was releasing drawn away from Marowak by the bone it held.

An Electivire wasn’t a simple Pokemon to raise, and just having one was notable enough. Molayne knew: Sophocles had partnered with an Electabuzz passed to the Hokulani Observatory from the Blush Mountain Power Plant, the Electric Pokemon happy to provide energy to the machines requiring more power than the norm, and eventually the Pokemon had evolved thanks to a device Sophocles had built himself. It was an impressive feat indeed.

But being such a strong Pokemon didn’t guarantee its superiority to the one it faced.

Striking again and again with the club it held the Marowak partner of Kiawe easily met the flow of its opponent’s attacks, slipping through them and hitting time and time again, Kiawe calling out support for his partner with every blow it struck. He was already deep in the flow of the song, his partner moving with it so precisely indeed. But Sophocles could feel the flow too. And he could move to adjust it.

The only real way to beat Kiawe without overwhelming force was to deny the power he wielded best.
"Electric Terrain!"

The immediate blast of discharged electricity from Electivire, responding to its partner’s directive, did not stop Kiawe’s partner from landing a heavy bone strike upon the Thunderbolt Pokemon’s head, but the counter punch thrown by Electivire a moment after was so much faster and stronger than the Captain of Wela Volcano had expected. Cracking its knuckles before pounding its fists together, the Thunderbolt Pokemon took a heavy step forward.

Then its next closed the distance on Marowak far faster than before.

“Go!”

Pokemon that could create terrain used such in different ways for different strengths, but for a Pokemon that channelled and expressed electricity as an innate part of its being, Electivire was one of those suited best in an environment such as this. Even were he matched up against Tapu Koko he... well, Sophocles couldn’t imagine winning that. But he’d like to think he’d do very well.

And if he’d think that, then of this battle...

The slam of Marowak’s club into the earth threw up a plume of dust and dirt, but it wasn’t enough to turn the tide. Back in the battle against Ryuki, when the earth was still soft after the rain, Kiawe’s Marowak had unleashed a huge surge of mud. He longed for that again. That would have made a difference.

Even still, hidden by the cloud of dust, the spinning throw of the Marowak’s bone came at an odd enough angle to catch the Electivire by surprise and strike heavy upon a knee. Leaping overhead to close the distance as its opponent struggled to steady its leg after that heavy impact, Marowak landed with a hand on each of the Electivire’s shoulders before slamming its bone masked head into its opponent’s own. The thud of the impact resounded loudly enough to make many watching flinch back.

Sophocles’ partner powered through that to seize its opponent by the throat with one heavy muscular hand.

“Closing the distance against Electivire inside of its electric terrain appears to have backfired for Kiawe!” Alexa’s commentary fit neatly above the layer of noise that was the crowd’s cheers. “The partner of Kiawe is strong but -oh!”

Though the bone it carried was the conduit for much of its power, the true strength of a Marowak always remained inside. So with ease did the partner of Kiawe ignite into a bursting blaze in the grip of its opponent, flames surging around its body as the Electivire was forced to drop its suddenly burning foe. Wreathed in fire the Marowak did not pull back, or search for the bone it had let fall when attacking before, instead slamming its burning hands into the gut of the larger Pokemon before it, a great blast releasing with such force each Pokemon was pushed back.

Now standing by its bone the Marowak neatly flipped it into the air with a foot, then caught and threw it forward as the Electivire lowered the arms it had guarded against the flames with before. Another loud thud of impact against a skull, this one even more infused with power anathema to the Thunderbolt Pokemon than the last.

Electivire dropped and Sophocles, surprised and impressed, called it back. One down then.

Second changed the entire energy, mood, and discussion of the League the most of any so far this day.
Captain Sophocles of the Hokulani Observatory had three Pokemon to his name. His longest held partner Togedemaru, the Electivire he had partnered with and evolved, and one more. He’d had more in the past, a Vikavolt raised from a Charjabug, an Alolan Golem raised from a Geodude, but neither could remain with him while he bore the weight of another.

One captured in the last year.

That Captain Sophocles of Hokulani Observatory took that position at the tender age of fourteen said much about him. Only Lana and Acerola had been younger of the current Captains to claim that mantle, and the difference between those two and most others was... extreme. That Sophocles did not consider himself much of a battler, or have a keen interest in the practise, flew at significant odds to his accomplishments. When asked about it he would simply describe himself as having ‘solved the Island Challenge’, glossing over the great effort and fantastic battles he’d had to bring him to this stage.

It made it a surprise every time to see the battling heart he carried in full.

“That-” Anna found herself surprised by this most of all, Alexa lacking the context for what the glowing Pokemon released onto the field could be, Molayne having spent more than long enough helping Sophocles and this partner find their feet together.

Not that the Totem Minior, Meteor Pokemon, had any feet to begin with.

“That’s a Totem Pokemon!”

Anna’s declaration drew the voices of the crowd to spike, all Alolans understanding the shock that this was. Alexa, now realising, opened her mouth in surprise. She hadn’t expected that.

Who had?

“Minior,” Molayne took charge calmly, explaining this partner of his younger cousin, “is a Pokemon that cannot survive outside of the stratosphere without a Pokeball to keep it within. Because of that, unlike most Totem Pokemon that Captains will make deals with to become guardians of Trial Sites in Alola, this Minior had to be caught and kept by Sophocles himself. As per the rules of this League: there is no restriction on Pokemon choice. So here it is.”

Kiawe was staring forward. He’d known Sophocles had that Minior – all the Captains did – but somehow still hadn’t thought he’d bring it to this field. Then again how could Sophocles have not? Though the Totem’s own personal Z-Aura seemed to sustain it more than most – as far as Sophocles claimed – the Captain of Hokulani Observatory had still reported it as being rather exhausting to keep. The reason Sophocles had asked for three Pokemon was because that was all he’d had!

Kiawe wasn’t nearly prepared for the Meteor Pokemon’s first attack. Or any of those to follow.

Immediately ramming Marowak in a sudden burst of speed, rainbow light shining brightly through the cracks in the rock coating surrounding the Meteor Pokemon’s body, the Minior spun off of each impact before returning, striking rapidly from every direction until the Marowak no longer stood again. The Totem Pokemon of Alola, partners but not sharing Bonds with the Captains, generally held back when testing Trainers brought to them. But this Pokemon, actively sharing a Bond, was fighting with so many times more strength than the norm. Maybe second only to the Totem Kommo-o itself.

Kiawe was expected to beat that with three Pokemon? Two now that Marowak was out? That was
ridiculous! An incredible demand!

Nothing worth getting bent out of shape about.

The calm of Kiawe selecting his second partner now, an Ultra Ball raised to unleash the contents it kept, was all the warning available before the Pokemon within was manifest. Amongst the competing Trainers watching, Ryuki and Pitaya both reacted happiest at this sight.

“Kiawe’s second Pokemon is another Alolan native, the Blast Turtle Pokemon Turtonator!” Anna’s exclamation was one deeply impressed. “Turtonator is both a Fire and Dragon-type Pokemon, marking Kiawe among the notable Trainers to have brought that Type to this League! No small feat at all!”

Being part Rock-type, that Minior was still a threat, but if anything could match against it... Kiawe would bank his victory on this fight and give it all he could to do so. For this League he’d trained hard to bear the weight of his Turtonator partner for as long as he could, and though the cost was that his Pokemon count remained firmly at four, for the power of the Blast Turtle Pokemon he considered it a cost well paid.

Now to see it pay off.

“Shell Smash!”

The equal call of Sophocles and Kiawe both defined how this battle would be: immediate and violent. With the partner of each using a technique that shed the armour coating them so the Pokemon might express greater speed and strength, the clash to follow could be nothing short of extreme. As the heavy rock coating of the Totem Minior fell away, a glowing core of rainbow colours within was revealed, the Z-Aura suffusing it now plain for all to see. Yet the Turtonator of Kiawe, glowing brightly itself, matched its opponent in shine.

Each prepared for the clash to come.

Each vanishing in a blitz of speed a moment after.

Blasts of force danced across the stage of the League battlefield, the Minior and Turtonator opponents exchanging attacks of all forms – those struck by bodies and unleashed as power from afar. Past this battle many would rewatch it at reduced speed, the recorded footage precise enough to be slowed, so the active movements of the two could be seen. The way the Turtonator used jets of flame to reposition itself and move at great speed, becoming a spinning disc of flame projected from its snout, while the Minior flew across the battlefield unleashing the full strength of its attacks.

Kiawe set the Dragonium-Z into his Z-Ring. He’d prepared it alongside the Firium-Z, but against this opponent Dragon-type attacks were the superior choice. Sophocles prepared no Z-Crystal of his own, for when performing a Z-Move with the Totem, he was unable to provide it the amount of power it asked. The Z-Aura the Pokemon manifested seemed to drain all the energy its partner held. The first time he’d tried Sophocles had fallen unconscious as soon as he’d begun the pose!

Still, with the high speed of the two Pokemon, Meteor and Blast Turtle, clashing again and again, it was difficult to predict the moment. Kiawe was relying on his understanding of the song, and the sense his partner was giving him, to choose the right time. Sophocles could barely keep up too. Was giving strength through the shared Bond, but given the Minior’s self-sufficiency through its Z-Aura, his commands weren’t nearly as sharp as a proper League Trainer’s should be.

Maybe choosing to rely on the power of a Totem for this was too frivolous a thing.
“Kiawe has begun a Z-Pose! That’s the pose for the Dragonium-Z, so we’re about to see a Dragon-type Z-Move!”

There wasn’t much Sophocles could do but watch. Watch as Kiawe went through the pose and Z-Aura flared around him, before transferring to his partner so that there were two Pokemon wreathed in Z-Aura battling now in the field. Pulling back from a great explosion of two beams meeting – one of Rock-type Energy, the other draconic – the Turtonator dug its feet into the ground, breathed in deep, and for a single second held itself as the Minior charged in upon it after their last attacks pushed them apart.

Then with a rush of Z-Aura flowing around it the Blast Turtle Pokemon breathed out a stream of force that twisted and shaped into a draconic form, the Z-Move Devastating Drake launching directly into its foe.

Such was now defined the difference between any regular Pokemon and the beings known as Totems.

The sudden rush within Sophocles, feeling his partner demand more, left him momentarily breathless, momentarily light-headed. But in return the surge of Z-Aura around the Minior was able to oppose the Z-Move striking it directly, for a moment the Totem’s charge like a smaller Z-Move of its own. Not enough to negate and undo the attack set upon it, no, but enough to lessen it still. To make the difference.

To not stop the Minior’s charge as, through the Z-Move and into the Turtonator behind it, it slammed.

The immense force that lifted the Blast Turtle Pokemon from its feet and slammed it into the barrier wall before Kiawe dropped all confidence from the Wela Volcano Captain’s face.

The attack hadn’t meant nothing. The efforts of Turtonator were not meaningless. But no Totem of Alola would fall from one single Z-Move alone. And reinforced by Sophocles as it was, the Captain of Hokulani Observatory now struggling to keep his eyes open, the Minior did not bow in this fight.

Took the advantage against the stunned Turtonator and Kiawe both to strike, strike, and strike again until the Blast Turtle Pokemon could no longer stand.

The second to Kiawe’s name defeated.

There was... no way that Sophocles could perform a Z-Move now. What the Minior had demanded of him, somehow more intense than if he’d performed a Z-Move itself, was exhausting. Barely was Sophocles able to keep himself standing. But he had to. The rules of the League said that if a Trainer was declared unable to continue they had lost. If he faded now, if the amount that Totem took left Sophocles unconscious, he’d lose. He didn’t want to lose. He wanted to fight and win too! Because... because... he was a Pokemon Trainer!

Kiawe’s third was Torkoal. Between the turtle-like Coal Pokemon, jets of smoke bursting from the shell within which fire burned, and Magmortar, evolution of Magmar, it was wiser to take the former. Kiawe’s use of a Z-Move and the pressure of this fight had their effects too, and Torkoal was better able to act independently than Magmortar. Already the Coal Pokemon was intensifying the light, moisture in the air burning away, heat mounting so the flame it could release would be even stronger still.

Beat the Minior... then whatever last Pokemon Sophocles had too. Kiawe’s focus on that remained strong.
The chance was still his.

The Totem Minior glowed brighter.

“Wait, is it-”

Anna’s moment of surprise was cut off by the light expanding more and more, the Minior now shining so brightly all colour was gone but an intense white light. Sophocles shook his head. That wasn’t his command – he wasn’t really giving one. This was the Pokemon’s own idea formed of their shared will. The expression of its full power immediately and without regret. The recovery of Pokemon Centers made the move safe in battles such as this, but still the choice always drew note. Sometimes though, there was no choice at all.

The power stoked within the Totem reached its peak and the explosion of force leaving its body raced out.

In the end, when the crater resolved from the smoke and Sophocles called the fainted Minior – all its power burned away in that singular attack – back to its Timer Ball, the Torkoal was still standing. Barely able to resist that attack, but its shell was heavy and it had hid away from the blast. Kiawe could tell though. Tell just how exhausted his partner was. And though they held an advantage over the Togedemaru to manifest, third partner of Sophocles, with that Pokemon still fresh and ready Kiawe felt no desire to prolong the fight against it. That Totem... really had defined everything after all.

He didn’t blame Sophocles though. To keep the Totem Sophocles had to bear its Bond at all times. There was no other way to compete but to bring it to this field. So Kiawe himself wouldn’t feel down for this showing. Not for the battle they’d had all the same.

With Torkoal returned and their match concluded, he and Sophocles circled the crater Minior had left behind, the battlefield repair crew already preparing to fill it in for the next fight to come. Each grasped hands and smiled.

“Congratulations Soffy.”

“Thanks for the fight!”

And that was that.

“Kahuna Olivia, thank you for joining us again.”

Commentating a second time today, and third time overall, Olivia smiled and asserted once again that she was happy to be here. As the second-most experienced Kahuna of those present in this League, her opinion was valued greatly on the topics of Tapu and Kahuna both, and thus she’d been requested to oversee the two battles featuring Tapu Bulu and Kahuna Hala so far.

Third would be a second of the Tapu, Tapu Fini, fourth to compete of the Island Deities in this League.

Of the four Tapu, two had passed through the first round – Tapu Koko defeating Sabrina and Tapu Bulu Mallow. Tapu Lele had been eliminated by Olivia’s own hand in a stunning display that no other but a Kahuna could enact. It made many wonder how anyone else would stop the Tapu from continuing on.
In the next round to come, it would be Moon facing Tapu Koko, and no doubt the discovery of just what the limits of Ultra Evolution were. Many were already excited to see such a bout on this stage.

Although for those aware – even Olivia though she held no involvement at all in the affairs of Ula’ula Island, having become Kahuna in the year following Holei’s passing – attention was far more focused on the next match of Tapu Bulu.

And the one who would stand against it.

“Dexio is another Kalos League Trainer,” Alexa took charge of introducing the first of the two to compete. “And like Sina another Researcher under Professor Sycamore. While he was eliminated in the first round of the last Kalos League, by Alola’s very own Kahili Hano in fact, he still displayed significant skill in that battle fought. And has an equal reputation to Sina as an expert in guiding Trainers to greater strength. I have full confidence he will be applying all of his abilities in the battle to come!”

“The Island Deity of Poni Island, Tapu Fini, is considered the most reclusive of all our Guardians.” Anna recapped what she knew of the other competitor in the coming match. “Known to possess incredible control over water, as we can see Tapu Fini is already prepared to fight.” Indeed it could be seen, orbs of liquid floating around the Guardian Deity, its bright blue eyes staring across the field at Dexio as he readied the Pokemon he would send out.

“Each of the Tapu have their own natures,” Olivia did not know Tapu Fini that well herself – only Koa truly had, not even Hala able to tell what the Poni Island Deity was ever thinking – but she still knew what she’d seen, heard, and experienced. “Compared to the others, Tapu Fini could be considered the least combative, but it has still fought against the others in times past, and still chosen to appear here today. It absolutely intends to fight.”

Hapu, in the competitor’s stands, neither having been ready to be commentator for this match nor having been asked – Anna and Alexa not intending to put the onus on children to appear thank you Captain Acerola – watched with intense eyes, to learn absolutely everything she could about the being with which her life was now so deeply intertwined.

Sina, who had still given Ryuki a severe stinkeye when he’d tried to speak to her earlier that day, watched closely too. She and Dexio had both been given some pretty terrible match-ups, but at the very least she wanted to see her partner show everything he could. So at least one of them would get to go all out.

She believed he’d show his best this day without fail.

Dexio kept his calm with a smile, an outward relaxed persona even as he raised the Ultra Ball he held for the judge’s call. Oh inside it was all turmoil, absolutely, but outside he was at least appearing fine. Like one of those motivational posters with the Meowth clutching onto the clothing wire just about to fall off. Feline fine, yep, that was him right now.

He’d cornered Sabrina before and asked her everything he could, everything she’d be willing to tell him. Surprisingly she’d been pretty pliable about what the experience of battling Tapu Koko was like. Maybe she was frustrated too. Wanted to make sure others did better than she. He hoped he would. She was watching him too. A legend with her eyes on him, and Sina relying on Dexio to give a showing good enough for the both of them. He definitely had to go all out for that.

He hadn’t spoken to Mallow. Oh her way was brilliant, absolutely, Dexio and Sina had spent a long time the last night talking about how cool what Mallow tried to do was – after Dexio had helped Sina calm down from her frustration at Ryuki’s extremely rude victory over her at least – but it wasn’t
something Dexio could do here. There wasn’t a good path to meet and fight Tapu Fini on a completely different field than pure power. He had to go at this like a proper Pokemon Battle. Couldn’t do Olivia’s super-awesome thing either, predicting everything his opponent would do before it even thought of it. Only one way forward.

Give it his best and make sure his best was good enough. Okay, the judge was raising their arms, alright then, and...

“Begin!”

Here we go.

Immediate was the motion of Dexio and response of Tapu Fini, the moment Alakazam, Psi Pokemon partner of Dexio, appeared both bursting into movement. Dexio raised an arm, Key Stone set within the Mega Ring around his left wrist, and focused. Compared to the Alakazam of Sabrina, who had worn an Alakazite tied to one of its two yellow horns, the one on Dexio’s partner was hung from a chain around its neck. And glowed bright.

Mega Evolution.

But even as the Psi Pokemon glowed red and began to warp and change, Tapu Fini’s response was in-bound. Mega Evolution came faster than a Z-Move, wasn’t as easy to move in counter to, but something as powerful as a Legendary Pokemon could. Even as the shape of Mega Alakazam resolved, metallic spoons twisted out of psychic power forming around it, the ball of water Tapu Fini had thrown was already clamped tight around its opponent’s head.

“Dexio has led with the exact same choice as Sabrina did, a Mega Evolved Alakazam!” Alexa had guessed this would be how it went, having seen that Pokemon in the last Kalos League as well. The sight of Sabrina’s battle with Tapu Koko... probably for Dexio it meant more than any other. He’d have to use everything she’d revealed then.

And it still wouldn’t be anything short of an immeasurable wall to overcome.

“Tapu Fini’s response was immediate,” Anna passed her own commentary as the Alakazam on the field waved a hand, seemingly unconcerned by the liquid wrapped around its head, and caused the bubble in question to pop into a rain of water. Tapu Fini raised both its hands and commanded a dozen more. “In battle it appears more like Tapu Lele than Tapu Koko or Tapu Bulu, choosing to attack immediately instead of waiting to see what its opponent would do.”
“Tapu Lele enjoys fighting though.” Olivia was well able to give commentary here. “It simply goes all out from the very beginning. This though... is colder. Tapu Fini fights in a way all of its own. I don’t know what we’re going to see.”

The air around Tapu Fini was sparkling, the appearance of stardust floating around its form as it lashed out with each hand, each sending the balls of water rocketing forward to smash against the psychic force its Mega Alakazam opponent commanded. Grimacing, Dexio focused for a way to break through. He’d been banking a little on taking the opening move here, but seemed not. Okay, no worries, still plenty of ways to follow the plan.

In fact...

Part of a Trainer’s duty was watching the field to see what their partner could not. So as his partner Alakazam fended off the orbs sent by Tapu Fini with increasing speed and number, shattering them into water that spread across the battlefield between the two, Dexio caught the motion at ground level. Tapu Fini was unleashing this incredible barrage as a feint. Commanding the water connected all the way from it to just beneath Alakazam to rise up.

And because Dexio saw that his partner could respond and launch itself upwards just as the whip of water lashed up to try and grasp hold of it. That moment of focus where Tapu Fini’s attention was there alone, that moment of freedom where Alakazam floated high above in the air, that was good enough. Okay let’s begin.

Dexio stretched a hand forward and spread his fingers wide, his partner taking the same stance. Then each clenched their hand.

It was visible. The way the whip of water reaching up to the Mega Alakazam splashed back down upon the earth, the way the loose dirt compacted and darkened, the way Tapu Fini suddenly hit the ground. The same. The same application of downwards force, a field of gravity the same as Sabrina had performed before. She’d confessed it to Dexio, when he’d asked her for anything she could tell him, that she’d regretted not relying on that power sooner in the fight. Her partner Alakazam could use it too. She’d gone into the first match of her fight still too lightly, looking to fight instead of overwhelm. But Olivia and Mallow had both been right. The only way to stand against a Tapu was to deny it the fight altogether.

You had to crush it with everything you had.

First the gravity, which had worked before. Then the cloying field of psychic energy, wrapped around the foe, draining from it strength. Both of Alakazam’s hands were now outstretched, the same as the Gothitelle of Sabrina had done the day before. Tapu Koko had burst through that by using the power all the Tapu shared, its Fairy-type abilities. Would Tapu Fini use that this early? Or fight back with water? Either way Dexio had to be prepared to keep it as ineffectual as could be. Let it exhaust itself by failing to reach him and his, the same way Olivia had before.

He couldn’t quite do what Olivia or Mallow had, not to the degree they had, but he could take from them inspiration all the same. The fight with Tapu Lele had proved it: they could grow tired. So Dexio would do it that way. A long and draining fight for this foe.

The only way he could see to win.

...his head hurt.

“Come on come on come on not this soon!” The mantra repeated to himself helped push it back, but
not all the way. Sabrina had told him about this too. About the intensity of the Tapu, and how they pushed down upon the minds of those who stood against them. Olivia hadn’t shown that in the least. And Mallow had never engaged with Tapu Bulu in a way it would fight back against. But Dexio had to deal with it. Had to deal with Tapu Fini’s presence reaching out and trying to push him down.

But no way, no way he was stopping when just getting revved up, he and his partner would push even harder back against Tapu Fini! Definitely! His vision already tunnelling upon his partner as he and it combined all their shared strength to fight against the Tapu, Dexio focused entirely on helping the Alakazam motionlessly form a barrier to deflect the jet of water Tapu Fini shot from where it remained held upon the ground.

Missed the two geysers bursting from the earth, having tunnelled from where the deity’s hands were pressed upon the ground, and striking into his partner from either side.

The psychic field in the air faltered.

This time when Tapu Fini clapped its hands together all the water that had struck the Alakazam wrapped into a bubble around the entire Mega Evolved Pokemon, the Psi Pokemon lashing out with psychic power against the crushing weight its deity opponent was exuding with its hands clenched together willing the water to close. Dexio’s mind surged, even as the headache he was already feeling from the intensity mixed with the feeling of Tapu Fini weighing upon him pounded harder inside his skull. He had to solve this one. If there was pressure from all directions then a psychic cut in the bubble should vent all the water out, so Dexio focused and Alakazam cut directly before it, a sudden gout of water launching out of the bubble and across the field right at the Tapu controlling it. The water around it now falling away, Alakazam waved a hand around and spread it out further across the field, too scattered to easily coalesce again.

Holding its hands together and outstretched, palms open towards its foe, Tapu Fini – the water shot towards it circling the deity under its control – released a surging blast of pink energy to course across the field.

“Tapu Fini has quickly escalated to using Fairy-type techniques alongside its own Water-type array! Is this the nature of the Guardian Deity of Poni Island, or a sign that Dexio has already pushed it this far?”

“I couldn’t say for sure,” Olivia was watching this match as closely as any could, “but I will say this: Dexio is not making this easy for it.”

Stopping a Moonblast was way more intense than the Water-type techniques before, Dexio could feel his partner struggling even as it brought its full psychic powers to wrap around and hold the pink beam launched towards it steady. Of course that was a huge opening for Tapu Fini, who’d risen up into the air and was preparing to send the water around it surging back. So...

Jerking its hands upwards Alakazam redirected the beam to blast through the incoming shot. Then quickly swung its hands to point outwards and grasp the geysers of water that returned to it, Tapu Fini already having commanded those two. Pulling the water together into a torrent, inflicting it with an electric charge, Alakazam launched the now current-carrying current right up at the Island Deity overhead.

It struck, the water breaking over the underside of Tapu Fini’s shell, the electricity within jumping out to wrap around the deity’s form. But any sound Tapu Fini made was hidden by the sudden rush of water, the explosion of the largest geyser yet from beneath Alakazam launching the Psi Pokemon into the sky. How much of the earth beneath the battlefield was already filled with water, waiting for the Tapu to command it to rise? Dexio struggled with that. He had to... get the gravity back, that had
worked. But he was already losing his grip on this fight and Alakazam was being held up by the water right in front of Tapu Fini. Okay! They were at close range! Full psychic assault!

But up close meant a full assault from the deity was possible too. The bursts of psychic energy and commanded water, light still dancing around Tapu Fini’s form as it did whenever the deity rose to battle, were rapid and extreme. Alakazam fought until it could do no more, until the form of its Mega Evolution faded away. The Guardian Deity let it fall.

Dexio raised his partner’s Ultra Ball and called it back before it hit the ground.

Okay. Okay okay okay! Slapping his palms to the side of his face to refocus, Dexio went for number two. He had five Pokemon and they were all real ready to give it their all! Admittedly two of them were pretty new, had been caught and raised in Alola by Dexio and Sina working together, in addition to a third that Sina had added to her own team of five, but still Dexio was confident! Even if whenever he blinked it felt like it lasted a split-second too long.

Next was Slowking, Water and Psychic-type Royal Pokemon, a pink-bodied and round-headed Pokemon that stood on two legs with a great shell mounted upon its skull. Slowking and Espeon both were strong partners of Dexio, and he had faith in both of them to maintain the pace! So here we go!

Compared to Alakazam using Psychic power alone, Slowking mixed in control over water of its own to the way it fought. Not to the same degree as Tapu Fini, every direct contest ending in the deity seizing control of the water in this fight, but at the least Slowking could slow the pace of their opponent. Force it to do more, draw out more, require more. More and more and more Tapu Fini attacked and had its attacks broken or pushed back, Slowking’s own beginning to reach through to strike against it.

But Dexio felt himself courting disaster. He’d been warned and known he’d have to go into this on pure confidence. Pure force of will. But it still felt like he was losing. Like the old days as a kid when he’d taken his third Pokemon and suddenly spent almost an extra half as long each day asleep. Like the time he had to operate was limited, and when he ran out he’d be out.

Didn’t really seem fair at all.

He called Slowking back. There was a timer in his head now, a countdown until he ran dry. Raichu, the Alolan Form, Electric and Psychic-type. He and Sina had found a Pikachu, partnered up with it, trained it with all their Pokemon, and offered a Thunderstone for it to choose. It had and took on this unique form, and Dexio was so delighted to have this Mouse Pokemon with him from here on out.

Electricity. Speed. Dodge dodge dodge, bolt bolt bolt. Keep hammering Tapu Fini, it was part Water-type, electricity would affect it. Ignore those waves of Fairy-type energy it was using now, that flowed out in discs from the deity’s body and sapped half the strength from whatever it touched. They could be dodged around. And struck back against.

A lash of water, the Tapu constantly moving its hands in control of the liquid around it, grasped Raichu by its tail and pulled hard, dragging the Mouse Pokemon into one of the tunnels gouged by the geysers of water to emerge. Seconds passed until another geyser shot out of the ground elsewhere and carried the Raichu with it. Dexio again called that Pokemon back before it hit the ground.

Okay okay okay he was okay he was still going uhhhhhhhh Espeon yeah, just like Sina had a Glaceon Dexio had an Espeon. The lilac-furred evolution of Eevee possessed great psychic power too! So go go go fight dodge block evade attack water was flowing across the field why was there so much water it was starting to spin Tapu Fini lifted its hands and the whirlpool it had released enough
liquid to create spun into life.

“Those are big techniques.” Olivia’s commentary overlaid the voice of the crowd. “Tapu Fini is not holding back, and if it were things would not be going well for it. Dexio is strong.”

Alright alright so Espeon hadn’t lasted long but that was okay! Tapu Fini was using the big stuff it was gonna start running on empty and as soon as Dexio had it down he was winning! Sure his head felt like it was going to split open now but alright alright okay Passimian! Yeah! He’d explored the jungles on the north-side of Akala and caught the Teamwork Pokemon at the same time Sina had the Sage Pokemon Oranguru. Bummer she hadn’t gotten to show off her full team but dodge dodge dodge beams of Fairy-type energy raining down from above, Tapu Fini maintaining its height in the air – Dexio really missed that field of gravity he’d had before – the sound of water lapping like waves filling his ears the roar of the crowd more like the roar of the ocean his eyes flicking from his partner dodging over the surface of the water as Tapu Fini above kept turning to look at it and he still had Slowking to follow things up and Tapu Fini was going to use the water in what way but also it was firing the beams and also Passimian had to reach it or was dodging good enough how tired was it anyway Dexio’s eyes moved to look at the deity again but for some reason he was still looking at Passimian. That was weird.

Closing his eyes, Dexio focused on trying to put himself back together.

Opened them again to find himself in the staging grounds of the League, seated on a bench and leaning against Sina’s side. When he tilted his head, she smiled at him softly. Ah.

“How... long was I out?”

“Long enough. Get some more rest.”

“...yeah okay.”

It was so easy to close his eyes and drift off again, the intensity of the battle against Tapu Fini having pushed him over that edge. Sina’s voice still carried with him as he fell back into sleep.

“You did great.”

The collapse of Dexio, the presence of Tapu Fini overwhelming him to unconsciousness, met the conditions of the League rules to pronounce the Kalosian Trainer defeated.

Though rare occurrences, Trainers themselves proving unable to battle, exerting too much energy to maintain consciousness, still occurred in League settings, and rules for such still existed. Dexio’s loss came as, to many, no ultimate surprise, the Island Deity Tapu Fini considered as unstoppable as the rest – providing it was not matched against its Kahuna, it seemed – but the efforts the man had made still impressed deeply. He’d fought with incredible energy, fervour, and ability alongside his Pokemon partners against the Guardian Deity. Olivia said it clearly: his efforts were well worthy of deep respect.

Kahili, who tore into Dexio as easily as he seemed to live for tormenting her – something that could perhaps be called friendship by outside observers if they squinted right – could not deny how impressed that man’s efforts had left her. He’d forced Tapu Fini to show so much of what it could do. Lessons she would take well into her match against it next.

Once she was done with the one before her first.
“Man oh man, so here we are, the final two.” Grimsley’s tone was as relaxed and carefree as could be, his observation holding about equal note of this situation as it would of the weather. “A baby Elite Four member versus one retired. Young against old. What do you think? Is the next generation ready to surpass the last?”

“None of that is relevant.” Grimsley’s lopsided smile told Kahili clearly he was fishing for a rise. “We are both invited Trainers to this Alolan League. We’re here to do our best and that alone.”

“Of course, of course,” shrugging his shoulders, arms lifting his white kimono sleeves, Grimsley revealed a silver coin with a flick of his wrist. “Still, you can’t stop a guy from being curious: heads or tails? High or low.”

Kahili’s cool stare was unbreakable. She’d dealt with Grimsley now and again, the man popping up around Ula’ula Island’s south-western coast mostly, and his seeming easy-going nature always rubbed her the wrong way. Like it was all just a front hiding fangs ready to bite.

“Three Pokemon.”

“Oho, low then, we’ll make that tails.” Flipping the coin, Grimsley held Kahili’s stare as the silver disc spun between them before landing in his outstretched hand, the motion of placing it upon the back of his other made in an instant. Lifting the first, Grimsley revealed the result.

“Oooh, bad luck, little lady, results are high. In that case we should cap this round off the way it began, a full on six against six. You can do that much, right?”

By incredible effort Kahili kept her brow from twitching, a sight the former Unova Elite Four member would no doubt have taken great joy from. Given the next round would place the winner of this battle against Tapu Fini, revealing all of Kahili’s Pokemon wouldn’t be the worst thing. She’d likely need every last one and everything she could do to get through Tapu Fini anyway. Logically, it made no difference any which way. All it came down to right now was which end of that number she believed suited her best.

Even with her confidence, she wouldn’t underestimate Grimsley here.

“I doubt you’re willing to hear argument?”

“That’s the hand we’re dealt,” still calm and cool, Grimsley never wavered. “And I think it’d be good for you too. Since you’re taking an Elite Four role here, you should get some experience battling those who had it. Or were you not sticking around, heading back to Kalos for that reporter’s sister, right?”

Finally scoring a hit through Kahili’s armour, Grimsley didn’t react externally to the sudden change in her expression. The judge waiting for them to settle on this battle’s number hovered back a little though.

“I’d expect someone who held a station such as yours to have better manners than to pry into someone’s personal life.” Kahili couldn’t help this snap, Grimsley specifically baiting her. “I’d ask you to not.”

“Hard to avoid with that Alexa practically yelling it to all gathered.” Grimsley seemed to easily ignore the slight seethe to Kahili. “But I’ll agree that was a little too far, sorry sorry, I’ll be good.”

A strained ‘will you’ escaping Kahili got the most standout reaction from Grimsley yet. A wide smile. He turned to the judge.
“Six.”

Kahili, suffering a deep sigh, turned and nodded as well.

“Six.”

Six it was.

“Both a famous Alolan Trainer and sportswoman, an individual who has appeared in both the Kalos Pokemon League and Golf Championships around the world, Kahili Hano returned to Alola to join Professor Kukui in helping prepare this first Alolan League. Following on from that, she served as the proxy for Kahuna Hapu in the Final Trials run since Hapu’s ascension to the role, and as such has been recognised as a current member of Alola’s own Elite Four! She’s an incredibly powerful Trainer and worthy of the highest respect! I’m excited to see her battling to end this first round off!”

With Anna having covered the first participant, Alexa outlined the second.

“Facing Kahili is Grimsley, formerly of the Unovan Elite Four. Grimsley was an active member of the Unova Pokemon League for a number of years before moving to Alola, including during the Team Plasma Uprising and Resurgence. With years of experience as an Elite Four member, Grimsley’s abilities are without question, and will pose an extreme challenge no matter who he faces in this League! With both Trainers here holding claim as members of an Elite Four, the battle they’re about to have will no doubt be incredible!”

The crowd’s appreciation was equal for these claims, the sight of the two Elite Four Trainers standing opposite one another drawing all eyes. What a way to end the first round of the first Alolan Pokemon League.

A sight none would dare miss.

“With us as our final commentator for today,” Anna made introduction, “founder of the Alolan Pokemon League and head Pokemon Professor of the Alola Region, Professor Kukui thank you for joining us.”

“Thanks for inviting me, yeah! I’m just as excited as everyone else to see this fight, knowing that both of these Trainers are super strong! So far we’ve seen a bunch of incredible battles here at the peak of Alola, and I know for sure we’re about to see another, woo! Don’t look away now!”

No-one would.
The last judge for today raised their arms and motioned for Kahili and Grimsley to be ready. Each prepared, in Kahili’s hand an Ultra Ball, in Grimsley’s a Dusk. Their opening choices made. And the final seconds ticked by.

Three.

Two.

One.

“Begin!”

Go.

Immediately the partners of each served as declaration. Kahili’s Skarmory, the silver-bodied Armour Bird Pokemon, was known as an excellent Pokemon for testing unknown waters, proving difficult to overwhelm without specific counters raised against it.

In contrast the Water and Dark-type Brutal Pokemon Sharpedo, partner of Grimsley, was a clear indication the man was going all in. A statement made all the moreso as Grimsley drew a Key Stone from a sleeve and held it up, the blue and yellow Sharpedonite strapped across his partner’s forehead immediately shining bright.

Mega Evolution did not put the exact same risk on a Pokemon as performing a Z-Move – it was not something that relied on enemies being in a specific position to strike, nor was it as easy to interrupt and ruin. Still, as the blue and white shark-like Pokemon glowed red, Kahili didn’t miss a beat in commanding Skarmory to launch a series of its sharp feathers about the field, settling in as a hazard spread across it. Continuing to beat its wings Skarmory next whipped up a surge of wind around it, a technique many Flying-type Pokemon used for speed. Preparation for what came next.

Yet even with that the sudden launch into motion of the now Mega Evolved Sharpedo – a Pokemon elongated from its previous form, mouth larger than ever and lengthy snout lined with outward-growing fangs – still took Kahili and Skarmory both by surprise.

Despite lacking a watery environment to swim within, easily did Sharpedo traverse the field, blasts of water from its back launching it at immense speed to curve in arcing leaps from point to point, the Brutal Pokemon effortlessly redirecting itself each time it came in close to the land. That Grimsley had chosen to use a Pokemon that traditionally suffered outside the water – a choice even the Water-type specialist Lana hadn’t been confident with – spoke loudly of his own confidence in his partner’s strength.

Confidence well founded as, despite Skarmory’s boosted speed, it could not avoid the fanged maw of Mega Sharpedo snapping down upon its wing.

“Opening with a Mega Evolution, just as Sabrina, Sina, and Dexio all did, Grimsley has made an immediate declaration of going all out! His Sharpedo closed the distance on Kahili’s Skarmory with ease, and doesn’t look likely to let go now! Just as this is the first six against six battle since the opening between Captain Ilima and Moon, this will also be our first chance since then to see a Mega Evolution and Z-Move clash! To stop that Sharpedo from taking too strong an advantage, Grimsley’s forcing Kahili’s hand to use her own full power as well!”

Not inaccurate. Just as it was known only a Z-Move could truly counter another Z-Move, so was it that the only way to properly match the power of one Mega Evolution was with another. Less understood, solely for those who mixed the two, was that either could move against the other just as
well.

In the Kalos League Kahili had used Mega Evolution and Z-Move both. Her partner Pidgeot, now staying with Viola until Kahili was able to return to them both, was strong indeed, and when Mega Evolved proved even stronger still. And Kahili had held a handful of Z-Crystals, her Flyinium-Z most iconic of them all, to use as well.

Being able to use either depending on the situation had earned her significant note and advantage, opponents always unsure as to whether a Mega Pidgeot or shockingly powerful technique were about to be unleashed. But one thing was true and that was this: when her opponents chose to use Mega Evolution, Kahili had to respond with power equal. Both worked: Pidgeot could fight many great foes, and a Z-Move would drain much of their strength, but it still took one of those two. Otherwise letting an opponent run unchecked for that long quickly led to defeat.

Lessons well learned that meant Kahili’s honed instincts as a Pokemon Trainer immediately began looking for an opportunity to put the Brutal Pokemon before her’s rampage down.

Skarmory was a scout, a Pokemon best suited to gauging others, and helping their partner determine overarching strategies to go forward. Against anything but a Pokemon who Mega Evolved, Kahili had been confident Skarmory would have done excellently. But now, the Armour Bird Pokemon unable to pull away from the heavy jaws grinding sharp fangs against its metallic wings, it was in one of the worst situations possible. Grimsley had gone all in, on baiting Kahili’s ire and attacking with his maximum strength.

She found herself struggling not to be lured into his pace.

The glow of Skarmory’s wings being infused with Steel-type energy pushed back against the fangs digging into the metal, but not enough to break free. The more Skarmory struggled against the greater weight of the Pokemon holding it down, the more energy it burned while its opponent did little to hold on. This pin would deplete the first of Kahili’s partners in seconds more.

Desperate times.

“Do it.”

Feathers loosed from the wing of Skarmory held in the mouth of Sharpedo immediately caught within its maw, the Mega Evolved Pokemon suddenly coughing and choking, detaching to thrash its head and evict the metallic feathers from its mouth. Those feathers launched before while Sharpedo was Mega Evolving had taken forceful wingbeats to throw out. To simply discard a mass of feathers without moving took something else entirely.

Quickly on its short avian legs Skarmory raced back, the metallic feathers that covered its body as a heavy coat continuing to slough away. It wasn’t one of Kahili’s favoured techniques, the discarding of body weight for speed, and would require care to help restore her partner after this, but to break free and pull away it was necessary all the same.

Now then...

Giving a command Grimsley ordered Sharpedo through its struggle with the metal feathers filling its mouth, the Brutal Pokemon responding with a bursting water-propelled charge forward. Yet with both the wind it had called before still flowing around it, and its own body now so much lighter, with ease Skarmory leaped, pushed a leg down upon the Sharpedo’s back to bounce off of it, and turned in the air as its opponent sailed on by.
Fast enough to create a moment for Kahili to complete the pose corresponding to the Flyinium-Z set within her Z-Ring.

Even without feathers or flight of its own now, wreathed in Z-Power as it was Skarmory still launched forward, all of the speed behind it meaning that Grimsley’s partner Sharpedo had no means to evade. Yet the reduced weight of Skarmory from its shed metal meant all the force in this attack was carried in the power of the Z-Move itself, and though launched by the impact, bouncing off of the barrier wall, when the Mega Sharpedo hit the ground it still righted itself and moved to continue its attack.

Not yet done.

Skarmory was by no means a freshly caught and raised Pokemon; it had been with Kahili for a full decade now. Using a Z-Move wouldn’t leave it unable to continue. Those techniques always had their effects, but even then the amount of speed the Armour Bird Pokemon had gained by discarding the reason for its title meant everything. The Mega Sharpedo of Grimsley couldn’t catch it, their clashes all favouring Kahili’s partner – for as little strength as it could exert upon its Mega Evolved foe – until Grimsley acknowledged that with a shrug and the first substitution of the fight.

Another Pokemon he was known for – especially from those who knew him during his Elite Four days – the Cruel Pokemon Liepard, pure Dark-type purple-coated feline with a deep yellow underbelly, feet, and rosette patterns across its body, stretched upon manifestation in the afternoon light of Alola.

Kahili, free to respond to this substitution with her own – rest would do little for Skarmory but still do better than insist it continue this fight – chose a response in order to take the lead. Moved to call Skarmory back.

Liepard moved in counter.

One of the most known techniques of Dark-type Pokemon, used to strike fleeing foes without mercy, the move categorised as Pursuit – taking a variety of forms depending on the enactor – for Liepard involved the Pokemon racing in on Skarmory before it could be pulled back and striking out with a heavy Dark-infused slash of its claws. The Ultra Ball Kahili was using still activated, but the watching systems of the League still registered the Pokemon returned to it as unable to continue. First of the Pokemon in this battle defeated.

Gritting her teeth Kahili chose her next partner as Grimsley kept his expression ever calm.

The Wrestling Pokemon Hawlucha, partnered to Kahili during her time in Kalos, held a strong advantage compared to Grimsley’s Dark-type focus. But being the strongest advantage Kahili held, if Grimsley successfully eliminated it she’d be left deeply under-equipped to continue, especially with one of her partners already defeated.

Simple enough then.

She needed to win here without fail.

Fast, even faster than the Liepard that opposed it, the Hawlucha of Kahili closed the distance between them and began its assault. The natural speed of Flying-type Pokemon, combined with the aggression and precision of Fighting-type techniques, made Hawlucha a fearsome foe indeed and Kahili put her full will and focus behind it, not even slightly inconvenienced by having performed her Z-Move already.
Though she was the same as any other bar Moon – were Kahili to attempt another Z-Move no power would flow, not enough within her to do the same again – having used a Z-Move would not slow the Flying-type expert in the least.

She’d long grown past the days those limits existed.

“In the initial clash between Kahili and Grimsley, each competitor has used their key technique: for Kahili a Z-Move, for Grimsley Mega Evolution. Though Mega Sharpedo took a full Z-Move from Kahili’s Skarmory, it was still active when called back by Grimsley, and in return Kahili’s Skarmory was defeated by Liepard. The match-up now favours Kahili, with Hawlucha possessing an advantage over it, but will that allow Kahili to retake any of the momentum she just lost? Professor Kukui, your thoughts?”

“Hard to say, yeah,” Kukui remarked absently at first, watching the match as closely as any could. “You’d think Kahili using that Z-Move then was a bad choice, with the damage Skarmory took lowering its strength, but with the speed it had it was able to land that hit and it’s difficult to know when that chance would’ve come again. Kahili made a real decisive choice there and we won’t know how much that mattered until this fight’s nearly over. If nothing else, it has slowed Grimsley down too, as his Mega Sharpedo won’t be at full strength again no matter how much rest it gets. They’re both going to be doing their absolute best to take a proper advantage here.”

Thanks to the feathers launched by Skarmory as the battle began, the steps of Liepard were either cautious or punished, with the smaller Hawlucha easily passing by them to maintain its own assault upon its Cruel Pokemon opponent.

Grimsley’s choice in techniques for this partner were those reactionary, beguilements to mislead and strikes in openings created by those, but this match-up was bad for him with the straightforward Hawlucha powering through without pause. Moon, watching this battle, some of the other younger Trainers – Hapu, Riley, and Sophocles – retiring to rest after the effects of their battles and use of Z-Moves or supporting of Totem Pokemon caught up with them, observed the difference between how Kahili’s Hawlucha fought here and how it had when she and Bisharp had battled it in Moon’s Final Trials before.

The way Kahili was now, Moon wouldn’t have stood a chance.

Hau, watching closely as well, thought similar thoughts.

With the advantage Kahili’s partner held, this battle ended firmly in her direction. It was not one-sided, the Liepard partner of Grimsley had struck reliably and consistently, but the difference in approach had meant for each hit it landed, worse was taken from its foe. Kahili wasn’t the type to give an inch in battle, and so she hadn’t let a single opportunity slip away.

But Grimsley himself had fought just as hard, and the calm with which he chose his next partner said clearly the confidence he had to push on.

Scrafty, the Hoodlum Pokemon, Dark and Fighting-type, a similar to Liepard-sized bipedal reptile, orange skinned with loose half-shed older yellow skin still hanging about its neck and lower half, a bright crest of red arching over its head, clapped and held up its hands in a stance. A challenge.

Kahili frowned. Continuing with Hawlucha would be ideal here: her partner was not yet close to defeat and its typing held great advantage still. But something in the calm of Grimsley and the energy of Scrafty concerned her. Was this a trick to cause Kahili to call her partner back and suffer another Pursuit? If Scrafty could even use that specific technique – an aspect she wasn’t sure of. Or was it a trick on the other hand to pull back Hawlucha who was so reliably facing down Grimsley’s team?
Not knowing irked Kahili, the constant calm smile of Grimsley needling at her focus. His bringing up what Alexa had said before had thrown her off too. She’d expected a degree of decency from a former Elite Four member.

Those thoughts lurking in her head and splitting her focus meant that, in the exchange of Hawlucha’s rapid attacks and Scrafty’s fearsome kicks in response, moves that seemed as much part of manoeuvring around its opponent as it was attacking directly, Kahili was a pace too slow to catch Scrafty wheeling around after one wide kick as its head glowed with Rock-type energy and smashing its skull down upon its Wrestling Pokemon foe.

The Fighting-type did not yield to Rock, but Flying easily did, and so while the attack upon Hawlucha was not decisive, it was still effective. Scrafty stumbled back from it, shaking its head to lose the rattling after-effects, but Hawlucha was significantly slowed. Kahili could see it in the slight bend of her partner’s legs as it kept its feet as clearly as she could feel it in their Bond. She should have countered that. She should have seen it coming and moved against it. Too caught up in thoughts that didn’t belong in this fight, something she should know better than after coming this far.

...that Grimsley, that had been his full intent, hadn’t it?

Kahili’s decision to return Hawlucha was made immediately and without a second guess, Scrafty moving in no way to stop it, Grimsley making note of the Dark and Flying-type Pokemon chosen to face him next. Mandibuzz, the Bone Vulture Pokemon, was one the former Elite Four member had more than enough experience with himself, even if it didn’t number amongst his team. Yeah that’d be a tricky one for Scrafty to deal with. In the time before Grimsley could change it for another... well, let’s just see.

Kahili’s command over Mandibuzz was exemplary, as clear a demonstration of her talent and skill as a Pokemon Trainer as Grimsley’s commands of Scrafty in turn were for him. It was as obvious as could be that Grimsley would move to change Pokemon to meet this switch, and so that he was commanding solely defensive, keeping Scrafty avoiding the many Flying-type techniques Mandibuzz released from range, was no surprise. For the time until the switch came, Scrafty avoided each of the attacks Mandibuzz unleashed.

Yet the amount of effort exerted to do that, multiplied by the sharp metallic feathers of Skarmory still strewn about, meant Scrafty would still find difficulty in fights going forward. Hawlucha had successfully landed a good few blows before after all.

Another of Grimsley’s Pokemon weakened but not yet beat.

In answer to Mandibuzz was a Dark and Flying-type Pokemon of Grimsley’s own, Honchkrow, the Big Boss Pokemon. Though a full foot shorter than the Bone Vulture it opposed, its dark feathers highlighted by red overlaying wings and tail, and white crest upon its chest, commanded all the more presence. Giving an ominous crow that brought to attention the few Murkrow with their partners in the League crowd, the Pokemon of Grimsley took off into the air. Time for things to get interesting.

“With these two Pokemon sharing not only the same Typing, but each of their Types being one that each of the competitors is an expert in, this match-up specifically will be a hugely technical sight!”

True enough it was, Kahili immediately engaging with techniques of Flying followed by Dark, Grimsley doing the opposite with Honchkrow seeking to close the distance between it and Mandibuzz, the Big Boss Pokemon radiating Dark-type energy in each of its attacks.

But a secondary goal, as Mandibuzz’s wingbeats sent out arcs of Flying-type power and Honchkrow wheeled around them, was for the Big Boss Pokemon to amplify those missed attacks with its own
wingbeats, causing a cascade of Flying-type energy to strike and wash out across the field, loosing all the scattered feathers of Skarmory and blowing them away. There, that was that nuisance taken care of at least.

In the moments Grimsley and Honchkrow gave that motion focus, Kahili seeing it coming countered with full force and Mandibuzz slammed wreathed in Flying-type power into the Big Boss Pokemon’s side. Thrown back by the attack Honchkrow suffered another immediately after, a pulse of Dark-type energy from Mandibuzz hitting it before it could recover and causing it to drop further in the air. Falling further still, this time under command, the partner of Grimsley opened its wings to curve out of the dive over the ground, pulling away from the aggressive assault of the Mandibuzz, more unleashed arcs of Flying-type energy scything through where it had just been.

“As a Flying-type expert, Kahili’s partners are all extremely trained in maintaining the power of that Type. Battles in the air are firmly her territory, her Pokemon able to attack while in flight with speed and power way beyond the norm!”

“Despite the match-up of these two appearing equal, the basic fact that this battle is being fought in the air actually strongly favours Kahili. Honchkrow may have been necessary to clear away the feathers left by Skarmory before, but for the length of this battle, it’s proving ineffective against this foe.”

Honchkrow, a Pokemon that excelled in close-range attacks, had been pushed far back. It had some techniques it could use from this far away, but none with the strength to stop Mandibuzz from glowing bright. Again and again the partner Pokemon of Kahili had displayed extremely strong attacks, a collection honed and delivered with long practised skill. Beating its wings to rise up higher and higher overhead, the Mandibuzz continued to glow with a harsh light. A big technique was coming.

From that height, with the ability Kahili’s Pokemon had shown so far, Grimsley doubted evasion. No doubt once that move, charging overhead, was unleashed it would fly at intense speed. But an obvious attack was one begging for counter. So when Mandibuzz surged down in a diving attack from the sky, Honchkrow moved quicker to strike it first. An attack to weaken the power falling upon his own.

Without question it struck and struck hard.

But it didn’t stop Mandibuzz’s most powerful attack from hitting with all the strength the Bone Vulture could muster.

Honchkrow hit the ground first, pinned to it by Mandibuzz atop it, the partner of Kahili beating its wings and pecking furiously, the advantage thoroughly its own. Aggressive, furious, relentless, those were the key tenets of that Pokemon’s power that Kahili had honed, and Mandibuzz expressed them without pause in the battles it fought. It was such a barrage as to be exhausting, the style of battling that would leave a Pokemon ill-suited to a drawn-out fight, but in this immediate match-up proved exceedingly able. When Mandibuzz pulled back, the Pokemon clearly breathing heavy after the amount of strength it had spent in this fight, the Honchkrow of Grimsley was pronounced unable to continue. The former member of Unova’s Elite Four required to call it back for another.

Stretching upon manifestation, its black-skinned body highlighted by silver ribs along it and twisting horns emerging from its head, as well as an orange coloured snout and underside, the Dark and Fire-type Pokemon Houndoom was well ready for this fight, even without Mega Evolution lending it further strength.

Two of Grimsley’s Pokemon had been pronounced defeated so far, with two more – Sharpedo and
Scrafty – having engaged in intense battle. By contrast only the Skarmory of Kahili was eliminated from her team, Hawlucha and Mandibuzz each having tired themselves as well, but three more of the Flying-type expert’s Pokemon ready to go.

That was impressive. Grimsley would freely admit it. As a League Trainer Kahili was absolutely a standard for what they should be: strong, unrelenting, and incredibly able. It wasn’t like he was going easy either, though admittedly his focus on relaxing and Pokemon Surfing had kept him from keeping himself and his team as honed as perhaps they should be. But absolutely Grimsley was determined now to retake the pace in his favour.

Marshal wouldn’t shut up about what a poor showing Grimsley had made for a member of Unova’s Elite Four if he didn’t.

Once again free to respond to Grimsley’s substitution with one of her own, Kahili again called her partner back, again daring from Grimsley reprisal. Though a fairly iconic technique of the Dark-type, Pursuit didn’t number actively amongst Grimsley’s team. Liepard had it, Honchkrow too, and good old number six as well, but that was it. Two of the users already out. Made it a little difficult to punish actively. That Kahili, despite clearly getting riled up before, she’d really smothered any annoyance at Grimsley, or at least turned it all into determination instead.

Sometimes poking the Beedrill’s nest didn’t work out and all you got was stung.

The red and black Baile Style Oricorio, Fire and Flying-type Dancing Pokemon, meant immediately that the Fire-type techniques of Houndoom would prove less than effective, Kahili narrowing off another of Grimsley’s team. She really wouldn’t let go of that advantage of getting to respond to his choices, would she? The kind of Trainer who once her fangs were sunk into a target she wouldn’t let go. Given the usual flighty stereotypes of Flying-type Trainers, Kahili was of another breed entirely.

... how long had it been since Grimsley last went all out one-hundred percent against a fellow member of an Elite Four?

Flames spread across the League battlefield in moments, the dancing steps of Oricorio weaving amongst the bites and swipes of Houndoom as the Dark Pokemon released its own fire, breathing out equal flame and noxious smog, the two mixing together into a potent reaction that once burned would never heal without care. But such didn’t quite stick with another Fire-type, and Oricorio’s dancing seemed to easily weave the fire about, never settling upon the Dancing Pokemon’s shoulders. The combatants remained close to one another, each attacking at close range, but neither proved effective against the other. The fires of both couldn’t settle on the other, and their other attacks besides couldn’t quite catch either quick moving foe.

Having hoped that the ineffectiveness of each would allow his Pokemon to pull ahead, Grimsley sighed as he gave his next command and sparks of electricity danced around his Houndoom’s jaws. He’d been wanting to surprise this on Kahili at the last minute, but now had to be the time, just as that Oricorio was leaping in mid-air slightly too far back for any regular physical strike.

But the way lightning arced from the fangs of Houndoom was enough to reach out and snare it so the Dark Pokemon could pin its opponent to the ground.

“Ooooh, and with that Grimsley has evened the number of defeats of each combatant’s Pokemon to two! Thunder Fang is a technique not a lot of Houndoom show, but it sure proved effective here! Now it’s up to Kahili to choose a Pokemon and Grimsley to respond to it! Is this the start of a turn in the tide?”

Hawlucha returned to the field. Of Kahili’s remaining team, she wished to use her other Oricorio, the
Electric-type Pom-Pom Style variant, to deal with that Mega Sharpedo when it appeared again, and her signature partner Toucannon to handle whatever Grimsley’s sixth would be. To that end she needed this Houndoom out immediately, and the best answer to that was Hawlucha without fail.

In the time until Grimsley could call Houndoom back for a switch of his own, the Dark Pokemon breathed out an intense warding wave of flames and Kahili’s Hawlucha, using a powerful leap, sailed over them to land with a ferocious downwards smash upon its opponent’s head. Biting and snapping with its electrically-charged fangs, each attack avoided by Hawlucha pulled quickly back, Houndoom warded off the Wrestling Pokemon until the last seconds before a switch could be made had passed.

Once again the Hoodlum Pokemon Scrafty returned to the field to continue this match.

Again. Again Grimsley chose Scrafty to match Hawlucha. And again Kahili experienced a moment’s doubt. Was there some serious strategy here? Something that Pokemon could do that would bring her own down? It hadn’t before though. The two had fought it out pretty equally – which was a testament to the strength of both and the Trainers behind them – but that Scrafty hadn’t shown anything special then. Would it this time though? Try to have Kahili lower her guard with confidence? She wouldn’t.

She wouldn’t slip for a moment more.

It took some outside effort to do so, but Scrafty was a Pokemon with a nice collection of techniques it could be taught. Pokemon held difficulty keeping hold of many techniques beyond their own natural style, which meant they could usually only learn a handful to use with regularity, but those techniques could often be counted on to be a good surprise.

After getting involved with a bunch of other Pokemon Surfers and winning a little competition they’d set up, Grimsley had gone on to enjoy the prize offered: introduction to a web of tutors across Alola who specialised in all manner of Pokemon techniques. Sure he might not be as honed as during his Elite Four days, but having a surprising arsenal still added a lot.

Giving Kahili the full show of Scrafty before in its fight with Hawlucha, or at least what he wanted her to think, let Grimsley confidently give his next direction and for Scrafty’s arm to crackle with electricity too.

She shouldn’t have expected Houndoom to be the only threat, after all.

She hadn’t.

In analysis of this battle after the fact, the match between these two expert Trainers considered a fine lesson in Pokemon battling at the highest of levels, this was concluded as the most standout turning point. The definition of when the result of this battle became apparent. A lesson in never lowering one’s guard, and always being ready for an opponent to go beyond what they had already shown.

A lesson Kahili demonstrated with perfect response.

She’d chosen to believe Scrafty had something more. And that Hawlucha would respond to it when it appeared. When the Hoodlum Pokemon shot out a fist, wreathed in electrical force, Kahili had not been surprised. Hawlucha had not been shocked, in any sense, as it ducked under the punch and shot its own fist up into the point just below its opponent’s arm. An immediate, precise, and decisive blow.

Its arm dropping from the force of the attack hitting its side, Scrafty stumbled back and Hawlucha did
not allow that. Pushed forward, striking relentlessly, and beat the Hoodlum Pokemon down. That one moment, that one perfect reaction of Kahili and Hawlucha avoiding and countering the Thunder Punch Scrafty threw, meant everything. Somewhere behind his surprise at how cleanly his opponent had just bested him, Grimsley couldn’t even be mad at how impressive that was.

Houndoom came back and Hawlucha fought it down too. By the time the Dark Pokemon hit the ground though, the Wrestling Pokemon was barely standing too, the flames of Houndoom having touched heavy upon it. Kahili sent her partner all the love she held for it as she called it back as well, knowing its Pokeball would keep it pain-free until she could take her partner to a Pokemon Center for care.

Then prepared and unleashed Toucannon, signature partner of her team, in response to the sixth of Grimsley’s own.

The Pokemon Grimsley chose drew immediate note for a different reason than any other in the League possibly could. Standing just under four feet from its four feet to its head, a Pokemon of white fur and blue skin, an arcing blue horn curving out from the side of its head, similarly sharp-looking blue tail, blue oval emerging from the white fur of its forehead, and menacing red eyes, the Disaster Pokemon Absol drew attention when and wherever it appeared.

“Now as a reminder folks,” Kukui’s voice rose over the crowd’s own, “it’s already well understood that an Absol doesn’t cause disasters, they appear to warn of them. And that doesn’t really count when it’s a Trainer’s. Seeing one here’s no ill omen at all, alright?”

Sometimes it took being reminded that to break people’s natural suspicions.

Though the clear growl and aggressive stance of the Absol still left some with worries.

As if enjoying the spike of concern he’d thrown into the watching audience, Grimsley gave a smile as he commanded his partner forward. Absol wasn’t the strongest of his team by any measure, but it was still a pretty darn good Pokemon if he said so himself, and he did, so he didn’t have any concerns of his own in matching against Kahili’s own.

But though holding confidence and focus were signs of expert Trainers, though letting himself doubt or worry or do any less than his best would be completely anathema to Grimsley’s style, for all of his ability and belief in his partner, still the result of this match was immutable too.

Absol was plenty strong, fast, and impressed many by quickly dodging around attacks to land its own.

But Kahili’s partner Toucannon, her oldest and strongest, who during her time in Kanto had battled often against her Mega Evolved Pidgeot and learned to push back against that Pokemon’s own incredible strength, was simply not a Pokemon that Absol could beat.

For as impressive a Pokemon it clearly was, this match ended decisively in one direction. With only Mega Sharpedo left, uncaring of the odds against him or the likelihood of his defeat, Grimsley still sent his partner out again with full focus upon the fight.

Because that was what a good battling Trainer did.

In a break between clashes Kahili called Toucannon back. Her sixth, the Electric and Flying-type Pom-Pom Style Oricorio, immediately broke into dance, electricity crackling around it.

The difference between Mega Sharpedo before and after taking the Z-Move of Skarmory was that before this Kahili’s Oricorio would not have achieved a thing. Would have been blasted off of its feet
by a burst of water before Ice-empowered fangs sunk heavy into its form.

But taking a Z-Move still mattered so much, and though the Mega Evolved Sharpedo was still stronger, it was not able to defeat Oricorio without suffering a barrage of electricity itself. When Kahili called Oricorio back and sent out Toucannon again, the commentators agreed this battle was now down to its final moments.

Bursting high into the air with water propelling it, Sharpedo opened wide its jaws lined with frost-laden teeth to clamp down upon its foe.

Into that open maw without a missed beat Toucannon blasted a relentless surge of Grass-infused seeds.

Thus was concluded the battle of Kahili and Grimsley, the first Trainer of the Alolan Elite Four and the second formerly of Unova’s own. At the shake of their hands Grimsley smiled at Kahili, who for the first time held a properly relaxed expression of her own.

“Not to be rude to the one who just showed me who’s boss, but speaking as an old Elite Four Trainer to a current great one, watch that you’re calm when you’re focused in a fight. That Tapu’ll give you a real rough time if you let yourself stress.”

“...appreciated. Thank you for the battle, Grimsley.”

“Thanks for showing me one of the best Alolan Trainers at the peak.”

When two Trainers meet, one will win and the other will lose. The winner goes on, the loser is left behind. Such is the truth of any battle.

But the best Pokemon Trainers could still leave their mark on the ones to go on.

“And that is that! With sixteen incredible battles behind us, the first round of the first Alolan Pokemon League is complete! Wasn’t it amazing, Alexa?”

“It absolutely was, Anna! From Ultra Evolution to battles against the Tapu, from an ancient dragon to one of Alola’s very own Totems, Mega Evolution, Z-Moves, master Trainers young and old, we saw it all here! And moving on, the next eight battles of the second round promise to be even greater still!”

“That’s right folks, just around the corner is the second round of Alola’s first Pokemon League! Over the next three days all competing Trainers will rest and recover alongside their Pokemon, and then on the sixth day of the League the winners of the first round of Blue and Green Block will do battle!”

“On the seventh day the winners of Red and Yellow Block’s first rounds will do the same!”

“Eight more amazing battles await ahead, so prepare yourselves just as our competing Trainers will be! We’ll be back then to witness the second round of the first Alolan Pokemon League, and without question it’ll be amazing!”

“We’ll see you then!”

**The First Alolan Pokemon League - Second Round**
And so the first round of the Alolan Pokemon League comes to a close. It's been a long road already, each chapter taking roughly twice as long for me to make as usual due to being roughly twice as long themselves - not to mention combat is a tricky thing to write
well and so I'm tested pretty hard by this to make it as good as I can - but I'm still happy with how it's going. We've now seen each character present fight, and as with each round to follow, halved the number of battles and trainers remaining.

What will come in round two? What will I do different with the basic context of how each Trainer fights already established? Good question. I don't know either. We'll find out.

To my wonderful readers, thank you so much for continuing on with Eldritch. The League arc is much more about character introspection and fic endstates than progress through a world, we've now been in the single same location for the longest time in the story after all. But it is important and there is much important still ahead, as I'm sure you can plainly see. So please stick with me as we continue on the road to the grand finale. I know what's ahead and believe me, it's not to be missed.

I'm really truly excited to show you what I've still got to show.

As always, for those able to share Eldritch's two advertising posts, if you can it would be greatly appreciated, as it definitely helps bring Eldritch to more readers. If you have any way beyond that of recommending this story to others, I'd deeply appreciate that too. My dearest wish, after all, is to be able to bring this story to all who'd enjoy it. So please, if you can, share either of the following links:

twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
Tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

Thus concludes another chapter, and I return to the writing of the next. Understandably it's gonna be a big one. Hold on, folks.

Things will get wilder and wilder still before the end.
On the second of the three days between the first and second rounds of the first Alolan Pokemon League, there was a knock at Moon’s door.

Not the first nor last to take place in that time, even despite the sign Jewellery had placed in front of their house, cosigned by Kahuna Hala, instructing all curious that Moon would not be conducting impromptu interviews of any sort. She was twelve years old, and though an amazing Pokemon Trainer, she was still to be respected as such. It worked a little. Not enough unfortunately.

But this time the one to earn Jewellery’s ire as she opened the door did nothing more than smile widely, the strangeness to his appearance momentarily distracting the brown-haired woman. The man at her door was tall, almost obscenely so, clothed in a long dark grey coat that hummed with electronics built across it, his perfectly coiffed blonde hair accented by a strange arcing blue coil extending out and around it. Some sort of clip-on? Jewellery couldn’t quite tell.

“Greetings to you, dear madam,” with a sweeping gesture the man took a bow, “my name is Colress, a scientist and researcher of Pokemon strength. Your daughter Moon will vouch for me that we have met before, and I have lent her my aid in understanding some of the unique phenomena taking place around her. I would very much like to discuss something with her prior to her next League Battle – with you present of course, as her parent and guardian.”

Colress’s voice, projecting well enough, had already caught Moon’s attention and lured her out from within the house, the girl approaching in time for Jewellery to turn and secure Moon’s acknowledgement that Colress wasn’t just someone approaching them for nothing. Shortly thereafter the scientist found himself sitting happily at a dining table while Jewellery prepared a coffee within the kitchen.

Setting a large booklet he had carried here along with a box of some sort on the table, Colress began to speak as Moon kept watch and Jewellery kept listen.

“Now then,” nodding to himself, the man explained his purpose, “what I have here is official writ from the Alolan Pokemon League declaring the contents of that box there as both legal to place on a competing Pokemon, and determined to in no adverse way affect that Pokemon in battle. It is a modification of a device meant to study Mega Evolved Pokemon, which disappears into their transfigured form the same way a Mega Stone does. Specifically the modification is to withstand a far more intense volume of power. I believe you can understand my intent?”

Moon nodded. Salamence... Ultra Salamence. Colress wanted to study it?

“Absolutely!” Pleased, the man nodded, happily accepting the cup Jewellery offered him before she took the booklet to leaf through. “Of course I would never dare suggest you not make full use of this incredible thing you and your Pokemon have created, that you not unleash the power of Ultra
Evolution in your next match: especially given the opponent you face. If you are to defeat the Island Deity Tapu Koko, it will no doubt require the full power of not only Ultra Salamence but all of your Pokemon as well, yes?"

Moon nodded again. She’d been thinking about it from the moment Tapu Koko started fighting against Sabrina. She’d understood which of those two she’d be up against next. She was... nervous.

“Perfectly understandable, and a completely respectable reaction!” Colress smiled gently as he kept his eyes locked on the girl before him. “Nonetheless I have confidence you will give this battle everything you have. And that is why it is so important that I gain as much information about Ultra Evolution in this fight as I can! For you see, though your Salamence has shown no adverse effects from Ultra Evolution – I can tell that clearly by your confidence in doing so again – there is no guarantee yet that the process and power that Pokemon will experience are completely safe things. Certainly do not hold back at all in the fight to come, no no no, simply rest assured that, after that fight, I will be able to without question conclude whether or not Ultra Evolution will be safe to use going forward. As Salamence’s partner, that is information very important to you, yes?”

It... was. The first time Salamence had combined Mega Evolution and a Z-Move as an attack, it had been left deeply physically strained and exhausted. Had taken quite some time to recover in full. Practising both powers separately had helped combine the two again with less effect, but expressing all that power in one moment still left a lingering touch upon her partner. Moon had worried, after the fact, that Ultra Evolution may have strained Salamence just as much, but besides being tired the Pokemon seemed perfectly content after the fight. So maybe Ultra Evolution was safer.

But it would still be better to know for sure.

“Madam Jewellery,” Colress’s attention flicked to the older woman keeping watch, even as she checked over the notes he had delivered, “your daughter is without question exceptional: not only for her uniqueness, but for her wisdom, love, and skill as a Pokemon Trainer. You should be deeply proud.”

Jewellery did not blink as she maintained eye contact with the scientist before her.

“I am.”

“And welcome back one and all to the second round of the first Alolan Pokemon League! Once again I am Anna of Alola, primary announcer for this League, with my co-host Alexa from the Kalos Region joining us again! How are you, Alexa?”

“Excited beyond reason, Anna! The first round of this Pokemon League has been surprise after surprise, incredible battle after incredible battle, and indeed it’s set the entire world aflame with excitement! Having seen each of the Trainers to compete today battle once already, I know for sure what we’re going to see will be even more amazing than before! And that’s saying something!”

“That it certainly is, Alexa. To begin with, the first of today’s four matches, the winners of the first round of Blue and Green Blocks doing battle: we have the Trainer Moon facing the Island Deity Tapu Koko! In the first round Moon exhibited amazing talent as a Trainer even at the tender age of twelve, and defeated Captain Ilima of Alola by revealing a previously never before seen power: the combination of Mega Evolution and Z-Move transforming her partner Salamence into something even more than either!”
“Professor Samuel Oak, who so graciously joined us to host that first match, has named the phenomenon as ‘Ultra Evolution’, and the Pokemon we saw ‘Ultra Salamence’! It’s doubtless that we’ll be seeing that Pokemon again today, and I for one could not be more excited to do so!”

“Tapu Koko, Island Deity of Melemele Island,” Anna continued on, “defeated the legendary Psychic-type Trainer Sabrina after an intense battle! With that accomplishment already, it’s clear Moon is facing an incredible opponent, but this young Alolan’s talent for surprising everyone again and again may not be tapped yet! We do not know what the result of this battle will be and that already has my heart pounding! The first match of the second round will be beginning shortly, with Moon and Tapu Koko both on standby to approach the field. We’ll soon be joined by our first guest commentator of the day, Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island, to oversee this match, so don’t go anywhere! This promises to be as intense an opening to the second round as we had for the first! Maybe even more!”

This time Moon stood on the eastern side of the League battlefield, the pillars to her north and south at the corners of the League stadium hosting Tapu Lele and Tapu Bulu each. The former of those two deities was still sullen, observing the League battles the same as the other three but sulking all the same at having been defeated so absolutely. Of the other two pillars, to the north and south-west, only the south-west was occupied, Tapu Fini watching the battlefield the same as the others.

Having left its perch in the north-west, Tapu Koko, black, yellow, and orange-coloured Guardian Deity of Melemele Island, was descending wreathed in crackling electricity. Its eyes locked squarely on Moon alone.

Not looking away for a moment.

“Competitors at the ready!”

Another of the judges that rotated through overseeing these matches raised their arms, instructing Moon and Tapu Koko to prepare. Moon held the Pokeball containing Salamence, Normalium-Z set into her Z-Power Ring. The device Colress had strapped to her Pokemon, a ring that went around its tail right next to the band holding the Salamencite, was in place, the scientist in the crowd observing this battle with absolute focus. Others in the crowd watched with similar, from Jewellery in the stands for families, to the other competitors – all still attending to watch over these matches, even those eliminated so far. Sabrina watched closely too. Hoped with all her heart that what she’d been able to reveal before would help.

The voice of the crowd carried cheers for Moon, a daughter of Alola, made so through the Island Challenge, and hope that she would do well. The Tapu had fought so crushingly, and only Tapu Lele’s very own Kahuna had risen above so far. But Moon, who’d shown such incredible skill, Moon who’d excited so many hearts, Moon who Alola loved and was proud of, Moon all wanted to do well.

Moon so many wanted to win.

“Begin!”
Louder again was the roar of the crowd at the sight of Salamence’s manifestation, Moon’s first choice exactly what all those gathered had wished to see. It had to start this way, the same as Sabrina and Dexio both had: leading with their strongest possible. The only chance for victory being draining their opponent with their strongest enough for the remainder of their teams to finish things off. Neither Sabrina or Dexio had achieved that though.

But neither could do what Moon now did.

Immediately placing her hand over the Key Stone hung from her neck, Moon willed and Salamence reacted, the Dragon Pokemon’s body pulsing with a bright red glow. Before Tapu Koko, the deity crackling with electricity washing out from its body across the field, the form of Mega Salamence arose, crescent-winged dragon built for battle in the air. But of course that was not where this would stop.

Moon’s arms rose as Z-Aura built around her.

“Tapu Koko is reacting in no way to prevent the use of Ultra Evolution!” Anna said what all were observing, of how the Island Deity was not moving in the least as Moon prepared all of the power she could throw against it. “Kahuna Hala, does Tapu Koko wish to battle Ultra Salamence?”

“It does,” Hala’s heavy nod came with his clear understanding of the Pokemon with which he was bound. “Tapu Koko loves nothing more than to battle strong opponents, and will ensure those who face it are able to give everything they have. But that means it will intend to use its full power without holding back. This will not be an easy battle.”

Once, so many months ago now, Tapu Koko had approached Moon and challenged her to fight it with all the power she could muster. A tiny amount the deity brushed aside with ease. Had it been worth it then, challenging her like that? She’d wondered about it so often since, but never found an answer.

As the light of Z-Aura built around her, Moon wondered whether this was what Tapu Koko had always wanted.

In the days following Moon’s last battle and now, she and her partners had only rested, done nothing more. Pitaya had approached Moon soon after that fight, first with praise for her student’s discovery, and second to tell Moon that the Guildmaster could not help her refine it. Not while they were still both competitors and thus opponents in this League. When this was done, then Pitaya would devote her all to helping Moon master the power Ultra Salamence held. She must find her own way until
then.

For the second time grasping hold of the twin powers she had passed to her partner, holding each so Salamence might be transformed by both, Moon nodded, heart pounding. She intended to.

Again Salamence roared, again the air itself shook. The twin powers within it, Mega Evolution and Z-Power, reacting with one another, transfiguring the Pokemon into something more. Changing the dragon’s form again, first blue then brilliant gold. A giant creature that dwarfed the Tapu, body shimmering and outline faintly distorting, traits of Salamence expressed in its shape but the lengthy serpentine creature, huge beating wings, coiling tail and jagged scales, it still resembled more the power released by the Dragonium-Z than Salamence itself.

Colress, who’d already spent so long considering this, fully believed Moon had stumbled a step further than any other on the path to the ideal form of a Pokemon’s strength.

Settling upon the stadium field, each of the four legs stretching out from its body holding the dragon up, its tail trailing against the barrier wall before Moon, Ultra Salamence stared Tapu Koko across from it down, the deity staring back, its electricity arcing to cross the distance between them. In silence these two great powers at rest. With excitement Anna’s voice rose over the crowd’s.

“And there it is! Once again Ultra Salamence has appeared, the unique transformation of Salamence by combining Mega Evolution and Z-Move! In the battle against Captain Ilima, Ultra Salamence brought the battle to a crushing close in a single move. This time... let’s~”

The burst of movement and crack of wind roared louder still, cutting off the announcer’s speech. In an instant Salamence launched forward, lengthy body stretching out, jaws open wide towards its Tapu foe. Tapu Koko evaded in a blitz of lightning, racing around the coiling body of its opponent, Salamence pulling up to slam against the barrier wall opposite with all four legs against it, rapidly clawing across it to climb higher while whipping its head around, mouth unleashing a stream of red flames to wash across the field.

Racing back across the field, dashing around the column of fire to the western wall Ultra Salamence clung to, Tapu Koko surged upwards at thunderbolt speed. The crack of the deity’s clawed arm striking underneath the jaw of Ultra Salamence was loud, the dragon’s head slammed upwards.

A moment later Ultra Salamence slammed its head back down with all the force it could muster and sent its deity opponent crashing into the ground so fast the earth shattered as the Land Spirit Pokemon was imprinted into it.

“Strong.” That single word of Hala was all any had time for as the earth around Tapu Koko exploded, electricity bursting from the deity as it glowed brighter and brighter still, manifesting even more of its strength. Moon’s eyes whipped from side to side, tracking Tapu Koko as it zig-zagged through the air, the immense power it was releasing making its presence obvious not to her eyes but to the sense deeper within. Sabrina and Dexio had both struggled under this, the full power of a Tapu bearing down upon them, but Moon did not feel it, just as she felt no drain in bearing her partner’s weight. The moment of unleashing Ultra Evolution, holding the power of Mega Evolution and Z-Power both, had taken only that. A moment. Now Moon’s will alone was all that she needed.

And her will was to win.

Whipping its tail around, Salamence cracked the pointed end of it against Tapu Koko’s face as the deity surged through the air, stunning the lightning-clad being a moment long enough for Ultra Salamence to burst forward through the air, head ramming into Tapu Koko and then slamming it against the eastern barrier wall, high above where Moon was standing. With its two claws pushing
back against the dragon’s head, Tapu Koko forced Salamence’s jaws closed, the sparks of red flame within not given freedom to release.

Twisting its body around, its head still keeping Tapu Koko pinned against the wall, Salamence repositioned itself to have its feet pressed against the barrier roof, then used that leverage to exert even more force and push its head down, dragging Tapu Koko against the wall with it. Its arms surging with electrical force, the deity lifted both and slammed them down together against Ultra Salamence’s head, pushing the dragon away from the wall and allowing Tapu Koko to dash free, more bolts bursting from its body to impact along Salamence’s side, the dragon hissing and following the deity with snapping jaws once more aflame.

The crowd struggled between cheering and silence at this battle that went beyond the power most any had seen to date.

It was like witnessing two Legendary Pokemon fight – and the thought of that alone was sobering. Was that what Ultra Evolution really was? The means for a Pokemon to cross the distance between the masses and legends? Every attack of Tapu Koko was met and returned, the two Pokemon fighting without relent, slamming their full force into the other and receiving equal retribution. Already the battlefield below was ruined, scorched by the deep flames of Salamence, shattered by electrical blasts from ‘Tapu Koko, and simply torn apart by the immense physical force these competitors unleashed. Moon did not budge from her position, nor let her focus on her partner falter. She knew that this battle was still against her, and that she and her partners had to continue to give everything they had. Any less would be defeat.

She would not be defeated here.

Somewhere in watching this battle, it occurred to Ilima that Moon and Ultra Salamence could likely do the same as the Tapu itself had to others. That form and that power, it really was like a separate thing from any Pokemon Battle he’d ever known before. As long as Moon chose to use it, yes, the Captain was sure he would never defeat her again.

Somehow he found that he did not mind that thought at all.

Sabrina, watching Moon as much as the Pokemon Battle itself, sensed it. The resolution, and waverless determination. The way the force of Tapu Koko’s presence meant nothing to the girl. Yes, the Psychic-type expert let a smile cross her face, that was what she’d hoped to see.

One who could rise above.

Its tail coiled around Tapu Koko Ultra Salamence flew to the roof of the battlefield in a moment, arcing overhead and then down again, dragging the Tapu through the air before stopping in the same moment its tail released, the deity launched out of the Dragon Pokemon’s grip as Salamence’s mouth full of flame unleashed a firestorm of red, yellow and white. Stretching its own hand out towards the incoming flame, Tapu Koko formed and released in an instant a ball of electrical force, before pulling its arms closer together and circling one claw over the other, bright sparks bursting around the deity’s yellow-shelled body as a larger sphere took shape.

The first electric sphere thrown into the flames detonated and pushed them back a step, but a moment later the fire pushed on through. But that was more than enough of a moment to form the second.

Thrusting its arms forward, this time the Electro Ball Tapu Koko released was larger than its own body, the ominous orb of electricity slamming into the torrent of flames Ultra Salamence was releasing, splitting them to wash out in all directions around the ball travelling upwards without relent. The League technicians, who’d had the barrier system reinforced for this coming battle, were
still continuing to make concerned noises as the battle went on.

Breaking its stream of flames Salamence whipped around through the air, its speed greater than ever in this form and its now serpentine shape lending oddness to its movements, allowing it to dodge around attacks with far greater ease. But Tapu Koko wreathed in lightning was faster still, and continued to batter the Ultra Evolved Dragon Pokemon every time it moved. That Tapu Koko still had yet to use a Fairy-type move felt significant to Moon, who acknowledged that but did not let her worry overwhelm her. They were still strong.

Still holding on.

Hala knew otherwise. Each of the Tapu had a different moment at which they would use the power that they shared, rather than held unique. For Tapu Koko, it was when it wished a battle to end. Being forced to use that ability by Sabrina and her Pokemon, it was because they were overwhelming Tapu Koko and holding it down, preventing it from fighting as it wished. The one thing it desired most.

But Moon was not doing what Sabrina had done. Not what any of the others had done. Not holding the Tapu down. Not countering its every move. Not battling it in a way apart from strength. Not even a mixture of all those tactics to exhaust this foe. No, what Moon and Ultra Salamence were doing was perhaps what no other truly could, the pair meeting Tapu Koko head on in a contest of strength.

Hala could not help his smile imagining the absolute joy his partner in caring for Melemele and Alola must feel.

The battle did not end quickly. The power of Ultra Evolution, maintained by equal and unflinching will, held up by the sheer vastness of the one they opposed, did not fade. Perhaps against any other, without the pressure of this opponent against them, Moon and Salamence could not hold this power for nearly as long. But for now they could. For now they fought on.

Again and again Tapu Koko and Ultra Salamence clashed, fire and lightning spreading throughout the battlefield, the air quaking by the immense force each crashed against the other. With a relentless electrical charge, Tapu Koko crashed into the Dragon Pokemon as it crossed through the air, slamming its head against the barrier wall. Pushing back against it, trying to force Tapu Koko away, Salamence roared as the deity burst with even more electrical strength, pushing forward to hold the Dragon's head in place.

Opening wide its jaws, Salamence breathed out blue flame, draconic, a power to which Tapu Koko as part Fairy-type was immune, but which still carried far more force than any other the Dragon could muster. Those Dragon-type flames, pushing against the barrier wall, began to force the Ultra Evolved Pokemon’s head away, pushing Tapu Koko back. Almost... free...

In a boom of thunder and blinding light Tapu Koko applied every last bit of the force it could summon and slammed the head of its opponent back against the wall.

Moon knew. Before anyone else did, before the form of Ultra Salamence dispersed into scattering light, leaving only the regular form of the Dragon Pokemon behind, she knew. Felt that one strike end this first fight. Tapu Koko, pulling its hand free, watched as Salamence dropped down to the ground below, Moon holding up her partner’s Pokeball to call it back to her.

Scratched and scuffed, burned and torn, the Guardian Deity of Melemele Island still remained floating in the air, electricity crackling around its body, as Moon whispered thanks, praise, and love to the partner that had brought her this far. She would not let it down. Not for what came next.
Raising a second Pokeball, Moon chose Decidueye to continue the fight.

In an instant Tapu Koko slammed down upon the ground, claw digging in as electricity exploded the earth around it. Decidueye, agile as always, weaved between the bolts and flying shards of stone.

That was right, it had been Decidueye, once a Rowlet, to use the first ever of Moon’s Z-Moves against Tapu Koko back then. Decidueye, the only member of Moon’s team from that time still with her here. That time in Verdant Cavern, the Tapu seeking Moon out and insisting she perform her first Z-Move upon it, how deeply had that left Moon affected? The power of the Tapu then, it had been scary. She had been scared.

She wasn’t scared anymore.

In the moments Moon atop Nebby’s back had battled with Necrozma in the depths of Ultra Space, every perception she had of strength had changed. The Tapu were very strong. Ultra Salamence was very strong. But that battle back then, and the power Moon had felt from her partner and opponent, that had still been something of a different world entirely. She wouldn’t be held back by this fight here. Wouldn’t be frightened of this.

She and her partners wouldn’t bow to this.

Bursting with electricity constantly washing from its body, Tapu Koko lashed out again and again, Decidueye firing arrows caught and destroyed by each electrical bolt, but pulling those bolts away all the same. The Island Deity was now expressing more power than ever before, as if it could not stop the strength pouring out of its form. Hala said nothing of this, to not reveal the state of this battle but... Moon had already pushed the deity further than any other had with one Pokemon alone.

Truly, what would Ultra Evolution mean for the future of people, Pokemon, and the world?

The leaves released by Decidueye as it dodged electrified and burned away in the air as Tapu Koko lunged, swiping out with claws against the Arrow Quill Pokemon, the intense vision of Decidueye and focus of Moon allowing that Pokemon to continue to back up while evading, steps to either side quick enough to dodge the deity’s swipes. Arrows littered the battlefield already, fired by Decidueye in every moment it could, creating a web spread across the field behind Tapu Koko’s back. Each arrow was manifesting the ghostly chains, each reaching out to and wrapping around the other. Enough to make a single moment.

One moment was all they needed to act.

When Tapu Koko cornered Decidueye against a barrier wall and pulled back an electrically charged claw, the Arrow Quill Pokemon shot one final arrow into the ground beneath the deity’s form. Chains reached up to grasp Tapu Koko for a single moment. The deity ignored them and released its electricity to break through.

And from chain to chain, tied between the arrows rooted into the ground, a web built in tense moments across the League field, the electricity of Tapu Koko flowed and discharged.

The soft ‘unreal’ breathed by Hau watching from the stands went heard and agreed upon by all those around him.

In that instant of Tapu Koko, menacing over Decidueye, finding itself surprised by the lack of its own electric attack, drained away through the chains, the arrows shot into the ground all destroyed by that singular surge, Moon performed the pose for Ghost-type Z-Moves, and by the Decidium-Z set within her Z-Power Ring, Z-Power flowed around her once again.
Decidueye fired a single arrow into Tapu Koko’s chest that multiplied into twenty points stacked together and blew the Land Spirit Pokemon back.

Bisharp. Without a second more Moon called Decidueye back, choosing a third Pokemon, the Sword Blade Dark and Steel-type striding forward even as it manifested in a glow of red. Moon changed her current Z-Crystal for the Steelium-Z.

Tapu Koko, shaking its head as it recovered from the attack, looked up just in time to dodge the blade of Bisharp cutting through the air where it had just been, the deity raising both its hands high before thrusting them down, unleashing a devastating electrical bolt.

Standing within the blast as the electricity raced through its metallic form, the Sword Blade Pokemon did not flinch, simply tensed its legs and launched upwards as its deity opponent pulled back in surprise.

“It’s unsettled.” Hala did not give another word of context despite Alexa’s immediate request.

Bisharp was old and strong, and could weather much in battle, but more of those electric bolts would still be bad for it. But it had only taken one, one crackling through the Sword Blade Pokemon’s body without Bisharp flinching away, to strike an impression its opponent would find hard to shake.

Moon was beginning to push Tapu Koko down.

Floating higher and higher now, Tapu Koko formed and unleashed more electrical blasts, Bisharp bursting into movement to dodge from place to place, showing no concern in navigating the shattered battlefield of the conflict so far. It had lived in far more drastic environments than this, decades spent amongst the rocky mountains of Ula’ula. This much was nothing.

It wouldn’t stop here.

Finally it came, the disc of pink, Tapu Koko releasing a wave of power from its body that stretched out across the field. The sign that it wished for this battle to end. But Moon had known this would come, and had watched keenly as Dexio’s Pokemon facing Tapu Fini had avoided similar. At a distance that Fairy-type power that seemed to exhaust any it struck was too easy to dodge. Tapu Koko would need to get closer.

If it dared.

The wave of Bisharp’s bladed hand after evading another lightning bolt – although Moon knew full well her partner could not do such forever and Tapu Koko would defeat it if things continued this way – still reached its mark. To be taunted by another immediately incensed the Tapu, who raced in again with electricity crackling around it, intending to smash down its foe. Breaths were held across the stadium as the Land Spirit Pokemon closed in upon its Sword Blade opponent.

Moon and Bisharp both knew what needed be done.

Slamming a bladed hand against Tapu Koko’s claw Bisharp stopped the limb’s swing, even as electricity flowed across its body again. But not enough, not yet enough to stop it, as without pause the Sword Blade Pokemon smashed its own smoothed skull against Tapu Koko’s own. The sound the deity made was almost akin to a yelp at the direct attack, the Steel-type less effective against the Electric, but with the amount of Fairy-type energy Tapu Koko was now exuding, still enough to strike that Type’s weakness and hurt.

By the attacks it had taken from the deity expressing its immense power, Bisharp had only moments more. But Moon had learned well in her singular year so far, and though her abilities as a Trainer had
grown beyond the nature of relying on Z-Moves alone, she could still find her way back to that style in times of great need.

In the moment Tapu Koko recoiled from Bisharp’s heavy blow, Moon’s fists slammed together and the Z-Aura that would unleash the Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Crash arose.

Slamming its own hands together, Tapu Koko caught the spinning body of Bisharp, electricity pulsing from every part of the deity’s form as it stopped the Z-Move raised against it still. Then the electricity surged further, a great explosion of it within the field, and from the smoke of that blast Tapu Koko retreated, the power around it still there but... less. For a while before it had been almost difficult to see the deity’s outline but now... it was visible. Moon called Bisharp, lying within the newest crater of the battlefield, back to her. It had done everything she’d needed it to do. Thank you so much.

Next Sylveon.

“She’s more relentless than the Tapu itself.” Hala’s words put the acknowledgement of just what this battle was into everyone’s mind. “Moon, this is the path she’s chosen to fight Tapu Koko on, something that requires her and her partners to give everything they have without a missed step. One mistake, one slowed moment, and Tapu Koko might recover or break free from her pace. But she has yet to give it that chance. It is... astounding.”

Could Hala defeat Moon himself? Even if Salamence Mega Evolved, yes. Quite handily, he believed. Did Ultra Evolution make that difference however? He didn’t quite know. Tapu Koko’s situation was built by the deity allowing Moon the freedom to battle as she wished, and being dragged into her pace through that fight. With planning and strategy, there were ways to beat that child and the incredible power she commanded.

But were those ways a Tapu would take on? Hala had never seen one of them express that sort of thinking before.

If things continued as they were...

When Sylveon manifested the pink field around it, Fairy-type terrain spreading across the battlefield, Tapu Koko’s electricity did not push it back or override it. Almost cautiously the deity unleashed a wave of electricity with a swipe of its hand, a wave of Fairy-type energy with its other. Two discs, one after the other, the first broken against a raised barrier, the second ducked under by the Intertwining Pokemon pressing its body against the ground. That Fairy-type technique the Tapu used was scary for what it did, but difficult to apply without having an opponent held in place. Moon set the Fairium-Z into her Z-Power Ring and waited as a Moonblast surged out of the mists and broke against Tapu Koko’s shelled arm.

With the efforts of the battle so far, Tapu Koko did not have the same natural sense it did in its energised state, and could not pick Sylveon out of the field to strike. Moon had known nothing of those specifics, only assumed that any earlier in the fight and Sylveon would have found no success. Her confidence, focus, and plan, were all exceptional, forged of a young girl who had already been through so much. Standing against Lusamine, going into Ultra Space: the battles Moon had fought had given her a Trainer’s heart that many with decades of experience could not express.

The truth of this battle was an announcement to the world that the Trainer Moon would grow into one of its greatest without fail.

Tapu Koko’s electricity was still so strong, still so dangerous, but there was a difference. Compared to the overwhelming and unrelenting force of before, it was now more... normal. Still incredible, but
a regular sort of incredible. The battle against Ultra Salamence, the two Z-Moves suffered after, had pulled Tapu Koko across the threshold from immaculate Legendary being to a Pokemon in a hard fight.

Though it had yet to touch the ground, it was unquestionable that the deity had already been dragged down from heaven.

As if realising this Tapu Koko screamed, an echoing crowing sound, as it raised both arms then smashed them down upon the ground, releasing a wave of electricity that flowed in all directions out across the field. When pressured the Tapu knew no moderation, a truth revealed in the battle between Olivia and Tapu Lele. Even so worn down, the Land Spirit Pokemon still refused to use anything but its most powerful attacks. A flaw of the deities that Olivia had made full use of in her battle to ensure victory.

One Moon was seeking to use to her advantage as well.

The barriers Sylveon manifested within the mist cracked and shattered against the lightning, the Intertwining Pokemon affected by the remnants of the blast, but Moon’s focused intensity helping support the Pokemon through it. There was still so much further they had to go before this victory could be theirs. There were three more Z-Moves Moon could unleash, and she knew she would need all of them. She had to find each perfect moment, strike each Z-Move unerringly, and maintain the constant pressure all the while. It was exhausting, overwhelming, and she felt that if she were to slip for even a moment she would lose everything.

But she wouldn’t slip and wouldn’t back down because she’d promised so many to give her all upon this stage.

A promise she fully intended to keep.

Tapu Koko rose into the air again, searching for Sylveon amongst the mist. A Moonblast racing up towards the deity went avoided, before a thunderbolt lashed back down from its hand upon the opponent below. The impact of the attack blowing out the mist around Sylveon, the Intertwining Pokemon struck by the bolt, Tapu Koko raced down to strike with its claws and remove this opponent from the fight. The wild enjoyment the deity had begun this battle with was gone now. Clearly it wished only for this fight to end.

Hala considered that as Moon performed her next Z-Pose.

When at rest Tapu Koko would be too easily able to respond, but this charge could be countered. The Z-Move was a pace too slow, the Tapu impacting first, but the Z-Aura transferring into Sylveon’s body still gave it a moment to resist. A moment where, as Moon completed the Fairy-type Z-Pose, a gesture endearingly cutesy to those not aware of the power it could unleash, Sylveon was filled with all of the strength Moon could possibly give it.

Tapu Koko, landing the first hit, its electrically-charged claw slamming down upon the Intertwining Pokemon’s form, found itself surprised by its opponent holding strong against it.

Then Sylveon burst into movement, the pulse of Z-Aura around it pushing back Tapu Koko’s arm, and launched at full force into the gut of the opponent now right before it. The Fairy-type Z-Move Twinkle Tackle striking in full.

The force of the impact threw each combatant back, Tapu Koko bouncing before righting itself in the air, Sylveon unable to stand again with the power it had suffered and spent. But that was enough. Moon called her partner back and chose Volcarona next.
No holding back.

In the competitor’s stands Benga’s eyes widened to see the difference between Moon’s partner Volcarona from her first match to her second. The first time that Pokemon had been a classic freshly evolved, no real skills or anything, just a lot of its natural incredible fire power. This time, well, it wasn’t the most different, had just picked up one thing from watching his own fight, but that alone made a huge enough difference as it was.

A cluster of scales detonating with force above it, Volcarona went from softly flying in the air, scales scattered around it, to racing down in an arc of flames just over its Tapu opponent’s head. A dusting of scales released as it spun igniting into a swirl of fire following the Sun Pokemon’s path, Volcarona curving up along a barrier wall as Moon chose the Firium-Z for her Z-Power Ring. Tapu Koko, covered in flame as it recovered from the Z-Move it had just taken before, burst into movement of its own, electricity trailing behind it as it pursued its Bug and Fire-type foe.

It was pretty basic first-tier stuff, Benga noted as he watched. Moon’s partner was solely using the bursts of flame for speed. With practise it would be able to quickly jump from side to side as well, evading around opponents neatly in mid-air, and maintain an advantage of movement that made the Pokemon a terrifying foe indeed. But even still right now what she was showing was so clearly learned from him that, well, he was actually feeling pretty proud! Cheered loudly for her, Hau a few seats away turning to look in surprise before raising his voice louder as well. The whole crowd cheering for this sight.

For Moon’s battle against one of Alola’s deities to have gone this far without defeat.

Tapu Koko’s speed was still faster, but after this long only just enough that it could catch the Sun Pokemon by flying directly behind it, a difficult thing considering the trail of fire following Volcarona’s path. Moon’s plan for using the Z-Move Inferno Overdrive was to once again stun the Tapu, but each time that was such a challenge to do. And Tapu Koko was growing more insistent on bringing this battle to a close, the bolts of lightning it was launching towards the Pokemon it chased increasing in number moment by moment. Closer and closer the deity grew, each bolt that struck Volcarona slowing it down.

In a moment’s inspiration Moon called for an explosion of scales before Volcarona, not behind it, and by that force the Sun Pokemon flew suddenly in the opposite direction, Tapu Koko continuing past.

The deity pulled short its charge, turning upon the Pokemon that had passed it by.

Volcarona still facing forward.

And Moon performed her fifth Z-Pose.

Tapu Koko evaded.

As the explosion of fire rocketed across barrier wall and ceiling Tapu Koko slammed into the ground, the sudden shift into intense movement enabling it to dodge the Z-Move but too fast to pull out of. Moon stared, her heart beating so hard, but forced herself not to feel despair. Commanded Volcarona, still in the air above, to rain down more scales below. But group them together with wind as well. Don’t let it get out of hand. Spreading fire would just make things difficult for the sixth Pokemon Moon had yet to unleash. The Sun Pokemon responded as asked.

Hala knew. Knew that though taking that Z-Move would have been worse, Tapu Koko was still beginning to run dry. What Olivia had done to Tapu Lele the other day, it had been the first time she
had defeated her partner. Similarly Hala never truly had. He knew, he knew without question that should it be necessary he could stop Tapu Koko no matter what. But all the times the Tapu sought him out to fight, he indulged it but indulged only. There was no sense in pushing them that far.

But right now Tapu Koko was beginning to tap upon the last of the power it held. As a storm of fire wrapped around it, that Volcarona of Moon’s overhead unleashing the attack, Hala wondered. Moon’s last Pokemon would be Milotic, Water-type. Could she handle the disadvantage against Tapu Koko’s electricity, and take the win? She was... in the position to do so now. Perhaps not against any of the other Tapu, who were harder to lure into a passionate battle’s pace, but against Tapu Koko Moon had grasped and pulled upon the shimmering thread of victory.

If she could take the final steps...

Another column, this time electricity, raced up around Tapu Koko, catching Volcarona overhead. It wasn’t enough to stop the Sun Pokemon, who continued to fly and unleash its flame, controlled better by summoned winds than before – another thing Benga was proudly sure Moon had learned from watching him – but eventually the battle still ended the same. Tapu Koko grasping Volcarona tight and electricity flowing from it into its opponent.

Moon’s voice was caught by the equipment around the field, her order that Tapu Koko let her Pokemon go so she might call it back and send out her next.

All of Alola momentarily surprised to hear this young girl give a Tapu a command.

And then to see it followed, as Tapu Koko lowered back down to the earth, placed Volcarona before Moon so she could return it, and then pulled back as Moon chose the sixth of her partners in this fight.

Upon manifestation the Tender Pokemon Milotic gave an elegant call, water already pouring from its body to wrap around the cream-scaled serpent. Then a moment later it dove forward, between two cracked and jutting pieces of broken land, and wove around one, crushing the earth in its coiled grip. The dust and dirt caught by the water of Milotic’s body quickly painted across its form.

Again and again the Tender Pokemon did this, Tapu Koko watching in silence. That the Island Deity was so affected by its fight so far that it would not react until Moon moved against it spoke so clearly to Hala, and indeed all the Kahuna of Alola. This girl, it had taken her not even a whole year to become such with her partners.

How much further was she to go?

“Milotic is covering itself in mud right now,” Alexa, realising, spoke up, “which will negate a lot of Tapu Koko’s electrical power. But while it’s doing that, Tapu Koko does appear to be gaining a moment’s rest. Will it be worth it?”

It would, Moon knew, setting the Waterium-Z into her Z-Power Ring. The motion seemed to alert Tapu Koko, who quickly launched forward at Milotic, the Tender Pokemon coiling and surging with muddy water surrounding it to dive out of the deity’s charge, another bolt of electricity jumping from Tapu Koko to Milotic but caught and dispersed by the mud around it all the same. Seeing this, Tapu Koko released another Fairy-type technique, this time close enough that Milotic didn’t have the room to dodge.

But that was okay. Moon had seen it in the times that technique did hit: the disc passed through a target and weakened it greatly, but did not physically harm them. So even as that ability of the Tapu was passing through Milotic, in no way did it stop the Tender Pokemon’s own movement.
In no way did it stop Milotic from closing the distance on Tapu Koko, the deity surprised by the energy of its opponent empowered by the will of Moon, and wrapping tight around its foe, mud coating sticking to the Tapu as well.

Tapu Koko electrified, Milotic clenched tighter, and Moon completed the Z-Pose for the Waterium-Z.

The mud and water torrent racing around Tapu Koko held as long as Milotic did, until Tapu Koko successfully overwhelmed and pushed the Tender Pokemon down into the earth. Exhausted, mud-splattered, only the barest crackle of electricity arcing over its form, still Tapu Koko remained there as Moon called Milotic back.

Then sent out Decidueye again, the Arrow Quill Pokemon having been returned after its Z-Move while still ready to battle before.

“This is it: the final matchup.”

Loud were the crowd's cheers, all for Moon. People around the world seeing this young girl standing up to a Legendary Pokemon with power beyond belief. All brimming with pride at this Trainer who did not break. Without its name on anyone’s lips, Tapu Koko did not react to the voices around it. Simply raised a claw and moved ominously forward.

An arrow struck it, exploded into a mass of chains, and wrapped tight around that claw. Tapu Koko moved its arm and the chains stretched and began to snap.

Another arrow, striking its lower half. The chains unleashed hanging from it. Tapu Koko looked down at them before up again at Decidueye, and moved ever forward.

Another, chains now heavy around the deity’s neck. Another, more clamping down upon its one raised arm. Tapu Koko raised its other instead, a ball of electricity beginning to form. An arrow struck into it, exploding into more chains wrapping around that hand too. Tapu Koko dropped slightly closer to the ground.

An arrow in the ground and its chains caught on those hanging from Tapu Koko’s lower half and held it in the air. Tapu Koko turned at the tug on it and raised an arm to smash those holding on. Another arrow into its back. And another. Decidueye firing again and again, Moon behind it giving everything she could to her partner and her partner giving everything she could in turn.

Another arrow. More chains holding on. Tapu Koko dropped a little lower. Steadied itself by placing a claw upon the ground. An arrow hit by that claw and latched onto it too.

Turning back to Decidueye, Moon behind it, Tapu Koko tilted its head, the ghostly chains covering its body shifting with the movement. As if in a moment of confusion. Of not understanding.

An arrow exploded upon the hard skin of the deity, directly between its eyes.

Tapu Koko dropped.

Silence was the crowd’s, as the judge quickly moved into position to observe. The sight of movement from Tapu Koko drew a deep inhalation across the world, as the Island Deity pulled its arms towards it, and closed its heavy shell around its body. And did not move again.

The judge called out, asking if Tapu Koko was ceding the battle.

There was no response, the seconds passed by, and Hala gave his verdict.
“Tapu Koko has no more desire to fight.”

With great excitement Anna and Alexa both spoke up as the judge raised a hand.

“Then?”

“The winner... is Moon!”

Even within the staging grounds of the League, even so long after the battle between Moon and Tapu Koko had come to a close, still the voice of the crowd remained high. Repairs of the battlefield were done, Tapu Koko emerging from its shell and floating back to its pillar once Kahuna Hala descended to speak with it, and the time of the next fight drew near. But the pressure in the air was still that of the last. All attention focused on the battle before, not the battle to come. It was stifling, weighing on Lana, and she struggled with it. With the sight of Moon battling in that way, and the knowledge that Lana herself could not. If she fought Moon now, Lana would...

She would...

“Lana?”

The voice of Jackson shook her from her thoughts, Lana glancing between the tall dark-skinned man and the judge awaiting them. They were picking the number for their battle, right? Lana knew Jackson had five, the team he’d kept for years and continued to serve Alola with. So then.

“Five.” The Captain of Brooklet Hill gave that as her first word. “Jackson, let’s do five.”

There was a moment, Jackson looking at Lana oddly, that it almost felt like he’d deny her that wish. But then the captain of the Alolan Pokemon Rangers nodded, and turned to the judge as well.

“Five against five.”

Nodding, the judge turned and left to handle final preparations for the match.

“Are you alright?” The question from Jackson surprised Lana, who stared at him blatantly confused. Then nodded her head.

“This is our first time battling like this, isn’t it? I’m excited.”

Left unsaid, Jackson’s response lingered in his mind.

She didn’t sound it.
“The Pokemon Rangers have buildings all over Alola, but one of their biggest ones is right outside Brooklet Hill.”

Just as she had for the previous battle starring Captain Lana, Mina was once again joining Anna and Alexa as third commentator, being one of the best choices to comment on the battling styles of the competing two. She continued outlining how much this match meant to those involved.

“Jackson was a former Captain of Brooklet Hill himself, so he and Lana have worked together a lot. She wants to be a Pokemon Ranger after her Captainship is over, so to say Jackson’s something of a mentor to her wouldn’t be incorrect.”

“With that between them, would you say Lana is intending to prove herself here today?”

To Anna’s question, Mina responded with a nod. An “Oh absolutely” voiced. But what she didn’t say was that this didn’t make things any different from any other day. Of perhaps all the Captains of Alola, Lana was the most full of the desire to ‘prove herself’. Even if she wasn’t entirely sure what that meant.

Mallow had spoken to Mina about it, when the former Captain of Poni Island caught up with the Captain of Lush Jungle after her battle with Tapu Bulu. Lana and Kiawe had hung around Mallow a lot, but eventually Mina had gotten a moment of her time. All things considered, by that point Mallow was mostly calmed down from her loss. Accepted that it had happened. Instead begun to worry slightly about the next match the Island Deity would have.

As they all were.

But perhaps even more than that, Mallow was worried about Lana. She’d tried to talk to her after Lana’s last match, fighting against Tristan, but Lana hadn’t wanted to say much about it. Had insisted she needed to focus on thinking about facing Jackson next. Then whoever came after him. She was locked on to thinking only about that. Didn’t even seem to feel anything about the one victory she’d already had. It slightly worried Mallow, but she wasn’t sure what to do. Mina hadn’t had a good idea either but... wanted to believe facing Jackson would help. The older man, a mentor for Lana, was plenty smart on his own. He should have seen it too.

As much as it was his responsibility to give his all in this fight, as all those called to this League would do, Mina was sure the captain of the Pokemon Rangers wouldn’t be able to resist lending a helping hand to someone in need.
He never could.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Called to react, Jackson and Lana each selected the Pokemon they would be bringing to this fight. An Ultra Ball in the hand of the first, a Net Ball grasped by the second. The final moments ticked down, the crowd cheered for those competitors – though with none of the intensity they had for Moon before – and the judge raised and then lowered their arms.

It was time.

“Begin!”

From Jackson Machamp, the Superpower Pokemon, blue-grey skinned humanoid of intense muscles, four great arms, and golden belt emblematic of its kind. The Fighting-type Pokemon had been unable to show itself in the battle against Mina before – indeed had the Captain of Poni Island insisted on any more than a three against three, likely she would be the one standing here instead. But Jackson wasn’t interested in considering those motivations or what fate had brought him here, only what he needed to do. Right now he needed to face Lana in battle.

Lana and the Octillery she’d brought to the field.

The Jet Pokemon had made a fine showing in the battle before, matching up against Tristan’s Lycanroc, the Wolf Pokemon older but Octillery perhaps more experienced. Lana battled and trained with ferocity on the regular, more than most of the Captains. Perhaps only Ilima compared. And that said much indeed.

It was a good choice to counter Jackson’s own, the boneless cephalopod proving too slippery for its Superpower opponent to strike. Easily shifting around punches and thrusts, Octillery clasped onto an arm to be pulled in closer to its foe, blasting ink across the Machamp’s face. That moment of blinding allowed the Pokemon to travel further around the body of Machamp, grasping tight to its back and constricting, the Superpower Pokemon having difficulty reaching back to grab at it and the soft body of Octillery meaning that each time it did it could gain no purchase. Jackson, holding his partner’s Pokeball despite the fact the first sixty seconds had yet to pass, frowned, for the rules of switching Pokemon required them to be separated apart. Lana wasn’t giving him that option.

She was really going all out in every way that she could.

Lana’s heart beat calmly. Her breathing came evenly. Her mind remained alert, and she felt neither confidence nor concern. To her this battle felt... distant, separated from her in a way. Beyond it, in the next round, she’d be facing Moon. Moon who’d defeated Tapu Koko. Moon who could use Z-Moves without limit, and had now discovered a power no other in the world seemed to have. Ultra Evolution... in the battle against Tapu Koko Moon’s Salamence had been so strong. How could Lana stand against that? Using Ice-type techniques fully, which Salamence was weak to? If that weakness even persisted in its new form – the Pokemon seeming to weather Tapu Koko’s electricity well. Lana had an Icium-Z. She could use that and hope.

That the only way to defeat Moon now would be with hope stung deeply the Captain’s pride.

It hadn’t even been a year! Not a year since Lana had so easily crushed Moon with barely a mote of effort. How had Moon grown so fast, how had her Pokemon become so strong, and how was it now that Lana felt the weaker of the two? To be passed by so quickly... it continued to weigh upon her. How it felt like she was falling behind. Not becoming the person she wanted to be. Who did she even want to be? What did she want beyond wanting to be strong? She didn’t even know that. It
wasn’t like being a master Pokemon Trainer was a requirement for joining the Pokemon Rangers. It wouldn’t even help as much as having Pokemon that worked well within nature. Mallow was a better candidate for a Pokemon Ranger than Lana right now. What was she even doing?

Caught at a crossroads, forced to accept the weight of her own limits, Lana struggled deeply.

Was there even a reason to go on?

Despite those thoughts roiling within her, no missteps were made as Lana calmly reacted to Machamp finally grasping and pulling Octillery free, her partner unleashing a beam of psychic energy into their opponent’s face. Stumbling back from that Machamp dropped Octillery, who quickly scuttled back, catching Machamp in the legs with a beam of ice. That old Pokemon of Jackson’s was plenty strong and resilient, but it wouldn’t be able to last forever as long as Lana and Octillery kept hitting it. As long as they denied it the chance to hit them in return.

That was all it would take.

It was.

“Despite an extended battle, the match remained in Lana’s hands for the length of it, her partner Octillery wearing Jackson’s Machamp down! The Pokemon Ranger captain is now required to send out his next Pokemon, to which Lana will be free to respond! What will he choose?”

Jackson knew a fair bit about Lana’s Pokemon as well. She’d slowly and determinedly worked up to five over the years, starting with Cloyster and Octillery initially, then adding more as she went on. The speed at which a Trainer’s ability to support Bonds grew was different for all, and difficult to grow with anything more than time, but Lana had done well. Had grown into four full Pokemon in the three years given to her Island Challenge, then a fifth soon after becoming a Captain of Akala. She was strong. All the youths invited to this League were strong, significant outliers amongst all Pokemon Trainers. Many young ones would be happy to have two, maybe three, by the time they were fifteen.

Lana, her sixteenth having come not long ago, held five and five strong ones at that.

As a Trainer she was deeply worthy of respect.

Even if measuring herself against others as she was meant Lana did not feel that way at all.

“Blissey, the Happiness Pokemon!” Alexa announced Jackson’s next choice. “In the last battle with Mina, Jackson used Blissey’s Healing Wish ability to restore another of his Pokemon to full health. By bringing Blissey out to fight now, does he intend to do something different?”

“Well his Blissey also knows Earthquake,” Mina chimed in, “which made things really awkward for me. Given the way that Octillery moves, breaking the earth up should make it easier to catch.”

“These Trainers sure are making work for the battlefield repair crew, huh folks?” Anna’s observation drew scattered laughter between the cheers for the competitors as Blissey, as expected, set down a heavy foot and sent out a pattern of cracks across the field.

Compared to the Snorlax of Kukui in the first battle of Red Block before, or the sheer force of impact from Ultra Salamence and Tapu Koko striking one another down, each stomp of Blissey did far less damage to the field. Cracked and unsettled it for sure, but did not completely upheave it as those more powerful had. Lana maintained Octillery’s presence, the Jet Pokemon firing bursts of water and ice across the distance between it and Blissey, but those attacks sprayed off the body of the Happiness Pokemon with little effect. A clear sign that Lana’s Pokemon would need to get closer to
this opponent to achieve anything of note. Something that grew more and more difficult with the slowly cracking and splitting earth between them.

Calling back Octillery, Lana sent out Araquanid to take over the fight.

She had a Wishiwashii too. Had made sure to catch and raise each of the Pokemon species that served as Totems living within Brooklet Hill, so that Lana might better understand them and how to work with them. Those two Totems were old, endlessly competitive, and Lana had been taken with them from the first days of her Trial in that place. That was right, she’d decided she’d be the next Captain of Brooklet Hill as soon as she’d laid eyes upon it. Told its Captain at the time that. They’d laughed but only in acknowledgement. Told Lana to work hard to take the role from them when their twentieth came.

She had.

With six long legs keeping its body high above the ground, the Water Bubble Pokemon Araquanid easily navigated the breaking field, closing the distance between it and Blissey without concern. Again that was a good choice, Jackson noted, Lana’s initial pick leading her to take hold of the battle’s pace. He’d need to do something pretty significant to take it back into his own hands, or the battle would be entirely Lana’s in no time at all. The Captain was still young – sixteen wasn’t old by any measure there could be – but she’d made sure that even for her youth she was far more experienced than most older, and from that become a powerful battling force.

Jackson, who kept Pokemon that strongly worked the environment for the betterment of others, was not a battler himself. Lana would know how to exploit every weakness and mistake he made without fail. The training with Asuka had been all about how to expose himself less, and use what skills he did have to his advantage. It had worked well enough against Mina, but for Lana whose style was far more aggressive...

Electricity crackled between the hands of Blissey, another technique learned through Asuka’s TM collection. Quickly in response did the Water Bubble Pokemon lunge forward, this attack as much of a surprise to Lana as Earthquake had been to Mina before, but the thunderbolt hit first and both Jackson and Lana knew it had hit well. The crash of Araquanid against Blissey – a Pokemon that did not move quickly by any means – resulted in the Water Bubble Pokemon biting hard and unleashing as much power as it could, but Blissey’s continued electrification brought it down first. A technique that, expressed by the resilient Happiness Pokemon, made it quite difficult to stop indeed.

“That Blissey has quite the collection of techniques,” Alexa observed. “It’s clearly been taught a number to help it counter a wide range of foes. Who knows what else it can do.”

Lana didn’t. And struggled to choose from the remainder of her team, each Pokemon weak to the Electric-type. She’d considered adding a Lanturn to her team at one point, the Light Pokemon able to absorb huge amounts of electricity, but lacked confidence in choosing to use a Pokemon that fared so poorly outside of the water. Decided instead to pay the price when it came up.

It had.

Cloyster then, Lana’s strongest partner. Electricity would still be a threat, but by pure power Lana would overcome, the Bivalve Pokemon firing out a rain of icicle spears from within its shell as soon as it appeared. A barrier created by Blissey in response took a number of them before shattering to let one more through. Jackson watched the timer until his next switch with focus.

He’d lured out Lana’s strongest partner now, and so had to respond in turn as soon as he was able. Scizor would easily resist the Ice-type attacks of Cloyster, and with a Steel-type Z-Move take that
one down in no time at all. Nothing else in Lana’s team could use ice as strongly as that Cloyster, and so Jackson needed that Pokemon gone before he could bring his Tropius out. That was the plan.

Now to stick to it.

Playing defensive with Blissey, a naturally defensive Pokemon, wasn’t too hard a thing to do, but it was still the case that Cloyster scored a number of pretty hard hits all the same. The Happiness Pokemon was looking decidedly beat up as Jackson called it back, even as it continued to attempt to heal itself. But they’d made it through to the next switch and now Scizor was out, Lana’s eyes locked on to the red Pincer Pokemon before her. So that was Jackson’s goal.

She wouldn’t allow it.

Her Z-Ring carried the Waterium-Z, a few other Z-Crystals with Lana as well, but that was the Z-Move she remained prepared to perform at any moment. Jackson clearly wanted Lana’s Cloyster out of the way as soon as possible; after all if it was still around when he sent out Tropius – who being Grass and Flying-type was a threat to the entirety of Lana’s team – Lana would be able to take the Fruit Pokemon down with an immediate and powerful Ice-type barrage.

And yeah Lana could see it in the way Scizor lunged and jabbed at Cloyster, keeping close, its claws glowing with silver energy, it was looking to stun the Bivalve Pokemon and open a moment to strike. Jackson had his arms half-raised too, as if he was waiting to start his Z-Pose. Asuka, watching from the stands, shook her head at the man clearly broadcasting his intent. He really couldn’t help it, could he?

Closing its shell tight around an incoming strike of Scizor’s claw, Cloyster resisted the power in the blow to keep on going, Lana beginning her Z-Pose a single step faster than Jackson himself, both Trainers moving to unleash their full power but one just slightly ahead of the other.

Before Scizor could spin into a powerful drill of Steel-type force, a tornado of water whipped up around it and dragged the Pincer Pokemon into its grip.

Within the grasp of the Water-type Z-Move Hydro Vortex, the Steel-type Z-Move Corkscrew Crash still moved. Still pushed against the torrent, attempting to drill down to the Cloyster at its core. But the Steel-type was not effective against Water, and the Z-Move did not succeed in piercing through the attack it pushed against. Overwhelmed by the rushing tide slamming it from every direction, Scizor’s Z-Move broke and the Pincer Pokemon was dragged through the spinning vortex all the same.

In the moments after, water raining down upon the field, Scizor stunned by the rapid impacts it had gone through, Lana directed her partner to glow and weaken its defenses for strength: that technique armoured Pokemon used for power. Each Pokemon having performed a Z-Move, but only one having suffered the attack, this fight ended before Jackson could call his partner back, the victory in Lana’s hands.

Her battling style, so aggressive and relentless, refusing to give him an inch.

Crawdaunt, the Rogue Pokemon, a red-shelled crustacean held upon two heavy back legs with two smaller front limbs acting as balance, a final pair of two limbs, each ending in massive claws, raised menacingly. The Water and Dark-type Pokemon was Jackson’s primary choice for aquatic work, whether restoration, reshaping, or rescue, and well experienced in applying its force to shattering wood and stone whenever necessary.

Cloyster, faster and more powerful than ever in exchange for the weakening of its armoured shell,
fired a barrage of spikes to rain down upon this next foe.

There wasn’t a huge amount Jackson or his partner could do. Ripping up and throwing with great force chunks of the earth was all well and good, but Cloyster was far too fast now – an issue given Jackson’s two fastest partners were both already out. He hadn’t even concepted that idea, that Lana would wait for Jackson’s faster Pokemon to be defeated before she’d weaken Cloyster’s armour for speed and strength. That was the gap, the distance between a Trainer who focused so hard on becoming a master battler and one who simply lived with their Pokemon. Those sorts of tactics for defeating others, Jackson had never immersed himself in them.

And now in this battle at the peak of Alola he was reaping the cost.

Hard-shelled itself, though unable to weaken its own for the same power, Crawdaunt endured a number of heavy blows. But despite its best efforts, threatening with its heavy claws and unleashing a range of attacks that crossed the field – Water, Dark, Rock, Normal, even one of Poison – Cloyster either dodged or formed barriers against them all. And slowly wore Crawdaunt down.

The Rogue Pokemon defeated by an intensity that did not give an inch.

“While Jackson has had three of his Pokemon defeated in this battle so far, Lana has lost only one! It’s clear the difference between these two Trainers is one not of experience itself but battling experience specifically! Mina, your thoughts?"

“Lana’s relentless.” The former Captain said what many were observing of this fight. “As soon as she has an advantage she uses it for everything she can. And her battling style’s as aggressive as can be. She and her Pokemon are strong. I’d have lost to her handily.”

Even after this fight, told Mina had said that, Lana still found herself unable to find happiness in those words.

Blissey returned to the field, electricity once more crackling around it, and Lana called Cloyster back. After using a Z-Move and finishing off Scizor, then spending an entire battle against the Crawdaunt of Jackson, the Bivalve Pokemon was now reaching the point of its exhaustion. It couldn’t continue much longer, and would definitely take one of those thunderbolts at the speed they could move. None of the rest of Lana’s team were a good answer but... she’d still go for it.

Refuse to do anything but win.

Wishiwashi, the Small Fry Pokemon, did similar to Moon’s Milotic, manifesting water around it as soon as it emerged. Even without other Wishiwashi to school together with, the power a Trainer gave that Pokemon enabled it to create a form resembling the massive fish cluster all the same. Supported in the air within a great watery form, the Wishiwashi partner of Lana moved ominously forward. Moon, thinking of the times she had battled alongside her own, wondered just how much stronger Lana’s would be.

Did not wonder for long.

The surge of water released from the Small Fry Pokemon’s form struck against the bolt of electricity Blissey released and then froze, the entire column of ice falling to the ground with a heavy thud. All of Lana’s Pokemon seemed to know and use Ice-type techniques as easily as they did Water, a symbol of the difference between the Water-type Captain and other go-with-the-flow Water-type specialists. Lana was one who forced battles into the shape she wanted, rather than reacting and redirecting the forces raised against her.
She wasn’t stopping here.

Water turning to ice was an expensive technique to use, draining quickly at the strength the massive Wishiwashi school held, but it was a strong means of stopping the electric attacks of Blissey, the Small Fry Pokemon drifting ever closer. The technique, Moon observed, was similar to what she did with Milotic as well, which made sense given she’d learned such from Lana herself.

A technique Lana used well as Wishiwashi finally closed in upon its Blissey foe.

At a distance Blissey could be dangerous, maintaining its safety through barriers and healing, but once a Pokemon closed that distance it was too much to resist. Araquanid had done enough damage on its own, before the number of thunderbolts striking it had laid it low, but Wishiwashi now close enough to attack did far more than enough. Blissey, lifted off of its feet into the liquid form of the Wishiwashi, had no option but to be buffeted and attacked from every angle by high-pressure watery force. When dropped again it did not rise.

Moon remembered specifically a battle where she had done the same, to the partner Raticate of a Team Skull Grunt, and the state of mind she’d been in at the time.

And frowned.

“Jackson has only one Pokemon left! The Fruit Pokemon Tropius is Grass and Flying-type, making it a danger to each of Lana’s team, but with so many still with her, is the Captain of Brooklet Hill at any threat?”

She’d never considered herself at threat from the very beginning. Over Lana hung the pall of facing Moon in the next round, and the understanding that the power Moon held was now beyond her. Compared to that... this didn't matter. It wasn’t anything to her.

And she wouldn’t lose.

Chill rising from the columns of ice formed before, Wishiwashi released a pulse of power and started a reaction in the air above, swirling mist forming and chilling in turn, heavy pelt of hailstones beginning to fall. In the time it did that a surge of Grass-type energy, swirling leaves carrying power unleashed by the Tropius of Jackson, passed through the Pokemon’s form, but Lana did not blink as the water-coating of Wishiwashi, so much spent on resisting the electricity of Blissey before, broke and the Pokemon within dropped down. Just called it back and sent Octillery back out to fight.

The Jet Pokemon, shooting a range of techniques – Water, Bug, and Psychic – from its turret-like mouth, held out against the Tropius’s attacks as the Fruit Pokemon suffered the falling hailstones Wishiwashi had summoned before – too large-bodied to evade them all.

All it took was one to hit the flying saurian in a wing and slow its flight enough for Lana to command an Ice Beam from Octillery right into the Fruit Pokemon’s path. That was enough to show how this would go. A heavy enough hit for those that followed to lay that Pokemon low. To bring this battle to a close. And have the judge overseeing raise their hand to the competitor in the western circle.

“The winner is: Lana!”

That was enough to win.

With the crowd’s cheers and the commentators’ praise as backdrop, Lana and Jackson crossed the field to one another, extended a hand to one another. Jackson looked for the expression on Lana’s face even as he congratulated her for her win.
“Well done, Lana. You are a strong and talented young Trainer, I’m proud I got to experience your strength here. Well done.”

Lana nodded acknowledgement. But showed little more. No smile, no relief, no loss of tension in her form. In her head all she could think of was the one she’d be up against next. No means of feeling happiness in this moment with that opponent before her.

Jackson frowned slightly. That wasn’t a good look at all. In that case.

“Let me help you prepare for your next round.”

He’d do what he could, as any Alolan should.

“Alright alright alright, Miss Rockin’ Kahuna, are you ready to dance?”

“Oh absolutely.” Olivia smiled evenly at the red-clad Dragon Tamer before her, the pair meeting in the staging ground to decide their number for the coming fight. Ryuki Oda, a master Dragon Tamer who’d revealed a monster amongst his team in his battle before. Something intimidatingly strong but... oh Olivia really couldn’t help her interest here. She’d faced one monster in this League already after all.

“So that Hydreigon.”

“Honestly,” Ryuki shook his head, “that’s what everyone’s been saying. Not the impression I wanted to make starting out at all, but what she says goes y’know? Capricious lady.”

“It must be difficult.” The Kahuna sympathised. “What would you say will tempt her out again?”

“Well...” Ryuki paused a moment, before shrugging and admitting the condition. No reason not to at this point. “Before that battle, it’s always been when the rest of my team were out. She has this ‘I’ll clean up your mess’ air to her; a little rude but hard to argue.”

“That makes sense,” Olivia nodded, smile starting to gain an edge. “In that case we’ll have to do a full-on six against six, so I can pull her out onto the stage after defeating the rest of your team. We’ll have to do that.” In the wake of Olivia’s announcement, a moment of stunned silence lingering in the air as Ryuki’s eyes widened at that confident declaration, the Kahuna nodded to the judge awaiting their choice. Ryuki, recovering quickly enough after to speak, had a slight hitch to his voice.

“That’s a little mean, Miss Kahuna, saying it like that. Me and my Pokemon are strong, we’re not just gonna sit there and let you tear through us to get what you want.”

“Oh of course,” Olivia’s smile didn’t shift. “Let’s make this battle incredible. I’m looking forward to it.”

Another silent moment lasted, Ryuki’s instincts telling him exactly what he already knew. This wasn’t going to be easy.

But he wouldn’t back down. Turned to the judge as well to give his own nod.

“Six.”

Six it would be.
“Guildmaster Pitaya, thank you for joining us again to oversee this next match.”

Starting her announcements as Ryuki and Olivia took their places on the League battlefield stage below, Anna introduced the next competitors for the day. “In the previous round Ryuki Oda stunned everyone with the revelation of a truly ancient Hydreigon, a Pokemon of immense power. Today he’s facing Kahuna Olivia, another of Alola’s most powerful Trainers, who performed the incredible feat of defeating Tapu Lele without a single one of her Pokemon defeated. This battle promises great intensity: Guildmaster, your thoughts?”

“Knowing Olivia, that Hydreigon is her goal.” Pitaya did not know Olivia that well, all things considered. She’d made note of Ryuki as a talented battler from even before the woman ascended to the role of Kahuna, and actively sought her out as soon as the Guildmaster had learned Olivia held a Tyrantrum amongst her team, but apart from a battle between that Tyrantrum and Pitaya’s Kommo-o – a battle Pitaya won but not easily at all – the two hadn’t interacted much. Still Pitaya was aware of enough about the Kahuna of Akala, and her battling nature, to make this statement with confidence. “She deeply enjoys Pokemon Battles, and no doubt considers facing that Hydreigon an experience worth having. I imagine she will be aiming to force that Pokemon to appear.”

“In his first match Ryuki immediately chose Hydreigon, leading to Sina’s crushing defeat.” Sina, in the stands, huffed a bit at Alexa’s words. Dexio patted her consolingly on the shoulder. “He’s dodged all interviews since that match, so we don’t know for sure how Ryuki and that Pokemon are related, but this battle will tell us much: whether we’ll be seeing it again immediately or not.”

Ryuki, standing in the eastern Trainer’s circle, felt no voice of command from the Luxury Ball holding his ancient partner at his side. It seemed for Kahuna Olivia she held no more interest than any other battle before. So why had fighting Sina been so different? He still didn’t understand. Shook his head as he chose a different Pokeball instead. Alright here we go.

The judge overseeing raised their arms as Olivia prepared her own Pokeball. The moment held.

And then...

“Begin!”

From the Quick Ball Ryuki chose came the blue dragon Lilith, the Dragon and Ground-type Mach Pokemon Garchomp. Benga, in the stands, reacted with as much excitement to see Ryuki’s partner as Ryuki had before to see his own. Moon, knowing that this was the specific Pokemon Ryuki Mega Evolved in battle, prepared herself to witness a most intense match indeed.
With an unwavering smile Olivia, having unleashed her partner Lycanroc from the Love Ball she carried, the deep-red furred Midnight Form of the Wolf Pokemon appearing once again, commanded her partner forward as Ryuki raised up the Key Stone he held and gave a grin of his own.

Here they go.

The first strike was Lycanroc’s, a heavy punching blow into the Garchomp’s gut even as the Mach Pokemon glowed red and transfigured into its Mega Evolved form. Spinning into a whirlwind of blades in response Garchomp slashed through the air, the cutting force unleashed reaching all the way to strike the barrier in the distance. Yet the partner of Olivia was fast and strong: quick enough in close-quarters to dodge each slash of Garchomp’s scythe-like arms; and relentless enough to never give the Mach Pokemon a chance to express its full power. Every time Lilith tried to pull away the Midnight Lycanroc moved with it, punishing every attempt to ascend into the sky or dig into the earth. Giving no freedom for escape.

Olivia’s will behind her partner remained as unyielding as the greatest mountains of Alola. Don’t relent or give in for a moment. She knew what she had to do here.

She and her partner wouldn’t stop.

He’d had this experience before, Ryuki considered. Someone who was like a wall, who shut down and prevented every attempt of their opponent to ever change the pace. Olivia wouldn’t let go of control of this match for even a single second once she had it. Losing to a Trainer who fought like that and being retired from the Hoenn League in the first major round had been bad enough.

Ryuki wouldn’t let it go that way a second time here.

“Lilith, go crazy!”

The difference in power between a Mega Evolved Pokemon and one not was so significant. One direct and almighty blow from Lilith would spell defeat for the Lycanroc that faced it no matter its strength. Just one blow to slow that opponent down and make all the attacks to follow hit surer still. Just one blow.

The Mach Pokemon failed to catch its foe.

“Lycanroc don’t let it go!”

How was that Pokemon this strong? Ryuki wasn’t slacking, Lilith was going all out, and still that red-furred Wolf was keeping up. Never letting Lilith get the distance to boost her attacks, forcing her back into place every time she moved to try and leap or dig, keeping her before it while never letting her strike directly, always swinging its claws to catch and deflect her at every vital point. It was like Olivia had taken the immense martial talent of the best Fighting-type Pokemon and stuck it into the resilient body of a Rock-type to create the ultimate close-quarters foe. Even more than that, every time that Lycanroc swung its claws up from touching the ground it dragged a piece of the earth with it to attack, whether jutting points or just loose stones infused with Rock-type force. It was... actually a monster. A for real monster of a Pokemon. Too overshadowed by the power of Tapu Lele to be obvious back then, too focused on dodging attacks and countering safely, but now this... this was an assault.

Lilith, not as strong as Tapu Lele even when Mega Evolved, couldn’t exert enough power to force its opponent into a defensive stance, Lycanroc always pushing forward and attacking. Kahuna Olivia, she had one of the strongest Pokemon in the League for sure!
Ryuki’s grin spread to his partner, Lilith changing to take a heavy clawed strike against one of her scythe-blade arms before slamming her head down upon the Lycanroc’s own. Oh yeah so the Kahuna wanted an all-out brawl, a struggle to be the one to throw the other down? All thinking she could run through Ryuki’s team and drag the Lady out? She’d better think again! Ryuki was gonna take this pressure and turn it into strength!

Let’s make a diamond out of this fight, baby!

The two Pokemon, Mach and Wolf, remained close to one another for the remainder of this match. Exchanged and avoided blows, slashes and strikes, gnashing fangs, and furious blasts of force. When one attacked low, lashing out or stomping the ground to unleash force, the other leaped only to be punished in turn. The same true for either attempting to strike high, countering and being countered as the other moved under. The two maintaining this brutal duel. And yet at no point did Olivia show interest in unleashing the power of a Z-Move, despite the Mega Evolved Pokemon that she faced. By that choice, and the sheer power her partner was exerting, did the Kahuna of Akala force the acknowledgement of all who watched. This was a strong Trainer. This was an extremely strong Trainer.

Another Alolan who held the potential of being named League Champion firmly within her hands.

The battle ended by attrition. By the two never separating enough for their Trainers to call them back, and so the resolution being solely one claiming victory over the other. Eventually a blow was struck, and from it more followed, a chain that led on until the weaker of the two fell. Forced to call that Pokemon back, Olivia showed no displeasure as one of the six Pokeballs displayed beneath her name on the boards around the field darkened to black.

After all, her partner had done all they could and the sight of the Garchomp before her breathing heavy was more than pleasing enough.

A good start.

Ryuki couldn’t help the degree to which he felt put off. That Kahuna... she’d really fought Lilith down to equality. Sure the numerical victory was Ryuki’s but... Lilith could not take a fight like that again. He wasn’t even sure how much she could do to any of Olivia’s other Pokemon. Seriously, what’s a Pokemon gotta do to obtain strength like that? Ryuki wasn’t a slouch of a Trainer himself, and Lilith was one of his oldest buddies! For Olivia to stand up to Lilith’s Mega Evolved form like that, that was just... seriously...

Oh Ryuki really couldn’t stop the grin on his face now.

“Alright then Trixie let’s keep it rolling!”

Given Olivia’s second choice, the Jewel Pokemon Carbink, Rock and Fairy-type, Ryuki chose his partner Turtonator, the Fire and Dragon-type Blast Turtle Pokemon, in response. Though the second newest of Ryuki’s team – after the Jangmo-o he’d received from the Dragon Tamers in Alola and raised into a Kommo-o – Dragon Pokemon were strong, and Ryuki a master in raising them up. This partner of his would have no difficulty expressing her full strength.

Easily met Olivia’s partner without relent.

For Moon, battling that Carbink had been an endlessly frustrating affair, the Jewel Pokemon ever defensive, difficult to even touch. It was because she had battled it that way, struggled against it so,
that watching the Carbink of Olivia now burst into movement, spinning like a top gouging a trail through the packed earth of the League battlefield before rising into the air alight with crackling force holding it up, that Moon found herself more shocked than ever. Once again Olivia had completely changed the way her Pokemon fought to suit the one she faced.

It seemed almost impossible to measure the limits of what the Kahuna of Akala could do.

Olivia had known four of Ryuki Oda’s six Pokemon before this battle began. The Hydreigon a recent discovery, but besides that three others learned many months ago. In the wake of the battle between the three Captains of Akala and Ryuki, Mallow had told Olivia everything. The action of Ryuki, playing his song to shift the beat of the song of Alola to his side, was an incredible feat, and Olivia positive that was a core component of his victory. He couldn’t do that here. But that did not mean she would underestimate him at all. She would do her absolute best without relent.

To see the sight she wanted to see.

Of Ryuki’s three other Pokemon – Turtonator, Drampa, and Dragonite – Olivia had concepts for how to best each. The remaining two of his team however she did not know, and so had to rely on more overarching strategies to succeed. The belief that Ryuki would do as so many had, and begin his battle with the power of Mega Evolution, had been rewarded, Olivia matching her Lycanroc against the Mega Garchomp he unleashed. She’d have to face that Pokemon again before this was over, but at the least it had taken many great hits in its long battle against her partner all the same.

Carbink wasn’t for fighting here. Oh even now it was on the attack, forming and releasing beams of Rock and Fairy-type energy from the reflective gems studding its body, but it was a screen. This Pokemon was specifically for striking the Hydreigon Ryuki kept once she arrived, a Fairium-Z awaiting the moment to unleash. Ancient and powerful that dragon may be, but a Fairy-type attack, doubly effective against Hydreigon’s Dark and Dragon typing, once transfigured into a Fairy-type Z-Move would certainly leave a mark.

If Olivia wanted to win, and oh she did, that was what she’d have to do.

Though Trixie’s Fire-typing insured her some against the Fairy-type attacks of Carbink, it exposed her more to the Jewel Pokemon’s Rock-type array, pressuring Ryuki despite this being his best choice. That Carbink was a rough match for most of his team, but between Trixie’s defensive resilience, and the few Steel-type techniques she knew, Ryuki still held his confidence. If he could just force, with gouts of flame and manifested barrier as Trixie marched dutifully forward, a moment to do the same as Lana had, the same as Sophocles, or Kiawe with that Turtonator of his own had, he’d have a chance. One Shell Smash releasing armour for speed and strength and Trixie could threaten so many Olivia could bring against her.

The means by which Ryuki’s partner would rise above.

Yet when that moment came, Carbink raising a barrier against a stream of flame instead of dodging around, Ryuki faltered. That hadn’t been bad positioning. That had been intentional. Olivia had given him a second of freedom of her own free will.

Catching that, Ryuki skipped the order and instead commanded Trixie to push on forward with more barriers of her own.

Oh there’s a good Trainer. Olivia held her smile. She’d set out bait and Ryuki hadn’t bitten at all. Carbink, armed with gem-focused beams of Rock and Fairy-type force, was a Pokemon with a fair few tricks up its sleeve besides – ways to affect the battlefield around it to twist things into more advantageous shape. Changing the air to slow the fast and speed up the slow was a trick her partner
knew, and if Ryuki had used Shell Smash, which Olivia knew the Alolan-native Turtonator could use, things would have gone very poorly for him indeed. But look at that, he’d caught something wrong without even knowing what it was and reacted accordingly. He really was good.

Oh Olivia was having a fantastic time indeed.

Relentlessly Turtonator pushed forward. Moving and attacking at the same time was an imprecise art for most, and that Carbink always gave a moment of freedom when it had to pull away. Exploiting that, drawing out from Trixie the few techniques she knew not Fire or Dragon, Ryuki continued to drive the Carbink back. Soon as he had that Pokemon cornered, one solid Iron Tail and Trixie would bring it down. Not something she could use at range though, making this a tough fight to close in on. But he was getting there.

Just a few steps more.

But sixty seconds had now passed and Olivia without concern called Carbink back to her. She’d pushed Ryuki to retreat his partner Garchomp before, and that Pokemon wouldn’t return now until the rest of Ryuki’s team was through. Too much risk to send it out again against something fresh, no matter the potential advantage. Ryuki wouldn’t respond to her next choice with his Dragonite or Drampa either, so would continue with either this Turtonator, or his last unknown. Either way, Olivia smiled as she unleashed the Compass Pokemon Probopass to appear in the place she had called Carbink back from, it would go fine.

Believing that was a tenant of the mental strength a true Pokemon Trainer needed to succeed.

Ryuki commanded a screen of flames, his partner Turtonator breathing out a powerful stream. With Olivia’s Pokemon changed, Ryuki once again set his sights on a Shell Smash, to elevate Trixie’s strength and speed to a level that could strike their opponent down. They just needed a moment.

A beam of Rock-type energy blasted through the flames and struck the Blast Turtle Pokemon directly.

“Oh sneaky.”

It took only a second, Ryuki’s eyes glancing from side to side, to spot one of the three Mini-Nose units that the main body of Probopass controlled. Olivia’s partner had sent that one out for a better angle, while the remaining two with the main body constructed an attack given accuracy by a smaller bolt from the third. This sort of opponent, that could move smaller pieces of itself freely about the field, was a different kind of battle from most Ryuki had ever had before.

What fun!

Watching this fight, Moon again found herself comparing the difference between those she’d battled in her Final Trials and how they battled here. Olivia, Hala, Acerola, and Kahlili, if any of them had gone all out back then they’d have crushed her. Even now Moon could not help but doubt she could defeat the elder three were they to give it their all. Even with Ultra Salamence.

Such was the strength they exuded.

Despite Trixie’s typing granting her resistance to attacks both Electric and Steel, Olivia’s partner continued to mix them in amongst its Rock-type assault, and pushed the Turtonator back even further still. The way that Probopass mixed techniques of differing types together to create unexpected results, it provided a whole new level of pressure for Ryuki in this fight. Rocks that exploded. Steel that electrified. Blasts that suddenly accelerated and hit twice as hard as before. There was a world of
creativity in the way that Pokemon fought, which could only have been honed by an expert’s tireless work. Clear was it by the way that Probopass fought that its Trainer was one to stand amongst the very best of Alola, and indeed the world.

An individual with claim to the title of Master Trainer.

The battle ended with Trixie’s defeat. Hounded and distracted by the Mini-Nose units the Compass Pokemon controlled, the main body of Probopass moving from side to side around those attacks of Turtonator that did reach out to it, there proved little Ryuki’s partner could do. And nowhere near the freedom necessary given for the Dragon Tamer to call upon the full force that Pokemon could unleash.

Now the onus of switching was upon Ryuki, with the freedom Olivia’s to respond. Each clash of their Pokemon so far had gone well beyond the sixty seconds between switches, but when Ryuki had moved to call Trixie back before, one of the Mini-Nose units had unleashed a pulse of energy that cut the beam of her Ultra Ball off. Olivia was a vicious opponent. Ryuki couldn’t help his smile.

Battles to make his blood burn. Shining stars duelling at the peak of the world for all to see. He wouldn’t stop here.

He wouldn’t stop here!

He’d been saving Kommo-o, the Dragon and Fighting-type Scaly Pokemon, for that Tyrantrum Olivia kept. That thing, when she’d set it on Tapu Lele, oh it had drawn and held Ryuki’s eyes with ease. Beautiful and powerful, a real grand dragon of a Pokemon. He wanted to fight it. Likely that was the same feeling Olivia held towards Hydreigon herself. But right now with the pressure Olivia was exuding, Ryuki couldn’t afford to think of such sweet things as preserving certain Pokemon for certain moments. He needed to give it his all. And force Olivia to as well.

The only way forward.

Kannonade Ryuki had been given as a Jangmo-o, when first he’d arrived in Alola and greeted the Dragon Tamers here. Pitaya, continuing commentary on this incredible battle before her, outlined how impressive it was of Ryuki to have raised that Pokemon to its final evolution in barely a year. It was clear that this man held the right to claim the title of master Dragon Tamer. Praise highly given from a woman who held the same.

That was a dangerous pick. Probopass severely weak to the Fighting-type, and the rest of Olivia’s team lacking effective Types against this Dragon and Fighting foe. Carbink, with one Moonblast, would tear through it, but knowing that made Olivia pause. Was Ryuki daring her, or luring her? She’d been relying on Carbink to help with that Hydreigon, but if she didn’t grasp every advantage she had, would she even see it?

No, she wouldn’t take that risk. Wouldn’t give Ryuki the luxury of constraining her strength. Once again Carbink returned to the field. They’d handle whatever Ryuki did.

That was their confident decree.

It was no surprise to Olivia to see the silvery Steel-type blast form from the Kommo-o’s rattling scales, nor was it a surprise to Ryuki that the Jewel Pokemon Carbink so easily evaded it. Olivia had known that Pokemon would not be so easily threatened. Ryuki had known that Pokemon would not be so easily defeated.

But that was fine, the Dragon Tamer’s smile remained, as Kannonade without a missed beat
followed up with a second attack in the same moment as the first: a scale-rattling thrust of an arm unleashing a pulse of Fighting-type force just a second after the Steel-type blast from before. They could go further still.

Oooh, aggressive! Olivia was impressed. There was always a window between major techniques Pokemon released, a gap where they had to come down from one to unleash the next, but the best Trainers shortened that with tactics and training so their Pokemon could continue to attack without pause. And if Pitaya was right and that Kommo-o had only a year of Ryuki Oda training, that was some pretty good training at that!

But in travelling to Alola, Ryuki Oda had chosen to take on new members to his team, while Olivia’s had been with her for years already. He was a really, really good Trainer, and this was one of the most fun battles Olivia had ever had, but there were a couple of differences between them that really favoured her in the end.

So despite that Kommo-o scoring some real good hits, using its fast attacks to punish Carbink’s every dodge, the result of this battle between these two Pokemon remained one of truths. It was very true that Ryuki was a talented and able Trainer. But the same was true for Olivia. And in both Type and experience, Carbink held the lead. Eventually that Kommo-o was pronounced defeated. Carbink having taken way more hits than Olivia wanted before that Hydreigon emerged, but even then, the advantage still hers.

From the moment her Lycanroc had pushed the Mega Garchomp of Ryuki’s so far he’d been forced to take it off the field, the pace had been Olivia’s to seize, her grip upon it tightening with each victory to follow. Ryuki had fought hard to take it back, but that woman had fought just as hard to keep it. This fight was going her way.

Hey why was she so scary? Ryuki’s heart was pounding, facing off against this master Trainer in this League. Is that what becoming leader of an entire fourth of Alola and partner to a Legendary Pokemon did to someone? This was wild. The tension setting his passion aflame. Oh he’d write some great tunes from this.

*Hey Stone Queen, why’s the mountain falling, it not suit your taste, or was the same sight boring?*

The Armaldo of Olivia, Rock and Bug-type Plate Pokemon, answered Ryuki’s next choice in bringing his Drampa to the field. The Fossil Pokemon of the Akalan Kahuna fought similar to how her Lycanroc did, remaining close and never allowing distance or relief. Despite Drampa’s ability to fly, rocks launched by the blue-plated Pokemon on the ground punished its every ascent, and forced the Placid Pokemon to remain grounded at all times. It was obvious, in the way it fought, that the Armaldo must be a constant sparring partner for the Lycanroc, the two fighting the same and furthering one another constantly. Another member of the Kahuna’s team with such power as to overwhelm.

“Dazzle!”

But Ryuki fought back hard and, despite its title, once roused into anger at the strength its opponent brought against it, Drampa unleashed intense power of its own. It was hard to ever match the scale and ferocity of a Dragon-type Pokemon once they got going, and this battle evened the one between them just a bit. Olivia called Armaldo back and sent out Probopass again. Ryuki faced with a tough choice indeed.

Dazzle had won its prior fight at a cost. Taking off into the air now, it attacked with a taught electric technique, sparks jumping over the Probopass’s body, but from the way the Mini-Nose units could intervene with each bolt, and the sense Ryuki got from his partner as it fought, he knew Dazzle had
little left to give. Each battle with Olivia’s partners was pushing him down. And she’d hammered hard those Pokemon most recently added to his own team. Strong. Extremely strong.

But not enough to give in.

It took time for Probopass to defeat Drampa, the Compass Pokemon having spent a share of its own stamina facing Turtonator before. The victory did go to Olivia’s name, but she knew there was little more her partner could do. Still, her pace was good. Still, she was pushing closer and closer to the ultimate partner of Ryuki Oda with strength to spare.

Still, she wouldn’t give up here.

Serena, the orange-bodied Dragon Pokemon Dragonite, was the fifth of Ryuki’s Pokemon to join this battle, just herself and a tired Lilith left. Of Olivia’s team: Lycanroc and Armaldo defeated; that Probopass running out of steam; and Caribink having taken a measure of damage. No appearance yet of the Alolan Golem or Tyrantrum Olivia had revealed in her battle with Tapu Lele. She was as much a monster of a Trainer as Ryuki, maybe even more. In battles like this, the very first choice could often decide the flow. At their level, were they to meet a second time the battle could be completely different. A runaway ending in one’s crushing defeat of the other. Or another drawn-out fight that just barely favoured Ryuki instead. Such were fights among masters at the peak.

Such was the shine of these stars at the top of the world.

Using a variety of Electric-type techniques in addition to its Rock and Steel, the Probopass partner of Olivia proved immediately dangerous to the Dragonite Serena. But Ryuki had understood that would be the case, and held faith that his partner would rise above. And she did.

Benga, watching Ryuki’s fight so closely, learned as intently from that man as Moon had from watching him and his Volcarona before. The way Ryuki’s Dragonite fought, wow she was tough. Using her tail as a counter-balance while moving and attacking to speed up and exert more force, that was a great idea! He’d have to practise that as soon as he had a chance!

Pitaya, who’d specifically requested Benga join her for training with the Dragon Tamers, would find herself severely disappointed that Ryuki had managed to teach this potential student such first.

One brutal flaming punch, as Dragonite pushed through the Mini-Nose units in a flight of great speed, sent Probopass flying backwards into the barrier wall, its Mini-Noses dropping with the main body no longer conscious to command. Olivia called the Compass Pokemon back and sent out at last her Alolan Golem, the Rock and Electric-type Megaton Pokemon, iron growths across its body enabling the electric force that crackled around it.

This was a rough match-up too, but at this point all of Olivia’s Pokemon were. Ryuki could bring Lilith back out now, who’d be severely effective against this Rock and Electric-type foe, but with the strength of Olivia’s Pokemon... Ryuki wouldn’t risk it. Not yet. Gave Lilith as much time to recover as he could.

Would place his faith in Serena to continue this battle well.

Though she’d only evolved within the last year, explosively had Serena come into her own. She was passionately powerful, and fought always at one-hundred percent, Ryuki with delight supporting her the same amount. The battle between Serena and this Alolan Golem was one vicious and aggressive, the two pushing out as much power as they could to an intense degree. Those witness, after the match between Ryuki and Olivia was done, would quote this specific battle as the most even of all those within. The two Pokemon giving and receiving attacks in such equal measure, commanded by
their partners relentlessly and expertly, it was a duel of the highest level and just another flavour of the many delights this match had brought.

Of these two masters battling at the peak.

That the Alolan Golem of Olivia won this fight was, many would say, solely because the Dragonite of Ryuki had already battled some before. Would then, others asked, the Dragonite have won if it were fresh? Maybe, the first would reply, or maybe not, but it would be even closer still.

Olivia made her choice when the Mega Evolved Garchomp partner of Ryuki returned to the field. Her Golem had been savaged, but to spend the last of its energy here to try and slow that Garchomp further, or save that power to try and lash out at Hydreigon, which was worth it? The Kahuna decided immediately, decisiveness born of experience, and called Golem back so she might return Carbink to the field. Another risk, she was falling further and further from the chance to strike Hydreigon with a Fairy-type Z-Move, but even after Lycanroc’s efforts Olivia would not assume the Pokemon before her was an easy win.

She was more than experienced enough to be long past the days of those foolish mistakes.

Olivia’s first action, to call for her partner to use the power she’d planned for before, to change the air in the field to slow the fast and speed up the slow, was a good counter to their Mega Garchomp foe. That Pokemon moved quick, so the air pushing back against it would make it an easy target for a Moonblast as well. But Ryuki’s command was good too, and without any of her exhaustion holding her back, Lilith dug quickly into the ground.

“Ryuki’s Mega Garchomp has gone underground!” Anna said what everyone could see. “A fast digging Pokemon even in its regular state, we have no guarantee where it will surface at its Mega Evolved speed! How will Olivia move to counter this?”

Good question. Underground was outside the range of Carbink’s effect, meaning that Garchomp was going at its proper speed now. Even as worn down as it was, Olivia was still pretty confident that if the Mach Pokemon caught her partner when it surfaced that would be Carbink out. Which would ruin a whole lot of her plan. She’d have to use Tyrantrum to finish things off then, since Golem was still at serious risk from the Mach Pokemon’s Ground-type techniques.

To prevent that future from happening, she’d watch the field closely and-

Carbink had raised a barrier around it. Lifted up into the air as well to begin gaining height. But with sand streaming from its body, amplifying the strength it exerted as it burst from the ground, the Garchomp soared up even through the slowing effect of the air. Even through the sudden blasts of rock that Carbink fired downwards at Olivia’s commands. Through it all with Mega Evolved strength to seize the Jewel Pokemon in its jaws, then drag it back down to the ground.

Knowing her partner was easiest struck from directly beneath, Olivia had commanded it to rise up so it would be harder to reach. But even with that plan still the power of Mega Evolution had pushed through to bring her partner down. It was pretty obvious Carbink was out. Pinned by Garchomp as sand swirled around the Mach Pokemon, Ryuki calling out direction and Lilith channelling Ground-type force into her strikes. Olivia could tell clearly her partner was beat. Hadn’t been able to stop this at all.

Not great.

Now it was just two against two. Her very exhausted Golem and fresh Tyrantrum. Ryuki’s very exhausted Garchomp and immaculate Hydreigon. Olivia still had a Z-Move, but now she would not
have the one she’d desired. Would have to go with the Dragonium-Z instead. That sucked.

But no matter what she was going to fight the ultimate partner of Ryuki Oda with everything she had. And to reach that fight, she’d not hold back in the least.

No backing down.

The sight of the Despot Pokemon before him didn’t shake Ryuki’s wild smile, nor Lilith’s bared fangs, the Mach Pokemon diving forward and spinning once more into a maelstrom of spikes. The tail of Tyrantrum smashed into Garchomp, sending the Mega Evolved Pokemon flying, but only for a moment as she quickly recovered, dig her feet into the ground, then launched back at it with fangs aglow. Still so relentless and strong. Olivia hadn’t fought that many Mega Evolved Pokemon, and found herself enjoying this experience a lot even despite the trouble it had brought. Kind of wished she could have let Tyrantrum fight it from full, but that would’ve been a much quicker loss for them. Only her Lycanroc had the strength and fighting style necessary for wearing that Pokemon down.

All the decisions she'd made to bring her to this point, it would all be worth it in the end.

She'd face the final battle with head held high.

Lilith did not go gently into defeat. Fought until the bitter end, biting and slashing, unleashing Dragon and Ground-type attacks faster and faster still. But the Tyrantrum of Olivia was so much healthier and possessed of such great strength of its own. So despite all Lilith did, still the battle ended with her Mega Evolved form fading away, the regular Mach Pokemon falling to the ground defeated. Olivia breathed out a quick breath. Seriously, Mega Evolved Pokemon were no joke! But she’d done it. Fought her way through Ryuki’s five.

Now only one left.

Ryuki raised the Luxury Ball up and called for his partner’s aid.

“Were you watching?”

Once again he was unable to go on without her.

“Yeah yeah, you’ve got a fan out here wanting to meet you. If you say no that’s the end of us here too. You didn’t get to show off in the last League either, remember?”

She would fight.

“Alright, let’s do this one together, okay? She’s way stronger than you think.”

If he wished.

“Okay then. Here we go. Hydreigon I choose you!”

And once more she returned to the field.

Louder than the crowd’s roar was the Brutal Pokemon’s own, announcing her manifestation with ear-splitting sound. The Dark and Dragon-type Pokemon Hydreigon, centuries old, the blue of her skin faded to a dark enough colour to match her black, ready to fight. Pitaya outlined again how this was a Pokemon she did not understand, a creature she had never witnessed of such age before. What was a Hydreigon of centuries even like? Brutal and overpowering, by the battle with Sina, like all of that kind. Pitaya hoped dearly for Olivia to reveal more.
Olivia grinned wildly as the full power of Ryuki Oda bore down upon her.

It wasn’t like with the Tapu, the sensation of this ancient Hydreigon. With the Tapu there was something truly there, some force they exuded that pushed down those around them. A force Olivia had grown used to over her years alongside Tapu Lele as Kahuna of Akala. But the presence of this Hydreigon, Olivia knew, it was entirely in her head. The sheer acknowledgement of how strong this Pokemon was becoming an actual force that pushed her back. That was somehow even more.

She couldn’t stop her smile.

Stomping heavy forward, Tyrantrum roared back at the foe before it, rocks rising up at the Pokemon’s command, blasting forward into the pulse of draconic force that Hydreigon unleashed, exploding into pebbles and dust within the purple ring blasting out from the Brutal Pokemon's open mouths. But Tyrantrum, continuing to stomp forward, roared out its own and met the blast, two Dragon-type attacks mixing into an explosion the Despot Pokemon pushed through. Olivia would command the Dragon-type Z-Move, Dragonium-Z set into her Z-Ring, as soon as the opportunity arose, but she’d need to make that opportunity first. Believe in the power of her partner, who held the most raw strength of all her team, as any good dragon did.

They’d rise above.

Unable to push back the Pokemon stomping towards it, not summoning a firestorm to invalidate its foe as it had with Sina’s Pokemon before, the Hydreigon met Tyrantrum directly, the Despot Pokemon slamming its red-scaled and orange-crested head into the black and blue body of the Brutal Pokemon as Hydreigon’s three heads whipped around and each ground their jaws against the Tyrantrum's rock hide. The glow of blue around the edges of each of Hydreigon's mouths was warning of their plan, but Olivia had already commanded her partner to strike upwards into its opponent’s gut, the small arms of the Despot Pokemon not physically touching it, but projecting enough draconic force of their own to reach all the same.

The strike mattered, Hydreigon detaching and thrashing back from the blow, before all three heads pushed together and breathed out a stream of blue flames as one. Tyrantrum commanded a storm of rocks into the attack, but still the blue flames pushed through and licked at its stone scaled hide. The power of Ryuki’s partner overwhelming.

But not yet enough.

“Go!”

The next roar of Tyrantrum carried force, breaking through the remnants of the attack that had fallen upon it, blowing open a path through the blue draconic fire to the Hydreigon before it. Stomping forward again Tyrantrum’s jaws glowed as it opened them wide, Dragon-type energy forming across the Despot Pokemon’s fangs.

Hydreigon met it the same, the two dragons lashing out with empowered fangs, biting at one another and unleashing their strength. Such was a dragon’s duel, a requirement to strike and be struck, to rail their full power against the other until only one remained standing. For her ancient age, the Hydreigon partner of Ryuki still held onto that code. Pitaya found herself appreciating that fact.

A good sign.

“Stone Edge!”

Yet Trainers changed how a battle would be. The stomp of Tyrantrum even as it held Hydreigon in
its bite, the three heads of the Brutal Pokemon biting at it in turn, erupted a pillar of sharp stone beneath the partner of Ryuki, shoving it into the air and out of Tyrantrum’s grasp. Ryuki commanded back in turn.

“Draco Meteor!”

For a moment Hydreigon paused.

She had accepted him. They shared a Bond. Ryuki gave her strength, and she battled in his name. But when he commanded her in battle, still she remained... disagreeable. There were times he was too full of himself for her taste. She had agreed to remain by his side for him to earn her full favour, but he had yet to do so. To command her here, too arrogant.

She held for a moment to disregard him and make her own choice.

That moment enough for Olivia to burst into motion, clasp her hands before her, and perform the Z-Pose of the Dragonium-Z.

The light of the Z-Move shone as bright as the crowd’s roar was loud, energy swirling around the Tyrantrum as it opened its jaws wide to point up at the Hydreigon flying above. The light built, the power built, and facing a Z-Move pointed towards her, the ancient dragon paused further.

Ryuki’s voice, at full volume, didn’t even need the camera-mounted microphones around the stage for the crowd to hear.

“LISTEN TO ME AND ATTACK!”

In this moment his force of will was greater and she responded without question. Opened her mouth and manifested draconic energy of her own, a mass coalescing into a meteor blast raining down. Her full power thrown against the foe below.

Through that blast the draconic form of the Z-Move Devastating Drake broke through.

An ancient being who had fought in battles far beyond this, against foes seeking not only victory but her life, a blow such as this would not stop her. Even as it struck, even as it hurt, even as it did far more than she’d ever expected the opponent before her to do, still she roared against it and summoned her full power, Ryuki’s own behind her, to attack again. To rain down another Draco Meteor upon the Tyrantrum in its seconds of recovery after that Z-Move.

A direct hit which damaged the Despot Pokemon as much as its Z-Move had hurt the Hydreigon itself.

She showed no mercy. Even with a wound scorched across her chest she flew down and slammed into her foe, blasting it with attack after attack, suffering its own but pushing through to never relent her assault. This was the difference between a Pokemon of battle and a Pokemon of war. She’d never stop until victory was hers.

Ryuki’s command, sharp and full of unrelenting intent, the type so evocative of the one who’d partnered her before, drew her back. Olivia, eyes wide, raised her partner’s Pokeball to call it back, for a moment afraid this battle would go far beyond just defeat. That Hydreigon...

It had seriously felt like it had just been fighting to kill.

Golem came last, Olivia shaking her head. Ryuki’s call of the Hydreigon to relent, she’d trust in that. That the Brutal Pokemon would not act so dangerously again. That this was a Pokemon Battle the
two Trainers and their partners could still share. Though Golem remained exhausted from its battle with Dragonite, fought at so equal a level, Olivia still stood tall. She’d pushed Ryuki and his partner so far. Just... a little... further...

Hydreigon, fully accepting Ryuki’s commands as her partner in this fight, did not flinch in blasting out draconic flame still. As the Alolan Golem attacked back, blasts of electricity and rock, this final exchange was a battle of power and resilience alone.

A battle the partner of Oda won with heads held high.

Thus came to a close the third battle of this day, between Ryuki Oda and Kahuna Olivia of Akala. Through a once more cracked and shattered battlefield they walked to clasp hands, as the crowd roared appreciation for the immensity of the battle they’d shown. This day had already given two fights that could peak any other League. The first of Alola a clear display of the incredible Trainers the region would continue to attract and produce. Ryuki smiled.

“Let me say, I was really, really scared for a minute there.”

“I’d have been mad if you weren’t,” Olivia smiled easily back. “Let’s do this again sometime. A fight like this isn’t a high you let go of in a hurry.”

“Sounds good.” Releasing his hand from hers, Ryuki stepped back. “Now I think our teams need some rest, and that poor repair crew needs to fix the field for the next fight!”

Right. To Ryuki’s interest, Olivia’s face immediately lost her smile. She nodded.

The next fight...

A different energy pulsed in the voice of the crowd, those gathered in the stands of the Pokemon League dome to witness the fourth and final match of this day. The relationship between the two to compete, former Admin of Team Skull Plumeria, and Island Deity of Ula’ula Tapu Bulu, was no widely known thing. But enough knew, enough held their cries back, their tones not loudly of excitement or support, for others to notice and change their voices too.

Enough for, as Plumeria took her place in the trainer’s circle to the east, as Tapu Bulu descended from the south-eastern pillar to the battlefield and the barrier rose up around it, the sound of those watching to be more muttering and discussion than outright cheers.

“The final battle of today,” Anna’s voice gave no sign of her own misgivings, though she herself knew, “will be between the third and fourth winners of Green Block: Plumeria and Tapu Bulu. Professor Kukui will be joining us shortly to commentate, and then the battle will begin. Please look forward to it!”

Alexa, who could tell when someone was putting on more of a voice than feeling what they were saying, looked at Anna oddly as the Alolan reporter leaned back from her microphone. Then turned her head at the sound of the door to the announcer’s box behind them opening.

Heads raised across the League dome at the broadcast words to follow.

“You’re not Professor Kukui.”

A second later, a gasp in Anna’s voice.
Then a third voice, a man’s lazy drawl, followed after.

“Yeah he’s indisposed. The name’s Nanu, I’m Kahuna of Ula’ula Island and partner of that thing down there on the left. Budge over, I’ve got things to say.”

The wide-eyed stare of Anna spooked Alexa, who pulled back as Nanu pushed through and took the seat between them, leaning over the microphone awaiting the third commentator of this match. Toyed with it for a moment before beginning to speak.

The voice of the crowd went to silence.

“So before I took over the last Kahuna Ula’ula had was named Holei. Real good leader, everyone keeps telling me, though I never met her. Plumeria down there’s her kid, you know?”

Deeper the silence fell, colder those aware’s blood ran. Moon was staring up at the announcer’s box overhead, shocked to hear these words spoken out loud. Hala was forcing himself to remain seated, knowing Nanu would do more than could ever be stopped before he could make it to him.

That man...

“Back then we had Tapu Village,” Nanu’s voice continued unabated, Anna trying to calm her breathing, Alexa’s eyes flicking from her to the light smile on Nanu’s face as he spoke. “on the south side. It was just starting to expand, Holei approving a Thrifty Megamart to move in, before things went down. Turns out Tapu Bulu liked the old place the way it was, and didn’t want anything new. So went and destroyed the building, just like that. Cost of living, don’t you think?”

A pin dropped could be heard from one end of the dome to the other.

“Of course Holei didn’t like that either, and scolded old Tapu Bulu something fierce. Started teaching others how to keep it in line like she knew how to, like how Olivia showed off the other day. Well that not one of the Tapu were fans of hearing about.”

Across the world those watching looked to one another in confusion, back to the screens the broadcast came from. Others searching up recent history of Alola, to learn just where this story was to go.

“So Tapu Bulu came back after that and instead of just knocking down a building it didn’t like, it took the entire place down. You saw it growing those plants before, it did that to all of Tapu Village, threw out everyone who lived there, and banned those Holei was teaching from ever coming back. As for Holei, word is she got caught up in the overgrowth while trying to calm Tapu Bulu down and make sure people got out. No-one saw the moment but, fact is, after that day there wasn’t a Holei anymore.”

Now everyone knew. Now the world knew. A piece of Alola’s history smoothed over and buried, dragged out into the light of this immensely public sphere. Anna and Alexa both stared at Nanu, whose expression seemed almost delighted to have exposed so shameful a thing. The Kahuna didn’t stop at all.

“That’s what we’re looking at, folks. Plumeria down there and the one who took her home and did her ma in. Pretty sick situation if I say so myself-”

“Nanu!” The loud voice of Plumeria, speaking at last, was picked up by the microphones around the field and broadcast through the speakers so all might hear. Her tone was that of a person no more than inconvenienced. A minor annoyance in their way. “I’m trying to focus.”
A small laugh from Nanu came through the speakers in response. The Kahuna nodded where he sat. Fair enough.

“All yours, princess.”

There was not a voice in the crowd. Not a voice from those in the announcer’s box above. Nor in the competitor’s stands. All was silent as the judge for this match, knowing it was on them to break this moment, shakily raised their arms.

“Competitors at the ready!”

Tapu Bulu showed no reaction to any of the words spoken, floating within the battlefield’s barrier awaiting its next foe. Plumeria reached for the Pokeball of the first partner she’d send out. Into absolute silence she’d take this fight. Fine then.

She’d understood how this would be.

Before the judge could announce the start there was commotion. A sudden shift in the crowd behind Plumeria, many in their seats pulling away as a figure strode through. The tall man wore none of the regalia that had once marked him for who he was, though the black and white clothing, and golden sunglasses resting in his white hair, still carried the appearance he favoured. Everyone still knew.

Guzma took a stance looking over the field and raised his voice for everyone to hear.

“YOU’VE GOT THIS PLUMS, SHOW THAT PUNK WHO’S BOSS AND BEAT THEM DOWN, AIGHT?”

Easily did Guzma’s voice project across the stadium, Plumeria’s eyes widening in surprise. Since Team Skull’s disbanding she’d barely seen Guzma even once. Hala had taken on looking after the former Boss, and Plumeria had been busy with her Island Challenge. As much as they’d each decided Team Skull hadn’t been the way, Plumeria had still wondered whether Guzma found her taking on the Island Challenge distasteful.

It seemed not.

Silence still remained, that one call not enough to move the crowd, all staring at the man who had yelled out. Guzma whipped around to find all their eyes on him. And snarled.

“What’s with you? Ain’t this League a festival of Trainers? Cheer! Do it! I wanna hear you yell!”

Across the dome another voice rose up.

“Get em big sis!” Riley, on her feet, leaned out over the edge of the competitor’s stands and yelled her loudest. “You can do it!”

Still shaking, this moment too raw, Acerola shut her eyes and rose to her feet.

“Go Plumeria!”

Then another’s cheer. And another’s. One by one the voices of Tapu Village rising up to support the woman on the stage, the woman who had continued on with Alola even after losing so much. Then more voices still. Moon cheered. Hau as well. Across the stadium all gathered began to yell, to cheer, to call for a battle that would mean more than any other in this League before.

Go, Plumeria.
Win.

“Begin!”

In a surge of speed across the battlefield Crobat, Poison and Flying-type partner of Plumeria, flew, towards the floating Tapu Bulu awaiting its opponent’s first act. The Bat Pokemon struck immediately, a cut of poison across the Island Deity’s chest. And that was more than enough to start things off.

Immediately Tapu Bulu called out, a loud cry announcing its now raised intent. Lashing out with golden hooved hands it flew after Crobat, roused to action by the Pokemon’s opening attack. But the Crobat was fast, and flew with accuracy aided by Plumeria’s focus upon their opponent. Leading Tapu Bulu high up into the air and then down again, this way and that, Crobat continued to evade as the Island Deity pursued, gesturing again and again with its hands to burst growing trees from the earth as it flew. Arcing down along the eastern barrier wall before dashing away along the ground, Crobat neatly evaded as Tapu Bulu slammed both hands down into the earth just moments behind it.

Directly before where Plumeria stood.

“My mother told me... about you.”

These words were for these two alone. For Plumeria, standing before the barrier, looking through it into the blue eyes of Tapu Bulu, the Pokemon looking up at her from where it had just hit the ground.

“I know. The way you think. The little you ever bother to remember. You have no idea who I am, do you?”

The Tapu tilted its head, a gesture of confusion. The crowd stared as cameramen around the League field tried to get just a little closer to hear these quiet words.

“You Tapu, you never doubt yourselves. You never think yourselves wrong. Anything you choose to do, the results of those things, they’re always right because you chose to do them. That’s how you think. That’s why the Kahuna are tasked to moderate and keep you in line.”

Crobat had landed in one of the grown trees, while its partner spoke her piece. Tapu Bulu still stared at her with its blue eyes. Plumeria shook her head.

“My mother told you this, and you rejected her. So I’ll say it again. Tapu Bulu... what you did was
The immediate reaction of the Island Deity was to recoil back, as if struck, eyes wide.

Then anger.

Plumeria stood there as Tapu Bulu roared, a deep bellowing sound washing over her, passing easily through the barrier wall, slackened to safe levels but not eliminated at all. Tapu Bulu reared back a hooved hand.

Crobat slashed along the Land Spirit Pokemon’s back and left another poison-streaked cut.

Even as the Land Spirit Pokemon whipped around from her Plumeria stood strong, the heavy beating of her heart not stopping her at all. Not now that she was here. Not now that it was time to follow through.

The message she had to deliver from her mother went further still than this.

Tapu Bulu rammed into a tree and snapped it in two with ease, seizing hold of the toppling trunk before swinging it around overhead, creating a draft of wind so powerful it caught and pulled the flying Crobat along with it. But a beat of Crobat’s wings counter to the draft gave the Bat Pokemon a moment’s freedom, and it clasped onto the tree to be carried safely with it. Tapu Bulu, shaking the tree this way and that, seeking to smash the Crobat in the air, paused after a moment, staring up the wooden trunk to where the Bat Pokemon was latched on. Plumeria’s command was exact.

Spat from the Bat Pokemon a streak of purple poisonous goo splattered across Tapu Bulu’s face.

The roar of fury from Tapu Bulu was almighty as the deity raised the trunk it grasped to full height then swung it down with all its might, the wood shattering into splinters as it struck the ground, the earth itself breaking with the impact sending cracks across the field. Immediately up into the air Tapu Bulu raced, a surge of wind around it as it flew, curving through the air to smash through and topple another tree, even more growing from the broken earth the deity’s power was spreading through. Already incited to a rage where it would hold nothing back.

The state Plumeria had needed it in to drag it down to earth.

It was a battle of stamina, by Tapu Bulu easily won. Crobat flew, dodged, and rarely struck back. Focused on evasion for as long as it might. And Tapu Bulu pursued with relentless fury. Without the incredible agility of Tapu Koko, who flew at thunderbolt speed, nor the psychic power of Tapu Lele or water control of Tapu Fini, Tapu Bulu could not catch the fastest of Pokemon. Instead relied on outlasting them, an easy thing for the hearty deity to do. Eventually, after a long duel, Crobat failed just one dodge. The Island Deity pinned it against the barrier wall.

“Don’t even think this is over.” The red beam from the Pokeball Plumeria held, pulling Crobat back to her, drew the Island Deity’s eyes again, narrowing at the sight of the one below it. Plumeria held up and activated another Pokeball instead.

Not done. Not nearly yet done.

The rainbow coloured Alolan form of Muk, the Sludge Pokemon, Poison and Dark-type, was the second choice of Plumeria in this fight. She’d learned from her mistaken arrogance before. Tapu Lele, who could not harm Muk directly with its psychic powers, had still greatly endangered the Pokemon by working around it. These Tapu, they all knew how to overwhelm and crush.

She wouldn’t drop her guard for even a single second.
The hooved hand of Tapu Bulu sunk easily into the sludgy body of Muk, her Pokemon easing its consistency second by second to be even harder to harm. The burn of poisonous flesh, setting into the skin of Tapu Bulu in contact with it, caused the deity to jerk its hand back in surprise. Even touching this Pokemon hurt.

Well then.

Plumeria watched as Tapu Bulu went and ripped another of its trees from the ground. As grass continued to grow across the field, taking over the shattered sections already, Tapu Bulu so confidently looking away and turning its back. In the moments it was occupied with the tree another thrown mass of poison from the Muk, a segment of its own body, collided with the Land Spirit Pokemon’s back and it howled again, clearly pained, the flinch from it causing the tree Tapu Bulu held to be crushed by the force it exerted, split at the place it held rather than pulled from the earth. Fumbling with the wooden trunk, Tapu Bulu still turned around to swing it down upon its foe.

Muk, having compressed its soft body into a much smaller form, could no longer be seen amongst the swaying field of grass that had grown under the power the Island Deity spilled out.

That growth... of all the Tapu that power was the wildest and most unrestrained. Tapu Bulu could direct it, yes, but at any other time it simply... grew. Plants forming and twisting up under the deity’s power without command. Life simply growing. That was how it was.

That was what had done it.

It had taken five years before she found the one to tell her. Before she worked her way through all the residents of Tapu Village who were there that day, and had grown old enough to tell the ones lying to her. Eventually she found the truth. Nanu had said no-one knew. No-one saw the moment. But one, who’d spoken to Plumeria in such a haunted voice when she’d forced them to confess, had. Told her what they’d seen.

As Holei yelled at Tapu Bulu to stop, her Pokemon more focused on pushing back the overgrowth than reaching up to the deity floating above, one person that one of Holei’s Pokemon was saving had seen it. Had seen a tree burst suddenly through a building, and seen that building collapse.

So accidental. So stupid. Just part of the Tapu’s power spilling out without any real intent beyond growth and that was it. Plumeria remembered the white-hot rage she’d felt at that time, thinking nothing of what the one she was forcing to tell her this must have felt. What, she’d spoken so venomously, did Tapu Bulu do?

Shaking, that person told Plumeria what they had seen and never been able to forget.

The deity had spent a long moment staring at where Holei’s body was.

Then turned and flown away into the sky.

As it had with the Comfey of Mallow before, once again Tapu Bulu rose into the sky, drew back a hooved hand, then thrust it forward to flatten the grass and earth beneath a giant hoofprint projected into the ground.

She’d learned. Learned from Mallow’s battle how Tapu Bulu fought. It hadn’t shown that move – that power the other three had – and so Plumeria knew, that technique would only been seen on the other side of Tapu Bulu’s full release. Until the deity unleashed its full rage, that power would be of
All she had learned, all she had seen, all she had been taught, all of it she wove together into this fight here and now.

Tapu Bulu attacked again. And again. Overflowing power streamed from its form, the battlefield below it growing into new shapes every time the deity stomped it down. The pressure it was releasing, the intensity of the Island Guardian, it was beyond question in power. The most any of the four had expressed to date.

Plumeria rose above.

When Tapu Bulu hit the ground a great shockwave spread out, lifting and turning the earth, unsettling all upon it. Thrown loose from where its shrunken form had slithered Muk turned, spitting out another batch of poisonous goo. But Tapu Bulu responded fast, thrusting a hand forward to project power that blew that gunk apart and struck the momentarily airborne Muk hard as well. Threw it all the way across the battlefield into another barrier wall. But that wasn’t yet enough.

Muk slid back across the earth, its compressed body still difficult to see. Plumeria knew where her partner was, her Bond connecting them together, but never let her eyes leave Tapu Bulu’s form. The deity looked up, from where it had attacked, to stare a moment into Plumeria’s face. Then turned back to the battlefield, slammed its hooved hands together, and shook its bell-like tail to announce what it would do next.

Again. Again that sound. The announcement that Tapu Bulu was to destroy everything it did not like. Acerola again in the stands shrank back, but Riley turned and called her name, lifting Acerola’s eyes to the battlefield again. They couldn’t let their big sis face this alone.

Acerola nodded and forced herself to remain at watch.

Once again, in the wake of its cry, Tapu Bulu raised its arms. Once again the battlefield was sundered, trees growing at explosive speed in a wave out from the divine being. The League battlefield in a single moment was now a forest. Towering trees scraping against the barrier roof. Grown so thick and densely together. She’d drawn this out now.

Time to go even further still.

This time when Tapu Bulu burst through wood, trees sagging against one another as they were split from the ground, it was with intent. Its power suffused this environment to the greatest of levels, and in the afterglow of its attack Tapu Bulu held no difficulty finding those caught within. Tracked down Plumeria’s Muk with unerring precision, and once a Pokemon was caught by the Island Deity, defeat was all that could follow. Its raw strength simply too much to match. Plumeria stood tall as Tapu Bulu burst from the treeline to slam her partner against the barrier wall before her, dropping it in announcement, in rejection of the one who had dared to call it wrong. Plumeria accepted Muk’s return and exchanged this partner for her next. For the Toxic Lizard Pokemon Salazzle, Poison and Fire-type.

No stopping.

Not until this was done.

Salazzle breathed out a huge mist of poisonous fog as Tapu Bulu reached out to it, dashing into the dense forest as the deity pulled a moment back. Now Plumeria’s partner was on the move, clambering up trees and leaping from one to the next, seeking out those Tapu Bulu had already
severed from the earth and thus from the awareness it held. More things she’d been taught.

Lessons only one could have given her.

Tapu Bulu burst back into the forest, the sound of wood shattering soon the only thing that could be heard. View of within was impossible, and so the crowd surrounding the League stage could only watch. Called encouragement, support, wished Plumeria and Salazzle well, but knew not what was going on within. None could.

None bar Plumeria herself.

A Trainer’s Bond of eleven long years was no small thing at all. The connection between Salazzle and Plumeria, it told her all she needed to know. When her partner moved and when it was still. When Tapu Bulu was close and when it moved away, seeking out this foe. Starting a fire at the base of one tree, Salazzle moved quickly through the grown woods even as that fire began to spread.

Such kindling the Tapu had given them.

Smoke began to rise from the canopy, Tapu Bulu continuing to fell tree after tree. But its own overgrowth had now inconvenienced it, the deity struggling to chase down the foe set against it. Fires continued to set. Trails of poisonous gas continued to be unleashed. Salazzle, dutifully and with focus from the Bond it shared with its beloved partner, continued to transform this forest into a form more fitting its kind.

A form that would bring down the Island Deity Tapu Bulu itself.

A tree of trunk three times as thick as all the rest burst high, smashing against the barrier roof and splintering apart, the technicians on watch instantly in panic mode. Slamming a hoof against that tree’s trunk Tapu Bulu felled it, then seized it and spun. With power beyond power, incredible force beyond belief, the tree shifted, crashed against others, and then tore through. In a single spin with all the might it could summon Tapu Bulu felled a gigantic circle of the forest it had created. Vines and grasses and bushes and all manner of plants already overgrowing the fallen wood. Such was the power it released.

Expressing all it could give.

Salazzle, who’d grimly hung on to the opposite side of the great trunk as it was smashed through all the others, rose up as Plumeria raised her own arms in turn. Arms held to one side, then whipped apart as she dropped to one knee, other leg bent forward. Purple Poisonium-Z set within her Z-Ring shining bright.

In the brief moment of rest Tapu Bulu needed, having wielded its full strength to tear down the forest it created, Plumeria and Salazzle struck as one and released the full might of the Poison-type Z-Move Acid Downpour upon it.

The roiling cloud of purple gas and liquid charged by Z-Power flowed out, pouring from Salazzle’s open mouth, to fall upon Tapu Bulu’s momentarily still form.

Immediate and immense was the howl of Tapu Bulu, the pained scream as the Z-Move struck true. The only member of the four Tapu for whom both of what made up its Typing – Grass and Fairy – were weak to Poison: for Tapu Bulu this was an attack it felt all the way to its core. It was funny, in a way, that Plumeria had formed her first Bond with her partner Salandit before everything had happened. The specific Pokemon Type that would let Plumeria bring down this being that which she was biased towards.
If it was fated, fate was an obscenely cruel thing and Plumeria would tear it down as well.

Tapu Bulu’s screams did not cease. Its howls and pained cries as, coated in thick poison that did not loosen their cling to its form, the deity crashed through the ground, digging up the earth to pour over it, thrashing across the field as grass pushed through where the poison had not touched. Where the poison from that Z-Move had fallen, even Tapu Bulu’s power could not regrow.

Salazzle breathed out a stream of fire that torched Tapu Bulu’s form and the screaming deity grasped and tore a chunk of the earth three times its own size from the ground before hurling it at the Toxic Lizard Pokemon with perfect accuracy.

Again Tapu Bulu’s strength was impossible to fight. Any direct competition fated to lose, even after this long. But Plumeria was not stopping here. Held nothing back as she called Salazzle back and sent out Toxapex in turn.

They were not done.

She would not stop here.

She was going to win.

In the stands Sabrina stared with wide eyes. Of all of those to face the Tapu so far, those victorious had been blessed to be so. Olivia had defeated Tapu Lele by sheer experience with the force the deity expressed. And Moon... Moon had existed above. Been unable to be touched by Tapu Koko’s strength as Sabrina had been, as Dexio had by Tapu Fini’s own.

But Plumeria, what she was doing was... different. It wasn’t immunity or experience. It was intent. Drive. An unrelenting force that empowered the woman in a way that shook Sabrina to her core.

A Pokemon Trainer was passion. Intensity and drive. Confidence. Belief. Focus. Determination. A mixture of all of these things that lent their Pokemon strength and made them rise above. The more a Trainer expressed, the more they could give, the stronger their partners would be. This was a truth that Sabrina had seen, time and time again.

And it was by that truth that, watching Plumeria in this fight, Sabrina knew one thing for sure. That without question, right now, the most powerful Trainer in this Pokemon League was the woman standing down there on that stage before them.

Such was the power that Plumeria of Tapu Village, Plumeria daughter of Holei, Plumeria of Alola, expressed.

Her battle of eleven long years finally coming to a close.

The way Toxapex, the Poison and Water-type Brutal Star Pokemon, fought was in punishment and defense. With twelve aqua-blue legs covered in heavy spikes wrapped around its small main body, it was a Pokemon that presented an unyielding exterior to any who threatened it with their strength.

Tapu Bulu, poison still dripping from its form, slammed its hooved hands together again and, along with the burst of sound, a wave of pink energy flowed out.

Yet this technique that all the Tapu shared, the Fairy-type ability Nature’s Madness that sapped half the strength from whatsoever it touched, broke against the shimmering form of Toxapex as it tensed the twelve legs wrapped around it, each momentarily hardening to resist any attack, body within kept safe. Seeing this, infuriated and pained, Tapu Bulu roared again and flew at Toxapex with full speed, hoof raised to smash the Brutal Star Pokemon into the ground.
Plumeria commanded her partner to fire its next attack directly into the path of the deity’s approach.

“Venoshock.”

Any expert of Poison-type Pokemon knew full well that the vast variety of concoctions those Pokemon can create could never be truly catalogued. Each Pokemon was different, each of their poisons different, each of their applications different. Similarities could be forced by Trainers seeking controllable strength, but those who truly embraced the Type knew what was demanded of them. To understand what differed of each of the partners they held.

And how to mix, from one to the next, the most potent combination they possibly could.

Crobat struck with neurotoxin, inflicted through claw and fang, poison that lingered and sapped away at health. Muk’s poison was something that seeped into skin and burned, and proved an active catalyst for other liquid reactions. Salazzle’s was the deepest burn of all, more acid than poison, corroding and tearing away.

Toxapex’s was twofold. On its own paralytic, to render prey unable to continue on. But once the other variant, less potent on its own, mixed with poison already within a system... such was the chemical reaction Plumeria had built all this time.

This time the scream of Tapu Bulu caused for so many a sense of sorrow at the fight taking place. Poison-type Experts had this trait, the danger they possessed to battles being extreme damage and pain, but in competitive fights would rarely go so far. But for Plumeria, facing down one of the four Guardian Deities of Alola, she felt nothing more than another step taken on the path she had chosen.

This was what she had to do.

Tapu Bulu’s rage consumed it, pushing the deity through the pain of the poison setting into its body, the Land Spirit Pokemon slamming the ground so hard that Toxapex was lifted the same as Muk before, then struck again with another projected blow. Before it even hit the ground, bouncing off the barrier wall, Tapu Bulu had pursued the flung Brutal Star Pokemon and smashed it down with green glowing horns. The fourth of Plumeria’s partners defeated.

Fine.

She would not bow. She would not break. Reached for the fifth and final Pokeball she had ready. The newest of her partners, taken on in the months of her Island Challenge. But Plumeria trusted in them. This battle was for more than just her. It was for all of Alola. And for them too.

So then.

Let’s finish this.

“I choose you, Mimikyu!”

To see the sight of this partner of Holei, thought lost amongst the ruins of Tapu Village never to return, imitated by the Totem copying the memories of that place, struck every last person that knew silent to their core.

Kukui, watching from the corridor leading out onto the stage, pushed aside by Nanu and told to keep out of the way, felt his heart ache.

“Go get em, Plums.”
The poison was setting in. As Tapu Bulu turned Plumeria knew, the deity was now struggling to see. Its strength failing. She’d forced open a way with Z-Power and struck that Pokemon with everything she could give. It wasn’t over yet.

But it would be soon.

“Go!”

Mimikyu moved forward, under its partner’s command. Tapu Bulu, hearing the voiced word, raised its hands high, then slammed them down upon the ground.

The shockwave flowing outward rippled easily beneath the Disguise Pokemon’s form.

It was losing strength. As if realising this, Tapu Bulu howled again, floating up higher and higher, bursting with life energy it was pushing forth. Now it was summoning all the last power it had. Burning away the poison within it, drawing strength that could defeat any foe. A shining beacon of force in the air overhead. Plumeria stared up at it with eyes unblinking.

It was over.

Tapu Bulu fell, racing downwards, wreathed in strength. Crashed into the ground and all around it exploded, power bursting out through the cracking and shattering earth, explosions of raw energy the deity poured out washing forth. The most immense and absolute attack the Land Spirit Pokemon could express. All of its power to end this.

Plumeria breathed out as her partner, its cloth-covered form twisted and torn by the attack but that all the attack had done, pushed on through the rubble of the battlefield to where their Tapu foe lay exhausted.

“Finish it.”

It did.

Again and again the Mimikyu struck, an aggressive and unrelenting assault of attacks, ghostly claws and fairy-charged force. Tapu Bulu pulled back, unable to lift into the air again, but could not express enough power to stop that which fell upon it. Moving to close its shell around it, Tapu Bulu’s eyes looked from the Mimikyu, holding the two halves apart and keeping them from closing, to Plumeria staring it down.

Plumeria who held the same look for it that it had for her mother back then.

When the final blow of Mimikyu, struck cleanly against Tapu Bulu’s body despite the deity trying to close its shell tight, landed, that was how it came to an end. Thrown back by the attack Tapu Bulu hit the ground and did not close its shell, retreating from the fight as Tapu Koko had. Nor was it a victory of exhaustion, worn down and too hurt to get back up until a moment’s recovery had passed, as it had been for Tapu Lele.

Tapu Bulu would not wake from the damage done until it had been healed, cared for by the League Pokemon Center staff, for Plumeria had struck the deity down with all the force she could muster. The message delivered at last, after eleven long years.

Alola is all living within it as one. You cannot rise against that and win.

The moment of silence as the judge proclaimed Plumeria victor erupted into cheers led by Guzma, the man yelling as loudly as the rest of the crowd combined. Nanu smirked happily, the sight one
worth enjoying, as Anna and Alexa extolled the intensity of the battle they’d seen. Riley smiled, the most genuine she’d ever had, looking at Acerola who was sniffling so obviously indeed. See? Big sis could do anything.

She’d always believed.

Plumeria pulled the bandanna, blue with bright pink flames, from her head. Let the cloth fall as she raised her hands, one by one undoing the four tails of hair that hung from the sides of her head, two pink and two yellow. Pulling her hands through her hair, she drew it all out together, the pink majority, inherited from her mother, and yellow she had chosen herself. Then reached down to grasp the bandanna, raised it up, and tied it around her hair at the back of her head, forming the long ponytail again. Eleven years. Eleven years since those days she’d looked like this, excited to begin taking on her Pokemon Journey.

Eleven years...

Looking up, through the transparent League dome roof overhead, Plumeria stared into the blue sky of Alola above.

It was done.

“Mom...”

Chapter End Notes

And so the second round of the first Alolan Pokemon League has begun. This is, naturally, my new longest chapter, because at this point I really can't help myself. I prefer longer chapters to more chapters, and the pacing of splitting any of this apart just would not have suited my style. But with everyone's support so far I remain confident that this is the right path. So I hope you enjoyed this chapter very much. I know I did writing it.

As always, I'd like to take a moment to express my thanks to all readers - knowing that this story continues to hold you motivates me to keep doing my best with it - and all commentors - whose kind words and voiced support lift me up, and I constantly go back to reread and enjoy. I am not yet ready to announce the final chapter count for this fic, but we have continued on the pace I have set for it. Soon enough I'll be confident to do so.

Words can't express how excited I am for what's to come.

To those who can, please consider sharing either the following twitter or tumblr posts, to help bring Eldritch to even more readers. Continued sharing increases the odds of more people noticing, and bringing more people into my readership is an eternally important thing to me. Even if you're reading this comment long after the fic is finished, consider sharing them anyway. You might just help someone new find their way here. And I couldn't be more thankful for anything else.

twitter: [https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480](https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480)
tumblr: [https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628](https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628)
With that, I return to working on the next chapter. The taste of the ending is in my mouth now, so I am working hard on reaching out towards it. Thank you so much for reading, and I will see you with the next chapter. Until then, I hope you enjoyed!
“I must say it's been some time.”

“I cannot quite remember our last.”

With joviality Hala, Kahuna of Melemele Island, and Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, spoke to one another, meeting in the staging grounds of the Pokemon League dome. Each spoke with relaxed tones, and smiling faces.

But the energy coiled about their forms was so strong as to be palpable.

“The last time the two of us truly went all out?” Hala cast his memory back, considering the years and decades. He had a number of years on Pitaya, it was true, but not so many that either could be considered any less than an old hand at this point. Two caretakers of Alola's future, ensuring the youths to pass under their watchful eyes grew well into this region's care. This battle between them, honestly, the first in...

“I truly believe the time is measured in decades.” Pitaya settled on it first. “We have both had our own pursuits, but I think this is long overdue.”

“We've both had more than enough experiences since the last time.” Hala's words were unquestionable truth. Either of these Trainers would destroy their selves from their last match with ease. “We'll be setting the tone for the matches of today, leading in.”

“Then absolutely we must make as strong a declaration as possible, given who we are competing with from the day before. It is good to know the future is bright, is it not, Kahuna Hala?”

“I can only imagine how enthusiastic you are to take on Moon's training after all this is done.”

“A good teacher tells no tales.”

Pitaya's gentle smile earned a laugh from Hala, both knowing full well the depth of the Guildmaster's drive to experience everything about raising other Dragon Tamers that she could. Both turned to the judge awaiting.

“We will fight with six.”

And so the first of these second four matches, of the second round of the first Alolan Pokemon League, soon began.
Immediate was the wave of impact as the Hariyama of Kahuna Hala clashed with the Druddigon of
Guildmaster Pitaya, the two Pokemon settling in to a close grapple with each other, the greater size
of Hariyama met by the intense ferocity of its Dragon-type opponent.

As Anna and Alexa quickly praised this first clash of the competitor's first Pokemon, with Professor
Kukui, invited to be the third for this match, repeating himself yet again that this was a battle between
two of Alola's most powerful, all eyes remained focused upon the match. All watching closely.

All that were here.

The competitors' stands were not as full as they had been any day before. A number missing from
each row. So too was the entire crowd of the League stadium slightly diminished, but not with
enough missing for it to be anything more than a passing feeling, a sense one might have looking
over the filled stands and thinking it just a shade emptier than before.

As was fitting for its status as a Legendary Pokemon, Tapu Bulu's recovery was swift. Much of the
poison Plumeria had inflicted upon it in their battle had been cleansed by the deity's final attack,
expressing so much of its power that it burned away those ills. But not all of it. That lingering strain,
and the exhaustion of Tapu Bulu, let the poison seep deeper. Left the deity in a state it could not
recover from alone. Taken from the League field, as Plumeria walked away amidst the crowd's
cheers, Tapu Bulu was brought to the League Pokemon Center and those there set to heal it. A
stronger than normal antidote applied, curative medicine added, and the systems for healing those
outside of Pokeballs made use of.

Those working there would still claim nothing roused and restored Tapu Bulu as much as Nanu
wandering down to fetch it.

Today, as with each other day of the League so far, Tapu Bulu rested atop the pillar rising from the
stadium's south-eastern point. All four Tapu were here. But three were quieter, more reserved, than
even their Kahuna had ever seen them before. Tapu Lele had been sullen at Olivia's victory, but now
the three defeated seemed outright despondent. Hala, Olivia, and Nanu all wondered where things
would go from here. Turned their eyes to the last of the four undefeated. Tapu Fini watched with
bright blue eyes still.

And awaited its next match.

The roar of the crowd was loud as, finally overpowering the Cave Pokemon it had been grappling
with, Hala's Hariyama threw Druddigon down. Quickly did the red-faced Dragon push back up
against the Arm Thrust Pokemon, but the break of their initial clash had involved Druddigon suffering a powerful blow. Still, it did not lose quickly or easily, and Pitaya showed nothing but focused intensity, a smile laced with her own ferocity as a Dragon Tamer, that Hala matched perfectly with his own.

A couple of old monsters stretching their wings to full after so long.

Plumeria was not amongst the competitors' stands today. Neither was Riley. Nor Acerola or Molayne. Guzma would not be found amongst the audience either, but then he had only shown his face the once, for the match that truly mattered to him. Had no interest in being seen after that.

With Tapu Bulu here and defeated, those of Tapu Village had today gone home. All those residents to be found nowhere within the audience. All having travelled back to that ruined place, to walk amongst the overgrown and broken buildings, watched but not approached by the ghosts that remained.

To pay homage to a grave, and let the lingering spirits of this place know the message had finally been passed along.

They could now rest in peace.

“Hala's Hariyama is his oldest partner, so it taking the win here isn't a huge surprise, yeah. But that Druddigon isn't Pitaya's, and it did take a lot out of Hariyama too, so this battle being won doesn't mean anything yet. This match has still got way more to go!”

Kukui, loudly and energetically, continued to announce as the match between Kahuna and Guildmaster went on.

Neither were the rest of the Captains here. Mina was, for she'd passed her mantle on and it was up to Tristan now to do what she once had, but the Captains themselves were all absent. But most only just a little.

Gathered in the staging grounds of this League stadium, talking energetically amongst themselves, Ilima and Kiawe, Lana and Mallow, and Tristan himself, all focused on the last. On Sophocles, Captain of Hokulani Observatory, whose second match was due to be had later today.

A match that, if Sophocles was going to win, all six would have to give their all to formulating a strategy to get him through.

Hala retreated his Hariyama from Pitaya's next choice, the large and purple-bodied Dragon Pokemon Goodra, its slimy and fat-layered body making it difficult to harm for most Pokemon even when fresh. The Pig Monkey Pokemon Primeape, off-white furred round body with muscular arms and legs emerging from it, was Hala's second choice, he and Pitaya both still dancing around the Pokemon most dangerous to each other's. Oh it wasn't time for that yet.

Moon watched closely. She'd battled with Pitaya many times in their training together, both during Moon's stay with the Dragon Tamers and her visitations after, and even with that experience, even with the battle between Pitaya and Benga from before, still this exceeded that. The Guildmaster of the Dragon Tamers, she truly was an extraordinary power. Moon watched with absolute focus to learn everything she could.

Ryuki and Benga, both Dragon-type specialists themselves, watched similar for a sight like this you didn't get in a hurry.

Hau watched too. Though his battle would follow after this one, against Hapu who there was no
guarantee of victory over, not in the slightest did Hau think of that coming match. Just focused on the sight of his grandfather going all out as well, something the man so rarely did. Two of Alola's strongest, giving their all for all to see.

Hau watched and studied closely.

When Goodra bested Primeape Pitaya made her exchange moments after Hala's, the Kahuna choosing his Bewear and Pitaya responding with her Noivern in counter. That Bewear was one of the few Pokemon you were to never let run wild, and so Pitaya went with her longest ranged attacker. Noivern, the Flying and Dragon-type Sound Wave Pokemon, a wide-winged bat-like creature of black and purple skin, white fur around its neck, and green colouration beneath the flaps of its wings and within the massive ears upon its head, took off into the sky and turned overhead, pulses of sound already emerging from within those rounded ears.

The first of Pitaya's Pokemon to hold an advantage over Hala's, and one he would need to stop from running wild itself.

Jackson, seated in the back row of the competitors' stands, found himself more preoccupied with his thoughts than the battle before him. He'd told Lana what he'd seen, yesterday in the time after their match. Of how it seemed that Lana's focus was hurting her, that she was so intent on winning every battle ahead she was barely considering those before her. Was she happy? Had her two victories so far brought her any joy? It didn't seem so at all.

Was it... Lana had replied, really okay for someone she'd just beaten to tell her she wasn't considering the battles she was in? That chill dismissiveness then stunned Jackson. It was like Lana was barely focusing on him at all. Like she couldn't look beyond what was immediately ahead.

She was going to get her Pokemon hurt if she continued on like that.

Her Pokemon were strong and able, they'd done amazingly with each of their battles so far. They were fine.

Did she think she had?

...it didn't matter.

Was she happy?

She needed to focus.

Lana... you're hurting yourself.

“Jackson, you said you were going to help.”

He was.

“You're not.”

And Lana walked away.

“Thanks to its immense physical power, the Bewear of Hala successfully caught hold of Pitaya's Noivern! But even with Noivern pronounced defeated, that Bewear isn't looking steady at all! Is it... yes! The judge is pronouncing Bewear as unfit to go on as well! A double knockout!”

Anna's cry rolled with the voice of the crowd, a tide ebbing for only a second before flowing back
Even more than Olivia and Ryuki before, this was two master Trainers throwing the full weight of their power against one another. How could anyone look away from such a sight? As Pitaya chose Kommo-o and Hala matched it with his Poliwrath, almost all considered such impossible.

Who could look away?

Olivia's tilted head to the east caught sight of both Tapu Lele and Tapu Bulu watching over this fight. A slight turn and she could see Tapu Koko and Tapu Fini too. The four deities watching this fight but... three had far less energy in their form than before. Their losses, against her, then Moon, then Plumeria, seemed to have taken something from each. Pride? Perhaps. Olivia understood Tapu Lele well enough to know it was shamed at being the first of the four defeated, but could not parse what the others thought at all. Would they recover and return to the same as always after this was done? Or had this inscribed a change in them, a rare something they would never forget? One of the most defining features of the Tapu's history was their defeat by Solgaleo and Lunala. Was every defeat something that stayed with them forever?

This Pokemon League Kukui had created for Alola, claiming it would bring the region into a new age for its Trainers, was that all it would do?

The Kahuna of Akala remained in consideration.

The Poliwrath of Hala knew an Ice-type attack, as much of the Kahuna's team did. A powerfully aggressive Type, it was useful to have numbering amongst most teams. And when facing a Dragon, almost invaluable.

But even those attacks did not break through the power Pitaya unleashed as, clasping her hands together then pulling them apart, as the Kommo-o's rattling scales blew Poliwrath back after its last punch connected with the Scaly Pokemon, the Guildmaster glowed with Z-Power alight.

The dark-cream coloured Z-Crystal set into her Z-Ring shining bright.

“Pitaya's not using the Dragonium-Z,” Kukui, knowing, walked the crowd through this sight as the Kommo-o glowed with Z-Aura, slamming its arms together and swinging its tail about, scales rattling louder and louder. “That's the Kommonium-Z, a Z-Crystal that only works with Kommo-o! It's an Alolan Dragon Tamer speciality!”

Hala had directed Poliwrath to hold back, as the Kommo-o before them built up even more strength. It was a slow Z-Move to unleash, but that just meant the power within it was all the more. Any official battle had rules regarding pulling Pokemon back to escape attacks: returning Poliwrath now would be ruled as defeat. There was enough time to get a faster Z-Move going but, Hala knew he had to stop Pitaya's Flygon with his or the battle would be hers. That one Pokemon, her oldest partner, was truly fearsome indeed.

The Kahuna held back, Poliwrath manifested water and froze it into ice, and with a final roar the Kommo-o of Pitaya unleashed a tunnel of draconic sound that tore a gouge through the earth all the way to shatter that ice and slam Poliwrath against the barrier wall behind it.

The Z-Move Clangorous Soulblaze truly an impossible force to stand against.

Next came Crabominable from Hala, the Fighting and Ice-type Woolly Crab Pokemon, whom Pitaya had been waiting to see. Kommo-o was the best bet still for defeating this one, even with a Z-Move unleashed, and so the Guildmaster maintained her focus and Hala his own.
Two more of their Pokemon clashing with everything they had.

Watching Pitaya's Kommo-o kept Ryuki humble, an act almost as impressive as the battle those two down there were fighting. The entire League had really been a humbling affair for him, truth be told. Back in the Hoenn League, steamrolling through the Preliminaries then getting eliminated in a three versus three against the one who'd end up League Champion, had bummed Ryuki out but not really taught him that much about himself. The better Trainer won. That was just how it went.

But here... first Hydreigon invalidating Ryuki's intent for a reason he still didn't understand, leaving Sina still rightfully mad at him – he'd make it up to her one way or another as soon as he could figure out how – then that fight with Olivia, so down to the wire Ryuki almost felt like he was about to lose when giving it his all, including Hydreigon's own strength. And now he was going to be facing Plumeria who, honestly, was out of this world. He'd had no clue who she was, barely noted her fight with Jace, then watched her defeat one of those Tapu things with a shine that even the greatest of stars would struggle to produce. Alola kept throwing him punches from every direction.

Honestly... he was living for it.

The grin on Ryuki's face as he studied the way the Kommo-o of Pitaya fought was absolute. Oh that dragon of hers was strong as all get out: he was learning so much about how to improve Kannonade already. He'd seriously been on the wrong track with that Alolan Dragon, yeah, they could go so much further together. He and his entire team could. Even with her, who had remained surprisingly quiet after the fight before. Usually it was revelry in her strength being so much more than anything Ryuki could claim to. But the battle with Olivia had left her with little to say.

Ryuki really felt like this League here was bringing him to that higher stage he longed for. That place the greatest of stars could shine.

And if he could just push a little forward... and Moon could go just a little further herself... then...

Oh Ryuki's smile wasn't going anywhere today.

The Crabominable of Hala was an old Pokemon of his, and even with Pitaya's Kommo-o being so strong itself, the difference in it having used a Z-Move, and Hala's Pokemon not, meant that the battle fell the Kahuna's way. Pitaya chose next an interesting choice, a Pokemon found in the waters off Poni Island, rarely in this evolved form. The serpentine Mock Kelp Pokemon Dragalge, Poison and Dragon-type, was an aquatic dweller for the most part, but as it curled around itself to rest in a heap before Hala's own Pokemon, it seemed to show no concern with being outside the water here. A clear demonstration of it and its Trainer's intent.

Hala called Crabominable back without pause, and went for the Pokemon that would be answer to this foe. The least seen partner of the Kahuna of Melemele.

The one few knew him to have.

By their partnership to the Tapu, a Kahuna must always have the space necessary to connect with their Island Deity, so that when Alola is in need the two can join together in its defense. Because of this, rarely does any Kahuna of Alola sport a full team of six. Hala, Olivia, and even Nanu had a common five, but often – for the prior two at least – those changed quickly as well. Keeping Pokemon of weaker strength, with which they might test younger Trainers and help them grow, the Kahuna of Alola often rotated their teams around, making use of not only the Pokemon Storage System but also the Pokemon Daycare in Akala to care for those not with them. That was how it was for them so much of the time.
But for this League a dispensation had been made. The Tapu knowing that for this moment, they would be unable to connect to their Kahuna, who held a full team without them. For Hala and Olivia it meant taking on a full team of six, drawing upon their sum total of strength. For Hapu it meant little, she keeping a team of three and knowing that if Tapu Fini asked for her, it would be an almost impossible burden to hold at this time. But she’d taken on this challenge to accelerate her growth as best she could, and was standing admirably with it upon her shoulders all the same. Well worthy of respect.

The sixth Pokemon of Kahuna Hala of Melemele Island, the last member of his strongest team, was the Aura Pokemon Lucario. A canine biped of blue and black fur coating its head, arms, and legs, with cream fur layering its chest and three metallic spikes emerging from the back of its wrists and chest, this Fighting and Steel-type species was known worldwide for its powerful combative abilities, keen sense for the world around it, and ability to perfectly understand human speech and communicate in its own way in turn.

For Pitaya specifically, having a Steel-type Pokemon answer her Poison-type own was a concern. She'd need to be careful with Dragalge here to make it through the minute until the next switch.

Hala's commands came quick and his partner dived forward into the fray.

Moon's attention could focus little on Hala, as powerful as these two Trainers were. One going all out was all she could watch to gain as much as she could from them. Oh she saw the Lucario of Hala on the attack, but she understood the Dragalge of Pitaya as it fought. Continued taking all the lessons from the Dragon Tamer Guildmaster that she could.

Colress had approached Moon in the evening of last night. As the competitors shared food, families joining with them, Colress made himself present and drew Moon and Jewellery away. Outlined that he fully believed the process of Ultra Evolution to be safe, but that for extra safety Moon should rest Salamence twice as long as she would if it either Mega Evolved or used a Z-Move alone. That made sense, Moon nodded, thanking the scientist for reassuring her. Colress just smiled and thanked Moon in turn. This information, this data, with it he was sure he could bring about a breakthrough. Another step on the road to the true form of a Pokemon's power.

He simply could not wait to begin work on his next idea in mind.

“With incredible speed and power Hala's Lucario has made full use of its Steel-typing to push through all attacks and beat Pitaya's Dragalge down! This brings the count of Pokemon for Pitaya to two compared to Hala's three, with Hala also not yet having used a Z-Move!”

“But,” Kukui was quick to rein Alexa in, “Hala's Lucario, Hariyama, and Crabominable have all done a lot of fighting, whereas Pitaya's sixth Pokemon still hasn't. It's still anyone's fight!”

Pitaya's choice being her sixth, the Mystic Pokemon Flygon, quickly had Hala call Lucario back. The thing about Pokemon at this level was that the sixty second limit between switching was hard to take advantage of. Any proper fight would easily pass that and let one Trainer respond to the other. So, bringing Hariyama back out, Hala set his plan in motion. Wear down Flygon with this one, a sandstorm already whipping up around the green-bodied dragon, then strike a Z-Move with Crabominable after. Even with the incredible power of that partner of Pitaya, an Ice-type Z-Move would still end this. If it hit, there would be little left Pitaya and Goodra alone could do. It all came down to that one hit. Which Pitaya most definitely knew as well. A raw contest of skill and power between these two master Trainers.

Neither would have it any other way.
Colress... Moon had asked the scientist after his report... had said he was working on a way to save Lunala? Nodding, the tall blonde-haired man recapped.

“Indeed, at present I have completed a prototype system for introducing instability to the body of Necrozma, which should enable Lunala's consciousness to awaken and rebel. However without further analysis of their fused form I cannot guarantee further development: everything I've done has been based on the little data we have of them and my own prior research, so right now that's as much as can be done. When the Ultra Beast Task Force have determined a way to apprehend Necrozma, or at least gather more data of it, I will be able to do more, but for now we must wait.”

It had already been... so long.

“I am sorry that we must ask this of you, young Moon, but to cross dimensions and pursue such a power is no easy thing at all. Please understand.”

Understanding didn't make it any easier to bear.

“Thanks to an impressively focused series of attacks, Kahuna Hala's Hariyama has scored a great number of hits upon the Flygon of Pitaya: each Trainer's oldest partner exhibiting intense strength! But Hariyama has been pronounced defeated and it is now two against two. Professor Kukui, what will come next?”

“Hala's Crabominable,” Kukui's words came just moments before the Kahuna unleashed the Woolly Crab Pokemon to fight again, “will be using the Ice-type Z-Move Subzero Slammer.” Setting the pale-blue Z-Crystal into his Z-Ring, Hala nodded to Pitaya opposite him. Here comes their pivotal moment, to determine which would be the one to go on. The Guildmaster nodded back. It was always going to come down to a battle balanced on the edge of a knife.

Neither would have accepted anything less.

Hala's choice for Hariyama to focus solely on offence, to spend all of its power and take all of Flygon's in return, left a brief period of time before Pitaya could wisely call Flygon back. So in that time both had to...

Ice and sand spun in a storm as Crabominable thrust a fist that blew both in such a powerful stream as to batter against Flygon, the Mystic Pokemon diving down and beating its wings against the ground, sending a cracking shockwave out through the earth towards the Woolly Crab Pokemon opposite. Yet strong did the Crabominable stand, continuing to thrust its giant fists forward, shaping the sand and ice into a greater storm still. More and more punches, more and more the storm pushed against Flygon. A furious and overwhelming display of power that blocked out the field of vision from Pitaya's side entirely. No visibility or sense for their opponent in this mixed flurry around them. Ah yes, here it came. Pitaya's own sense for battle telling her exactly what she needed to do.

So it all came down to this.

As Hala completed the Z-Pose matched to the Icium-Z, raising his arms up, then out, then together before him, a great pillar of ice lifted his Crabominable up. With the mass of Z-Power infused ice around it, the Woolly Crab Pokemon drew from it power into an overwhelming beam. And into the storm that beam shot.

A Hyper Beam, fired from Flygon first, Pitaya's senses telling her the point to aim, struck into the ice pillar and blew through it, the column cracking and causing Crabominable to fall.

Hala did not relent.
“Go!”

It was dispersed, the Ice-type Z-Move Subzero Slammer, compared to how it should be. A spray instead of a beam, a wide-ranging outpouring of Z-Power compared to a tight shot. But as the power flowed through the ice in the air and froze it solid, the sand within caught and expanding the freezing field further, perhaps this form of the Z-Move was even more effective than the beam would have been alone. Reaching out to the entire storm instead of punching right through it. Difficult, even for Pitaya, to tell if this was an intended act, a responsive one, or simply just one of luck.

Nonetheless the result came clear as, the entire storm of sand and ice frozen in place, half of the battlefield before her glimmered under the light of Alola's sun overhead.

A break was called, as League crew brought their Pokemon to extract the solidly frozen Flygon from the ice, before the battle could resume. Pitaya's Goodra alone, and Hala's Lucario returned to the field.

Their finale.

Yet even with this battle between two of Alola's strongest Trainers, even with the height of their conflict and the clear display of their Pokemon's strength, still the cheers of the crowd, as excited and enthusiastic as they were, remained... normal. Compared to the day before, the battles between Moon and Plumeria against the Tapu, this fight had... such less weight. The addition of Legendary Pokemon to a League, many beyond Alola would begin to question the effect it had brought upon the fights to be seen.

But those within Alola remained instead focused on the effects of those fights themselves.

The sight of their deities beaten in battle most striking indeed.

With his Lucario and Crabominable both truly exhausted, nonetheless Hala claimed victory in their fight. The last time had been Pitaya's, and knowing her the next would as well, that woman never believing in loss as a stopping point, but for now the one to continue on would be the Kahuna of Melemele. Both met and shook hands amongst a frozen and ruined field, League crew already moving to repair it for the next coming match.

For Hau, grandson of Kahuna Hala, record-holder for completion of the Island Challenge, and Hapu, granddaughter of Kahuna Koa, youngest Kahuna in history, to meet for a fight of their own.

Two old legends stepping back and two young ones rising up to take their place.

The last time Hau and Hapu fought, it had taken all of Hau's team to pass Hapu's Grand Trial. The same as with Moon in truth, both young Trainers facing a stunningly powerful fellow in the Kahuna of Poni Island.

Hapu, both times, had gone all out. Met those two with everything she could put against them, and because of that, asked Kahili to act in her place for the Final Trials. So that those Final Trials could be even more than her Grand Trial had been.

Already these three children had, in their battles so far at the peak of Alola, become so much more. Been forged by the pressure of this place, these battles against the best at the height of the world, and grown. Hapu as she was now, even with so little time between then and now, would have been well able to give a proper test for the Moon and Hau of back then, and then met them all out for their
Final Trials instead. Moon and Hau as they were now, she was sure would have beaten her handily back then.

Hau knew. Knew how far Moon had come. How much further Hapu had grown. And he too... he knew he and his team had become stronger. But even still, in the past it had been the entirety of his team barely pulling ahead of Hapu's three. Now that the numbers were even, three and three on each side, was there really any way? He'd wondered that often, up to this point.

But no longer.

Moon was still holding on. Even with a Tapu against her she'd pulled through. Had gone all out, and risen above. He wanted to... Hau wanted to fight her. At the peak of Alola he wanted it to be him and Moon giving everything they had without holding back in the least. He wanted it so, so much. So even with Hapu before him. Even with his grandfather afterwards. Even with whoever ascended as the champion of Yellow Block after that, even then...

Hau wanted to go further still.

Sabrina, in watch, sensed an unshakable iron will. But would it be strong enough? She stayed silent, and observed.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Another judge, calling for Hapu in the east and Hau in the west to prepare. Each chose their starting Pokemon. And then...

“Begin!”

Somehow Hau found no surprise in Hapu's first choice, her strongest partner Mudsdale appearing on the field. Even considering in their Grand Trial Hapu had called upon that Pokemon last. Even though in her battle with Acerola, Mudsdale had come second. In this moment, this fight between them just beginning, Hau had known just how it would be.

And moved to answer in response.

“The immediate match-up between Hapu's Mudsdale and Hau's Primarina favours Hau in Type, but as we all know that Mudsdale is an exceptionally powerful Pokemon! That Primarina, would you say it is the strongest member of Hau's team, Kahili?”
Kahili Hano, called to commentate upon this match as the person to have overseen Hau's Island Challenge as much as she'd watched over Moon's, and the individual requested by Hapu to act as her proxy in the Final Trials, considered what she knew of the two young Trainers below.

“He has others that could be competitive, but not against that Mudsdale.” Hau's Raichu, Kahili had observed, was immensely powerful for its youth. But also would find only grief in battle with any of the Pokemon of Kahuna Hapu. That Primarina, raised from a Popplio given to Hau not one full year ago, was without question right now the most powerful member of his team in this fight.

He and Hapu both beginning by echoing the phrase circulating amongst the greatest of Alola's youth.

No holding back.

The slam of Mudsdale's hooves upon the battlefield – sending out an immediate spider-web of cracks across the field, the earth creaking and beginning to break into shards in the moments after – Hau and Primarina moved in counter to: the Soloist Pokemon blasting a powerful stream of water into the earth that ran back against the cracks, loosed earth binding into mud and forcing the battlefield to remain in shape. For a moment. The immediate contest won by Mudsdale, as the battlefield still broke under its strength, but immensely lessened by Primarina all the same. A measure of where each of these two competitors stood against one another in strength.

But by no means any prediction of how this battle would go.

“Mudsdale, go forth!”

In her Grand Trial with Hau, Hapu's Mudsdale had been defeated by that Primarina. Of course other Pokemon had gone before, wearing it down, but still that victory, it had to lend confidence to the pair before her. Confidence that would give them calm and focus in this fight ahead. And a calm and focused Hau was an opponent of strength beyond measure.

This would be no easy battle.

“Misty Terrain!”

Just as Moon and Sylveon did, Hau and Primarina shaped the field, a thick pink mist flowing out from the Soloist Pokemon, weaving around the jutting pieces of earth raised by Mudsdale's attack before. Soon only the peaks of that cracked earth and Mudsdale's head rising above could be seen, the battlefield encompassed by the mist as Primarina moved within.

Moon liked to use that ability to create counter-attacks, Sylveon preparing itself to strike an opponent when they failed to reach it within. But Hau was more aggressive, his partner immediately honing in upon its opponent once the mist arose. Hapu knew the attack was coming quickly, and that it was on her to react and put it to a stop. How fast that Primarina must be moving, from which direction it would strike, all these pieces of a puzzle the Kahuna had to solve in mere moments to stand a chance.

This was a true and proper test of just what a Pokemon Trainer should be.

“Earthquake again!”

Again Mudsdale's hooves stomped down and again the earth groaned and shifted, another pattern of cracks criss-crossing the first. More of the ground broke and rose up, more peaks parting the mist around them. But only some. Where the ground did not rise, where the water was thickest and held it down, that was the path Primarina was travelling. And that meant the attack was...!
“There!”

Rearing back and kicking its front legs, Mudsdale pulled away from the torrent of water that surged past it, the attack slamming against a barrier wall and blasting off into rain. The pressure of that attack, it had pushed the mist aside, and for a brief moment Hapu and Mudsdale could both see Primarina nearby, the earth beneath the Soloist Pokemon slick with the water it had slid upon for speed. Close enough that if that attack had landed it would have set the pace of this entire match from there.

Hau was truly an incredibly dangerous foe.

“Go!”

Primarina pulled away, back into the mists, as Mudsdale with heavy hooves thundered after its Water and Fairy-type foe, but this time the mist did not hide it, Mudsdale changing her own course to always be stomping down upon the wet mud that Primarina left behind in its wake. In order to be fast enough to get away, Hau's partner had to leave an obvious trail right to it. A weakness Hapu fully intended to exploit.

The Draft Horse Pokemon Mudsdale was a creature able to cross any terrain no matter how rough. Rain or shine, sleet or snow, no matter how twisted the path the giant brown bodied Draft Horse Pokemon would make it through. But that did not make it impossible to pose that Pokemon difficulty all the same. If a Mudsdale was fording mud it must be prepared to cross mud. Must be thinking of the way to handle mud. If it was crossing ice, it must be prepared for ice. And if it were changing between the two, it must be aware of those changes too.

But with the mist still hanging thick, the earth shattered by Mudsdale's stomps before, and the trail of mud left by Primarina as it slid through the mist spitting watery breath, the patches of ice the Soloist Pokemon also left behind came as surprise each time. A heavy stomp shattering ice and sinking deeper, or coming too light and slipping aside. Then an entire block of ice so that not one of Mudsdale's four feet were upon solid ground, then an immediate sink of mud after. The Draft Horse Pokemon slowed down.

Song rose over the misty field.

Water produced by the Soloist Pokemon Primarina, spread across the battlefield so far, rose in response to its song. Further bubbles spraying from its mouth as Primarina rose up from the mists, a distance from Mudsdale, closer to where Hapu herself was than anywhere else, the battlefield quickly became thick with the Water-type attack. Mudsdale was strong, and its body resistant to even effective attacks, but this was still a dangerous amount of power it would need to push through.

Best to do something about that right now.

“Mudsdale, stomp down!”

This time when Mudsdale slammed her hooves into the ground a wave of mud rose up in response, washing out from around the Draft Horse Pokemon and catching all the water in the air with it. Pausing its song for a moment Primarina unleashed a more powerful note, sending a burst of sound to punch through the wave of mud bearing down upon it, but Mudsdale was already charging through. Not even close to being stopped by the efforts of Hau and his partner.

Of course they'd known it would be this way from the very beginning.

“Primarina, keep on singing!”
And so the song of the Soloist Pokemon continued as the mist faded away, Primarina once more sliding upon the wet earth to shift around Mudsdale's charge, the Draft Horse Pokemon terrifyingly powerful in its attack but so straight-forward as well. Neither Pokemon quite able to catch the other, this battle was an exchange of tactics while sapping their opponent's stamina away. But Hapu knew, and Hau knew, that in any battle of stamina Mudsdale would always win. Hau would need to go beyond this point they'd come to.

He fully intended to do so.

More bubbles laced with power filled the air, popping into sprays of water empowered by the Pokemon behind them. But Mudsdale was at all times only a step behind Primarina, and once it caught the Soloist Pokemon, once it struck with an almighty attack, then the future of this battle would be set. It came down to just this. Hau and Hapu both knew.

Hau knew what had to be done.

The collapsing battlefield, shattered by Mudsdale and drenched by Primarina, was beginning to take on forms. At some points thick mires of mud, other places spines of earth, and right in the middle a sheet of fairly solid ice. Mudsdale charged through the mud, broke through the earth, and stormed over the ice without any slowing it down for a moment. Or rather, any on its own.

Mud stuck to its hooves. Was coated with more dust from the earth. Then stomped down upon the ice. Primarina, turning as Mudsdale bore down upon it, breathed out a thick wind of icy force that blew across the ground and over the sheet of ice Mudsdale was passing over. Easily the ice froze up over the material prepared above.

Mudsdale for just one moment brought to a stop, as the Draft Horse Pokemon found itself needing to put its might into breaking free of the ice now encased around its hooves.

Enough time to make their move.

Back in Malie Garden, when Team Skull had been making their move on the city, Professor Kukui had given Moon a Z-Crystal. It was the Decidium-Z, a Z-Crystal that only worked with the Arrow Quill Pokemon Decidueye, final evolution of one of Alola's three starter Pokemon.

Z-Crystals for the other two, Incineroar and Primarina, existed as well. It was not Kukui to give Hau his but his grandfather, as celebration of Hau's completion of his four Grand Trials. And preparation for his soon-to-come attempt of the Final Trials ahead.

In his Final Trials Hau had used it, the Primarium-Z. Began the day with one Z-Move for one partner, used in the early hours of the morning, and finished it with this and Primarina, enough rest between to use two. Experienced Trainers could perform Z-Moves with rest in between, yes, but Hau doing so still caught those testing him by surprise. Honestly. He really was amazing beyond belief all on his own.

The future of Alola was bright indeed.

The Primarium-Z was a blue Z-Crystal, a shade lighter than the Waterium-Z. The Z-Pose behind it is the same as the Waterium-Z's, for the Z-Move unleashed is of the Water-type too. Whereas the Z-Move Hydro Vortex unleashed a storm of water from around a Pokemon, the transfiguration of Primarina's signature technique Sparkling Aria – a song that released and took control of a mass of water in the air – into the Z-Move Oceanic Operetta created a far more titanic attack.

A song infused by Z-Power sung out, as Primarina rose up before the momentarily stuck Mudsdale,
and all the water in the air, all the water about the field, even that in the mud, pulled free. Was drawn together into a mass, an orb that swelled in size again and again over the Mudsdale's head. Hapu was performing her Z-Move too, moving in counter to Hau's own, forced into it by his pace, but Hau had begun his first and completed it first too. As Mudsdale shone with its own Z-Power, the orb of water above it shimmered, and Primarina sung the final note.

An operetta ending in dirge and deluge.

The Ground-type Z-Move Tectonic Rage enabled Mudsdale to push through this storm of water, the mass released by the Z-Move Oceanic Operetta washing out across the field, seeming to multiply again and again. From barrier wall to barrier wall the water released lapped up to Primarina's chest, Mudsdale still rising high above it but affected all the same. Then the Ground-type Z-Move opened a chasm, a fissure through the earth, and Primarina fell within. But not just Primarina alone. All the water filling the field as well. Water through which the Soloist Pokemon was able to swim within this Z-Move as Mudsdale bore down upon it.

And by that water Primarina evaded the Draft Horse Pokemon's most powerful attack.

When each Pokemon surfaced, Primarina in a spray of water, Mudsdale bursting out from the earth, Hapu knew. Knew clearly that Hau had taken the lead in this fight, and done far more to her partner than she had to his own. And now each had used their Z-Move. The battle with Acerola, by the end of it Hapu had felt the effects of releasing all the power her partner Golurk could manage. But Mudsdale took so much more. This would not be easy for her. Hau had expertly drawn her into his pace.

She felt no hope that the effects of using his own Z-Move would slow Hau any in the battle to come.

“Both Trainers have opted for an exchange of Pokemon after that, with Hau changing Primarina for Golisopod, and Hapu Mudsdale for Gastrodon! With this swap simultaneous, neither Trainer was reacting to the other, so we can only wonder what motivation each had in their choice! And what this second battle will be!”

“They both know the other's Pokemon,” Kahili made note, “so I'd say Hapu predicted that Golisopod. Gastrodon is part Water-type, so more difficult to harm with those attacks. Although we won't know how well it does matched against that Golisopod all the same. Hau's Pokemon are all very strong.”

Left unsaid, hanging in the air, was the difference between Hapu's partners besides Mudsdale, a gap in which Hau and Moon's own teams dwelled. This would not be easy for her at all.

But still she was determined to go on.

“First Impression!”

“Harden!”

Without a Pokemon of great speed, evading the most powerful attack of the Hard Scale Pokemon Golisopod was a thing best left to imagination. Hapu's response was pragmatic, Gastrodon tightening its body to receive the incoming strike before responding with a charging tackle of its own, slamming its full bodyweight against its heavily armoured foe. The difference between them was significant enough to make this move less than effective, but Hapu still had her intent. She'd known this Pokemon of Hau's would appear again, far stronger than in their Grand Trial before, and had thought often about how to face it. To face all of Hau's team.
To stand up to this young Trainer with claim to Alola's peak.

With Golisopod directly before Gastrodon it was already difficult, the partner of Hau unleashing heavy attack after attack. Whether Gastrodon or Golurk would have been the better choice, expecting this opponent as Hapu was, would come down to how the strategy she had formulated came into play. With the battlefield still mud-slickened by the clash before, Gastrodon was able to quickly bury itself into the ground, slamming its body down upon the soft earth and sinking within, then hardening again to take Golisopod's attacks and be pushed even further under. In moments, before Hau could properly parse what Hapu's plan was, his partner had successfully buried Gastrodon almost completely.

Phase one.

Compared to many Pokemon, Gastrodon were not particularly adept at changing the environment around them. Indeed the Sea Slug Pokemon was handily the weakest member of Hapu's current team, a fact the young Kahuna had accepted in coming to this stage. She had been given the invitation as a Kahuna, and the opportunity to reject it if she felt it necessary. If she was not confident in taking on this challenge so soon.

But Hapu had never in her life shied away from a challenge no matter the difficulty that faced her.

The jet of water and mud that burst out of the ground, striking Golisopod with enough force to lift up and push the Hard Scale Pokemon back, was the reveal of Hapu's plan. Kahili, who hadn't seen something like this before, still picked it up quick.

“Being buried in the earth and using Water-type techniques, Hapu's Gastrodon is using the strange makeup of the battlefield to attack. The water will push through the soft mud, but vent from harder stone. This allows it to attack from below, which Golisopod will struggle to defend against.”

That by simply watching over the field Hapu could understand its structure enough to command her partner to do this spoke loudly of the young Kahuna's own great ability. A master Trainer of their chosen Type understands that Type and the environment it favours so well as to be unstoppable within.

Ground-type experts rarely lacked a field they could confidently battle within.

“Liquidation!”

“Sludge Wave!”

As Golisopod charged forward a geyser of poisonous liquid burst from where the last attack had flowed, the way cleared enough for Gastrodon to release this follow-up attack. Droplets of toxic sludge raining down upon its silver scales Golisopod still charged forward, water bursting from behind its arms and wrapping into powerful blades. Watching, Hapu could not help but admire as Hau's partner dragged those blades through the earth, cutting new paths the attacks of Gastrodon would flow. Hau had moved to counter her so fast. He'd always thought quick but even here, both giving their all, it was still catching Hapu by surprise.

Really...

She wouldn't fall behind.

“Ice Beam!”

The water-blade of Golisopod bounced off of the layer of ice that formed over Gastrodon, the ice
attack the Sea Slug Pokemon released catching in the earth and freezing up and over it. Another rupture in the earth released another stream of water, then poison, but that one Hau had seen coming, Golisopod circling around the ice coating of Gastrodon and drawing a heavy claw back, ready to punch through. In position.

Hapu's command came first.

“Do it!”

The battlefield sagged. Earth so thick with water from Gastrodon now that it began to sink, the Sea Slug Pokemon drawn further down into the pit it has created. Golisopod too.

Except...

“Look,” Kahili's keen eyes caught it, the traces of purple amongst the sodden earth, “it's a poison trap.”

It was demanding, Hapu would admit, this strategy she had asked of her partner. A repeated series of attacks, an expression of a significant volume of strength, to create this mire and draw that Golisopod within. But it had been successful. This much poison would seep in and, struggling but unable to break free, the Hard Scale Pokemon would be beaten. Gastrodon likely couldn't express much more at all now, but it had done what Hapu had so desperately needed it to do.

One of Hau's partners unable to go on.

“Drill Run!”

All that training with Captain Acerola on the southern side of Ula'ula, it had borne other fruit for Hau besides. Spending so much time around Mahihinu, with Grimsley as well, Hau had by association been introduced to the same Pokemon tutors as the former Unovan Elite Four member himself. There hadn't been a lot of time to go through their full catalogue, but this technique had stuck with Hau as having promise.

He'd been right.

To see the Golisopod partner of Hau easily tunnelling through the soft earth towards Gastrodon, spinning with the power of the Ground-type move behind it, raised the crowd's spirits and razed Hapu's own. That partner of Hau's, using a technique like that, how did that young man so consistently keep surprising her? He seemed almost impossible to predict with the incredible range of abilities he and his partners continued to show.

Hapu needed to go further, much further, to make sure this battle did not end Hau's way.

Thanks to that technique the Golisopod of Hau caught hold of the Gastrodon of Hapu, and by that technique the battle was won. The exhausted Sea Slug Pokemon held no means of resisting the pummelling Golisopod unleashed, and so the first defeat of this match was pronounced. The Gastrodon of Hapu no longer able to battle.

But to all understanding eyes the heavy breathing of Golisopod and purple liquid dripping from its mouth as it retreated to Hau spoke clearly of the difficulty that Pokemon would have in continuing on itself.

This battle ending more evenly than one might think.

“And Hapu and Hau have each moved on to their third Pokemon in this fight! Hapu is once again
using the Automaton Pokemon Golurk, an extremely powerful attacker that went all out without pause in her battle with Captain Acerola before! Facing that Golurk is Hau's partner Espeon, the Psychic-type Sun Pokemon an evolution of Eevee! This match-up favours Hapu well, with Golurk's Ghost-typing giving it a dangerous advantage. Hau is in a difficult situation here!”

Kahili wondered about that.

Taking a heavy step forward, the partner of Hapu raised a fist already glowing with ghostly power. A direct hit from a Shadow Punch would definitely set the tone of this battle, but Hapu wouldn’t doubt Hau had a counter in mind already. She’d lure it out and break through it to go on. Such was her and Golurk's intent.

Hau, his own focus with Espeon at max, concentrated on the Automaton Pokemon stepping towards them.

It stopped.

“Huh?” Alexa's noise of surprise was echoed by the crowd, the sight of the Golurk on the battlefield paused now, one leg raised high in mid-step. It wasn't moving. Kahili waved a hand and directed Anna and Alexa's attention to the other Pokemon on the field.

“Espeon's attacking.”

Indeed the glow of energy around the Sun Pokemon was multiplying quickly, the air around it beginning to warp, Espeon's outline distorting. A fine display of its psychic power. Sabrina, watching as Hau's partner sealed the movements of the Golurk across from it, considered the strength of the Pokemon on the field. Hers could all do that too but, for Hau's age... not bad.

“He's got a Psychic Bias.” Dexio, seated nearby, leaned slightly over to earn some approval points from the famous Psychic Trainer. Sabrina didn't even look his way.

“I can tell.”

“This is another stamina battle,” Kahili observed, “Hau's Espeon is keeping Hapu's Golurk from moving, and that Golurk is trying to break free. Golurk aren't Pokemon that ever show being tired however, so it's hard to say how good of a strategy this is. Hapu's Pokemon all have impressive stamina reserves.”

A few seconds later, as the Golurk locked in place began to sink into the still soft earth under its own weight, Kahili admitted her mistake in missing that aspect. Each fight so far had only served to make the battlefield more unstable, and the significantly heavy Golurk, once held in place...

“Golurk, break free!”

A powerful dark aura surged around the Automaton Pokemon, Hapu's willpower drawing from it more strength. But Hau cheered just as loudly for Espeon, his partner Pokemon calling an affirmative response, keeping its eyes locked forward, the red jewel within its forehead shining bright. Sunk so far already, unable to achieve flight in this situation, Golurk could not manifest the strength to push back and escape what held it down. The Automaton Pokemon sunk further still.

Even with an advantage in Type, Hau had feared the dauntless strength of Hapu's partner Golurk. Chosen instead of Pangoro – whose Dark-typing would have threatened that Ghost-type Pokemon deeply – his partner Espeon to seek victory in a different manner to a contest of raw strength. With that Automaton Pokemon sinking before them, Hau felt confident this had been the correct choice. But kept his focus all the same.
No relenting until this was won.

There was one technique that could resolve this situation for Hapu with ease. One ability that the most powerful of Golurk could use, travelling easily through the shadows despite their great size and weight. Hapu had studied well the partners she'd raised, and knew the shapes of their power, now and into the future. That being the problem.

Golurk didn't know Phantom Force yet.

Once Golurk was properly buried in the earth, Hau's Espeon would have the freedom to attack without relent. The only way, the only way that Golurk would be able to fight back, was by using that ability. Which it didn't know.

Sink or swim.

“Golurk, go!”

In the instant Espeon released its hold, Golurk sinking under its own power while trying to pull free, Hapu and Hau each gave their command. From Hapu the drive to find a path to that ability that would let Golurk break free, and strike its Espeon foe down. From Hau the focus to continue their attack. Espeon's forehead gem glowed brilliant red, flickering like a miniature sun, as the lilac-furred Pokemon's body pulsed with power unleashed.

No strike.

Sabrina knew. Dexio and Sina knew. Anyone with any experience with Psychic-type Pokemon knew. The attack had been formed, and would strike, but not in this moment. In the future. As the Sun Pokemon had foreseen.

Yet that moment where Espeon laid no attack upon Golurk, that moment of Hapu's focus reaching its peak, enabled the Automaton Pokemon to respond in kind. In the crucibles of the greatest battles the most power was forged, and by this intense clash between Hapu and Hau, further their Pokemon grew. Through the shadows Golurk did move and with that power, appearing directly behind Espeon in the moment after the Sun Pokemon launched its attack, the Automaton struck.

A decisive blow that slammed the Sun Pokemon down.

The brief moment of rest had done nothing for Golisopod between its last appearance and now, Hau calling Espeon back and returning the Hard Scale Pokemon to the field. Still signs of poison ravaging its body remained, still Golisopod breathed heavy. By comparison Golurk showed little effect at all. It was a Pokemon that fought the same from beginning to end after all.

Against Hau the odds now swung.

But without relent he still fought on.

“Liquidation!”

Once more manifesting the watery blades Golisopod attacked, slicing a liquid slash up across the giant Golurk's body. For all its ponderous movements, at close range the Automaton Pokemon was quick, slamming another ghostly punch upon its Hard Scale Pokemon opponent. Golisopod stumbled back.

But Hau's call to strike drove it to dive in again and complete the joint attack previously foreseen.
The blast of psychic power cast by Espeon forward in time manifested now, rocking Golurk's body and dropping its guard. The water blade of Golisopod struck deeper this time, sinking into the glowing yellow cavity marked along the Automaton Pokemon's chest, then catching on the bronze metal seal patched over its core. A moment paused in time as Hapu drew in a shaky breath.

Then Golisopod pulled further and cut the seal in two.

Such was the truth of the Automaton Pokemon Golurk. Filled with an intense energy that gives the giant constructs strength, the seal upon its chest was an essential part of managing that swirling chaos of power within. With the seal broken its power spilled out, Golurk expressing greater and greater strength moment by moment, but strength uncontrolled, lashing out without target or focus. And strength spent it could not maintain.

By this blow struck, a timer now before Golurk could no longer continue its fight.

Golisopod pulled back, breathing heavier still.

Hau... Hapu wasn't sure how much Hau understood about Golurk, whether he'd known exactly what this would do. To prevent her partner from hurting itself, Hapu would have to call it back soon. But at the least it could deal with that Golisopod first. When the battle continued with Mudsdale and Primarina, even if Primarina won, Hapu was confident returning Golurk could finish things without her partner being harmed too deeply further.

She was sure that she could-

Without Hapu's will joined to it, the rampaging Golurk unable to take from her strength, once more into the muddy quagmire that the battlefield was the Automaton Pokemon sunk again. No ghostly technique to free it this time. Through that twisted earth with pure force alone Golurk moved. Hau called Drill Run once more and Golisopod dug into the earth.

Ah. That was going to-

Golurk sunk, a half meter, then one full as Golisopod dug out further beneath it. Pulled a hand out of the mud and found no solid ground to grasp onto. Sunk further under its own weight still, the thrashing of its empowered form giving no relief. Golisopod only half made it back out of the earth before collapsing, the poison within its body finally taking its toll, but Hau felt no defeat in calling his second partner back. Returned Primarina to the field, Golurk unable to be called back in this situation by Hapu herself without forfeit.

A simple wave of icy wind blown out by Primarina froze over the surface of the mud lake the battlefield's centre consisted of, and caught up Golurk within it too. The Automaton Pokemon sealed in a frozen state while the power within it continued to burn. The ice was already thawing but... Primarina just breathed another coating, this an easy attack to perform upon a foe caught in place. Hapu shook her head.

No sense continuing that.

“I admit Golurk's defeat!”

Her call had Hau call Primarina's stop, the ice thawing again enough for Hapu to raise her partner's Ultra Ball and call it back to her. It would need healing to restore the seal on its body now, before it could be safely manifested again. So it came down to this, the same as before. Raising the Pokeball given to her by her grandfather, Hapu returned Mudsdale to the field.

The final fight.
Suffering the Z-Move of Primarina, performing her own without striking that opponent down, had the advantage significantly against Mudsdale and Hapu. Hapu remained calm and focused, believing in her partner fully, but bore no illusions about her predicament. With a mixture of his partners' incredible strength, effective tactics that had taken control of the battlefield, and a series of choices that moved in perfect counter to Hapu's own, Hau had exceeded in this fight. He was so strong. So incredibly strong.

This battle... Hapu couldn't be more proud for the fight she and hers had fought against this dear friend before her.

“Mudsdale, go forth!”

The muddy field Mudsdale pounded over, circling where it sunk deepest, Primarina circling as well. The Soloist Pokemon spent no concern in singing another water-manifesting song, more bubbles spreading out across the way between them. Even those that did not reach Mudsdale added up, the mud field extended further by their contents. Over the length of this battle Hau had really created an environment that cut off the power of Hapu's own team. As much as her plan with Gastrodon had been complicit as well.

Hau had taken everything she'd done and turned it into his own strength to rise above.

What a Trainer indeed.

It was no elegant grand clash to close this battle out. Indeed if Mudsdale and Primarina met directly, the battle would still have likely gone in Hapu's favour – such was her partner's strength. But with no means to cross the mud between them afforded her partner, and by continuously remaining opposite the Mudsdale, Hau's Primarina remained free to attack. A slow, exhaustive, and relentless assault. No manner of Mudsdale's own power able to break through.

The victor announced long after all witness had understood who it was to be.

“The winner is: Hau!”

Circling the muddy field between them themselves, Hau and Hapu met with smiles, grasping one another's hands with a grin. Even defeated, Hapu could not help but admire this fight had, both her own team and Hau's having given all they could. The growth of Hau was admirable, and more than enough motivation for Hapu to give even more to her own. She wouldn't fall behind here.

“The next time I fully intend to win.”

“I'm looking forward to it!”

In the morning of this day, two battles had been fought. One by two of Alola's eldest and greatest, the other by their youngest and brightest stars. Two battles remained, the winners of Yellow Block to meet as the afternoon came. Kukui and Sophocles, Tapu Fini and Kahili, the final matches of this second round.

Don't look away now.

Returned from Tapu Village, Molayne took charge of commentating the second of Sophocles's matches, the same as the first. This time the opponent facing his young cousin however was Molayne's own best friend, Kukui the one to have defeated Molayne in the previous round.
Perhaps, some would say, it was solely because of the known result of this match, but Molayne if asked would say clearly he hoped for Sophocles's victory without question.

“Trainers at the ready!”

As Anna and Alexa went over what was to be expected from this match – between Kukui who'd shown incredible power in his battle with Molayne, and Sophocles who'd revealed a Totem Minior in his fight with Kiawe – the two competitors prepared themselves. Kukui was smiling, but focused. Even here he wouldn't let himself slip for a moment.

Not yet.

Sophocles wore no smile, as tense as his shoulders felt. The other Captains, besides Acerola who'd only returned to the stadium with Molayne, and was now cheering for Soffy as much as all the others, had done as much as they could to help Sophocles prepare. Now it was all on him.

Despite how often the Captain of Hokulani Observatory would say that battling wasn't his strong suit, the intensity around him spoke far louder. Here was a youth of Alola with the drive to give it their all.

Here was one determined to overcome.

“Begin!”

Incineroar versus Togedemaru. The odds worsening against Sophocles from the very first second. His choice had been the partner with which Sophocles could perform the best Z-Move, knowing he needed to unleash one quickly within this fight. With the Totem Minior's demands... if Sophocles waited too long to perform a Z-Move then Minior following so soon after would leave him too exhausted to go on. Even the thought of using a Z-Move then battling with the Totem after was intimidating. But... to stand any chance against a monster like Kukui, Sophocles had to do all he could all the same.

Push forth every last scrap of power he could find.

Kukui's choice was more practical. Incineroar was a good generalist for the two Electric-type Pokemon the Professor knew Sophocles to have – shown in the Captain's battle with his fellow Kiawe before – and Kukui would place a confident bet that Minior would not be the first to appear. He'd been right. That his pick had such a good match-up besides was... a lucky bonus.
Now came the fight.

“That Incineroar is young,” Molayne made observation, Anna and Alexa looking to him for his thoughts. “Kukui’s had a lot of different teammates over the years, and that one is definitely new. I’d say it's only recently evolved. Raised well for sure but... young.” The implication, that this Pokemon would be by far the weakest of Kukui's team, did not go missed by anyone. A Pokemon that would hold only similar strength to others of the same age. The biggest difference between it and its equivalent Starter Pokemon fellows being the Trainer behind it.

A difference shown clearly as Kukui commanded his partner forward.

“Flare Blitz!”

The Roly-Poly Pokemon Togedemaru, Electric and Steel-type, was both small and quick. A sixth of Incineroar's own size the round-bodied Pokemon, yellow and brown spikes flattened across its short grey fur, spun and bounced quickly, moving to evade the immediate flaming tackle of the almost six-foot feline humanoid, fire covering its red, black, and grey fur. Though the odds were against Sophocles, the typing of Incineroar – Fire and Dark – dangerous to Togedemaru's own, the truth was that the Captain's Pokemon was older. Experience was more difficult to determine, with the amount of time Sophocles stayed at work in the Hokulani Observatory, and the amount Kukui spent bringing his partners to battling fields across Alola – Royal Avenue most often – but in age at least Togedemaru had the slightest edge.

Dodging, releasing electrical bolts that struck and danced over Incineroar's body, the Pokemon of Sophocles sought to slow down its Heel Pokemon opponent for even just a moment. Electric-type opponents were always dangerous – if the power they struck with lingered, their foes could easily become unable to respond with any speed. And that was what Sophocles needed here. For Togedemaru to stun that Incineroar, and open the way for Sophocles to perform his Z-Move.

Then to hold out and recover from that act long enough that the Captain might use his partner Minior without fear the Totem would take more than Sophocles could give.

Kukui with Incineroar defeated the Magnezone of Molayne before. But watching that fight carefully, and with his own ability to visualise in battle, Sophocles moved well in counter to this Heel Pokemon opponent. Commanded clearly and, Togedemaru continuing to slip through Incineroar's attacks, punished with electricity each time, Molayne praising Sophocles's quick thinking in this fight. Certainly the Captain of Hokulani Observatory was standing up excellently to Kukui at this moment.

But the pressure and power was still Kukui's own. Each attack from Incineroar, each swing of its burning hands, was so dangerous. One, just one blow, would spell disaster. Sophocles was on a constant defensive in this fight. But even still, one single moment was all he needed.

And then that moment came.

A bolt struck Incineroar and the Heel Pokemon's leg caught, muscles seizing, the large bipedal feline momentarily locked in place. Sophocles raised his arms and began his Z-Pose.

Here they go.

To perform the Z-Pose tied to the Electrium-Z, necessary to unleash the Electric Z-Move Gigavolt Havoc, one brings their arms up before them, swings each around, then brings them together again in the shape of a lightning bolt. By that pose power flows, and from Sophocles to Togedemaru Z-Power was transferred. Incineroar left looking up from where it kneeled to the massive surge of
electricity its opponent released towards it.

Kukui's will behind it drove the Heel Pokemon to push through, rise up, and reach out.

“Darkest Lariat!”

The signature move of Incineroar involved the Pokemon swinging its arms around at great speed, becoming a momentary tornado of Dark-type energy to slam into a foe. It did not mitigate or reduce, not in any real way, the power of the Z-Move Gigavolt Havoc that struck it, but this attack, combined with Kukui's intent, allowed Incineroar to push through all the same. To take the blow but not be stopped or slowed by it.

And thus in the moments of recovery Togedemaru needed after launching that Z-Move, the severely weakened Incineroar still forced its way through to land an attack of its own.

A heavy arm collecting and throwing the Roly-Poly Pokemon into the air.

“Togedemaru!”

“Incineroar!”

“Wild Charge!” “Flare Blitz!”

Pokemon not of the air, once thrown into it, lacked many options of manoeuvrability. For the Togedemaru of Sophocles the Electric-type attack Wild Charge, which surrounded the Roly-Poly Pokemon in powerful electricity that pushed its body at great speed into a foe, was the best choice to return to the earth. For the Incineroar of Kukui, breathing heavy and looking up at its momentarily airborne opponent overhead, Flare Blitz, a flaming tackle that wreathed the Pokemon in fire it would then slam into a foe, was the ideal move as well. The positioning for each leaving this moment with one singular option alone.

A meeting of power between these two foes.

Numerically, the power exerted by Flare Blitz surpasses that of Wild Charge. Not to mention the effectiveness of Fire-type attacks upon Steel-type opponents. But Flare Blitz also took more from the user to do, and Incineroar had, despite its stubbornness aided by Kukui's own, still suffered a Z-Move. The needle on this match-up pushed back against it all the same.

Ultimately ending in the middle.

The recoil from these two attacks meeting blew both Pokemon back, and each hit the ground hard. Seconds passed, the crowd a moment silent, before the judge overseeing raised a hand to each side.

“And both Pokemon are unable to battle!”

And loud was the roar of appreciation for those watching this fight.

Second from Sophocles was Electivire, the large-bodied Thunderbolt Pokemon, a creature of thick and shaggy yellow and black fur. In answer Kukui chose his partner Lycanroc, Midday Form, oldest partner to the man's name. The difference in this match, Molayne knew, would be far more dramatic than the last. Do your best, Soffy, the thought crossed the mind of the head of the Hokulani Observatory. But it was hard to question the obvious.

Some battles decided long before they began.
“Electivire let's go!”

For the equality of the battle between Incineroar and Togedemaru, this time the fight was definitive. Older, stronger, vastly more experienced, the Lycanroc of Kukui gave no freedom in this fight. Struck hard, fast, and relentlessly. Incineroar's role had been to face the first of Sophocles, and allow Kukui to respond should Minior arise out of turn. It hadn't quite succeeded, but with Sophocles using a Z-Move, Kukui had held his confidence that Minior would be the last this time to appear. Good enough.

Again that battling style, those watching observed, where Kukui pushed relentlessly until an opponent was in position to take a most powerful blow. Like if the Masked Royal were meaner, some who closely followed Alola's battling scene would observe. Or simply more intent, Molayne would say in correction. Were he to unveil Kukui's obvious secret to anyone who hadn't already figured it out.

He was a better friend than that though.

Just a little bit.

For Sophocles, the goal had three steps. First use a Z-Move with Togedemaru, striking Kukui's first Pokemon hard and turning the odds in the Captain's favour. Then hold out with Electivire, allowing Sophocles as much time as possible to recover before Minior appeared on the field. Then finally use the power of the Totem Pokemon, so significant it was, to push through the Alolan Pokemon Professor's team.

Reality had been different. The Z-Move had only ended the first fight equally. And the grand plan with Electivire, all the other Captains helping Sophocles come up with tactics to prolong the fight, fell through. That Lycanroc of the Professor's, it bowled over and threw the Thunderbolt Pokemon every which way across the field. Somewhere inside himself Sophocles found himself complaining that the Professor was fighting so seriously against him. Another part chided the young Captain for expecting anyone, no matter how much stronger, to take it easy in as important a place as this. If anything, Kukui giving it his all so intently was a sign of respect. But it still left a sour taste in the Captain of Hokulani Observatory's heart.

He'd need to get stronger still and come back even greater for the next.

Slammed down with a heavy paw pushing against it, Electivire was pronounced defeated by the partner Lycanroc of Kukui. Sophocles raised one Pokeball for it then reached for Minior's Timer own to finish this out. Sixty seconds having passed all the same – Kukui keeping the battle in lock until he was free to respond – a switch came from the Pokemon Professor as well. His sixth Pokemon, the one unseen in the battle with Molayne before. A creature many across the world raised their heads to the sight of, different as it was here to all the rest of the earth.

Where to anyone else the Fox Pokemon Ninetales was a Fire-type of sleek golden fur: here in Alola it was something else entirely to see. It and its pre-evolution Vulpix, living on the sacred slopes of Mount Lanakila, the Fox Pokemon was one not of fire but ice. A coat of light-blue fur, long curls of wavy hair extending out from its head, neck, and tail, the Ice and Fairy-type Alolan Form of Ninetales captured the hearts immediately of all witness. A beautiful creature to see.

“A dangerous match for both Pokemon.”

Ice would threaten the Totem Minior, already glowing with rainbow light shining through the cracks lining the Meteor Pokemon's stone shell, but Rock was a danger to the Ice-type Ninetales in turn. And the natural resilience of a Totem meant that even a super-effective attack from Kukui's Pokemon
would not be enough to stop it in one go. Even with the age and experience it had as a member of the Professor's team.

Kukui would no doubt feel the pressure upon him to go even further forward in this fight.

“Hail.”

Slower with the rock shell around it, the Totem Minior partner of Sophocles could not act in time to stop the Ninetales's call, a chill in the air settling quickly within the battlefield's bounds, monitors around the field displaying the temperature's fast fall. Snow came next, then heavier blocks of ice as well, creating a swirling storm into which the Fox Pokemon quickly disappeared. The ice, despite striking against the Minior's body, did little, its rock shell insuring it against such strength. But too quickly Kukui's partner was already beyond Sophocles's sight.

On the other side of the obscuring storm, all able to see Kukui but Sophocles himself, voices rose as the Pokemon Professor set a light-blue Z-Crystal into his own Z-Ring. The same crystal Kahuna Hala had used in the first battle of this day before.

If the Ice-type Z-Move Subzero Slammer hit, Molayne knew, there would be little more Sophocles could do.

Kukui's plan to end this battle loudly and clearly announced.

“Power Gem!”

When pushed, Minior would take strength without concern. A Trainer's Bond with a Totem, it was like being a second away from a Z-Move at all times. At any time the Z-Aura covered Pokemon might demand more, and drain from its partner enough power to energise itself. Last time against Kiawe... it had immediately felt like Sophocles had performed a Z-Move without being ready for it, and left him deeply tired by the end. This time, with an actual Z-Move used already, if that Minior demanded more...

It could very well be the end of this battle right here and now.

He needed to stop that from happening.

“Careful with releasing its armour,” Ilima had said.

“Rather than a power fight, try for a counter-attack,” Lana had added.

“Totems are able to resist even great blows,” Kiawe continued their thoughts, “don't be pressured by your opponent, have faith in Minior and use that confidence to strike back through whatever your opponent does!”

“You've got this Soffy!” Mallow said, then and now. All the Captains were calling from the stands, support for their fellow in this fight.

“Go Sophocles!” Tristan cheered loudly too, before turning at the nudge of Lana's elbow against his side. The Brooklet Hill Captain grinned at him.

“Call him Soffy too.”

“... Go Soffy!”

Confidence and focus. Even when a beam of ice shot from the blizzard in response to the Rock-type
blast sent in, Sophocles kept his calm, just like they'd told him. Dodge that, easy enough, the Totem's inner power giving it the speed to do so with Sophocles expecting the incoming attack. Another Rock-type shot sent back in response. They'd trade like that and Sophocles wouldn't bet against a Totem in any stamina battle, even against a Pokemon as experienced as Kukui's own. Kukui had to know that too.

The next attack came far faster.

An Ice Beam Sophocles, watching closely, was able to command his partner to dodge. Not so for an Ice Shard. Weaker but far faster, the piece of ice flew from the storm and crashed against Minior's armour, unbalancing the Totem for just a moment. Just one slight change in its position floating there in the air.

Then the next Ice Beam, coming so fast after the last attack as to be a clear sign of the great strength Kukui's partner held, struck hard. As if Kukui had known, even with the storm of ice cutting off each Trainer's view of the other's partner. No... that Ninetales, was there any reason to believe it couldn't see Minior? Or that Kukui through their Bond couldn't tell where that Pokemon was? That was far too sweet a thing to think, that this storm was stopping those two at all. Sophocles shook his head.

He wouldn't stop here either.

Spinning itself into a whirling ball, shattering the ice holding it down, Minior raced forwards, passing through the storm and slamming all the way into the barrier opposite, before bouncing up high into the air. The strength and speed the Totem Pokemon held, Sophocles would have it use it all to break through this, even knowing the risk of the Totem asking for more than he could give. The only way to stand up to someone like Kukui had to be like this.

No holding back, right? That's what a bunch of the other Captains said all the time as of late. The message that was going around.

Standing here, the only way to truly face your opponent was to give it your all.

So Sophocles did.

And Kukui did too.

A shimmering aura of light pushed against Minior as it slammed down from ceiling to floor, sending out a wave of pressure that blew some of the storm away. Sophocles focused, forward intent, as his partner kept its attack. Faster than that Ninetales could catch. Stronger than it could stop. As soon as a blow was struck then it would begin. Sophocles would stun the Fox Pokemon, call for Minior to release its stone binding, then have it strike with all the more power that act would give. That was how he'd make it through.

He stayed calm, focused and prepared. They could do this still.

The shape of Ninetales, resolving from within the fading storm of hail, that was the moment to strike! “There!” Sophocles, confident and ready, commanded his partner to attack with all it had.

Ilima, in the stands, called for caution but his voice never made it to his fellow on the field.

Minior hit. Bowled over the Ninetales, the Fox Pokemon slammed hard upon the ground. That was the moment, the point where Sophocles had to give it his all! Caught in the drive to win, to strike before the battle could leave him unable to go on, the Captain of Hokulani Observatory made his call. Minior, high in the air, glowed brighter as the stone surrounding its rainbow core fell away. The final blow!
Racing down, the Minior smashed heavy upon its foe and the Substitute created by the Alolan Ninetales hidden by the frost faded away.

Enough clearing further for the sight of Kukui, completing the Ice-type Z-Pose across the field, to tell Sophocles his mistake.

It was over.

From a pillar of ice rising up beneath it Ninetales called out, its elegant voice echoing as Z-Power wrapped around it, magnifying into a beam more powerful than any fired before. Hala's Z-Move that morning had been disrupted, and instead flash-frozen a storm: effective, but less direct. This time, this time the beam fired and hit the target, Minior unarmoured, half-buried in the ground by its own powerful slam.

As beautiful as the Ice and Fairy-type Fox Pokemon was itself, the giant flower of ice that bloomed from the attack, the Totem Minior encased within, awed further, rainbow light refracting through the crystalline casing as it poured from the Minior's body all the same. That Totem... it was not yet done. Tried to break free, pulling more power to enable its escape.

More power.

More power.

More... pow... er...

Sophocles swayed and hit the ground moments before the rainbow glow of his partner faded away. Each too exhausted to go on. The battle concluded as so many had believed it would go.

Though the cameras focused on Kukui's face in the aftermath still caught clearly the exhale and wiping of beaded sweat from his brow.

Sophocles recovered soon enough. Woke in the League staging ground with Molayne watching over him, malasada gathered from a nearby shop within the League complex for the Captain to restore himself with. Asking of the next match's progress, the young Captain was directed to a screen mounted on a nearby wall.

And to the battle shown upon it.
“Even more than in its last fight, Tapu Fini is showing extreme aggression in the attacks it is choosing to use.”

The voice of Kahuna Olivia, last commentator of this second round, called again to oversee Tapu Fini's fights, carried her interest in the sight of the field below. Of the raging storm of water, howling vortexes of wind, and crashing bolts of electricity amongst them. Though in truth only part of that was by Tapu Fini's own make.

The yellow-feathered Pom-Pom Style variant of the Dancing Pokemon Oricorio, Electric and Flying-type, was on its own a Pokemon of only regular seeming power. Not something that significantly shaped its environment. At least not by its lonesome. But with Tapu Fini immediately unleashing its own power, a heavy mist surrounding the Island Deity and torrential storm forming overhead, an environment that Oricorio could make use of came into form.

Her immediate intention had just been to strike with an effective type in the opening moments, before Tapu Fini got too into this, in the hopes that an electrical effect might linger. But Kahili would take a bonus as significant as this in stride. Any of the Oricorio variants could summon a powerful windstorm once strong enough, but in a storm such as this their immensity increased. Hurricanes raged within the field now, pushing back the water continuously pouring from the thick dark clouds overhead. Electric bolts, formed and released from the feathered masses on each of Oricorio's hands as it danced, raced up the columns of wind and lashed through the clouds, multiplying into something more evocative of nature's fury itself.

If Tapu Fini wanted a storm Kahili Hano would give it a storm.

Dangerous though the Tapu remained. Immensely dangerous. By just moving its hands Tapu Fini seized control of all the water about, binding it together into massive tendrils that lashed down upon the Oricorio below. Kahili’s partner was strong enough to create a new windstorm that pushed the tendrils away, giving it a moment's protection to send up another crackling surge of electricity into the sky, but it was far too clear how this battle was to go.

Oricorio, pouring out power to remain in opposition, and Tapu Fini, countering with the barest gestures of its hands.

“Again.” Another bolt of electricity, this time cast not upwards but forwards. Into the watery shell surrounding Tapu Fini's form, the electricity dispersing with no sign of the damage done. No way to know. The deity refusing to give even an inch.
The heavy rain continued to pour.

“Tapu Fini is without question even more aggressive in this battle than it was facing Dexio in the first round.” Anna's words didn't come as surprise to any watching, the Island Deity continuing to move its hands and command the water steadily filling the barrier-enclosed battlefield. All could tell. “It may be that with the defeat of the other three Tapu, Tapu Fini has decided to go all out with the sole intention to win.”

Maybe... or maybe that was how it always was, Olivia considered. Tapu Koko lived for the fight. Tapu Lele as well, though in a different way. Tapu Bulu often avoided being roused to action, but when it did it lashed out freely as well. But Tapu Fini was different. Colder. More decisive. Rather than enjoying this battle, it seemed wholly interested in simply ending it.

The Kahuna of Akala silently wondered if any could defeat Poni's deity alone.

Kahili was determined. First Olivia had defeated Tapu Lele, and Kahili had been inspired. Had, from the moment the brackets were announced, believed she would be facing this foe: confidence in herself to defeat Grimsley and... not disrespect for Dexio but simple pragmatism that Tapu Fini would surpass him. The Tapu were monstrously strong.

Then Moon defeated Tapu Koko. Used all those incredible powers that were solely her own, drew Tapu Koko into a battle the deity allowed itself to be struck freely within, and wore it down with Z-Move after Z-Move. An action incredible beyond words. But something done by someone no other could emulate. Little that Kahili could take from that fight.

Plumeria defeated Tapu Bulu.

That was what stunned the Flying-type expert beyond words. Back in Malie City, when Team Skull had been making their annex attempt, Kahili had battled Plumeria and handily won. The difference between that woman then and now... it was to a degree Kahili had never imagined someone could cross in so short a time. Even knowing Moon and Hau. Still Plumeria had shocked Kahili to her core.

But... if Plumeria could do such a thing then... why not Kahili as well?

Because what drove Plumeria had to be something beyond what had moved anyone else in this League to date. Though she had nothing like Sabrina's psychic strength, Kahili was still an expert Pokemon Trainer. She could still look at another and know the strength of their Bonds. For the length of that fight, between Plumeria and Tapu Bulu, Plumeria had been stronger than any other Kahili had ever known.

If she wanted to win here, she would need to become that strong herself, even without a decade's grudge to drive her.

Difficult. So so difficult.

The Z-Crystal Kahili had prepared was the Grassium-Z. She would use it with her Toucannon, the Cannon Pokemon her oldest and strongest ally, to strike at Tapu Fini's weakness as hard as Kahili could do. But even with Toucannon's own strength, there would be no way to do such a thing without weakening Tapu Fini first, slowing it down, and ensuring that eventual attack would hit. To start with... as many of Kahili's partners as it would take needed to fight.

Oricorio just the first of many.

But it was difficult. Oh so difficult. Tapu Fini was relentless and remorseless, the battlefield below it
transfigured into a miniature sea as the rain continued to pour, now raging with whirlpools and waterspouts, the clouds overhead growing darker and darker still, billowing beneath the battlefield's barrier roof. Tapu Bulu transforming the battlefield into a forest both times had distracted those watching from the fact all four Tapu were held equal. The powers of Tapu Koko and Tapu Lele may be more ephemeral, quick to form and fade, but Tapu Fini's could be just as permanent as Tapu Bulu's own.

And just as, if not more, terrifying in strength.

Beating its wings and lifting from the ground, Oricorio rose up but was not so quick as to break away. The water across the battlefield already as high as Kahili's knees — were she inside of the barrier instead of just before it — Tapu Fini's domain had grown stronger still. The deity raised one of its black-webbed hands up and a far larger liquid hand from the water rose too, ensnaring Oricorio, grip broken by the Dancing Pokemon's attacks only to reform quickly around it. So this was what Tapu Fini had chosen to do. Fill the battlefield with its power then wield that power absolutely to crush its foes. Merciless. Merciless indeed.

Oricorio could not break free. Not truly. This first fight, it was a display of raw strength of such difference that Kahili had no choice but to call her partner back defeated. The first of her team unable to go on.

But many more still ready to fight.

Kahili couldn't oppose Tapu Fini in power, not the way Moon and Ultra Salamence, then Moon's Z-Moves, had Tapu Koko. And Olivia's strategy had been based on understanding Tapu Lele far better than any other could. Kahili struggled to imagine how Hapu, even a Hapu of the future, could ever bring Tapu Fini to bear. Or just how she might do so herself.

Plumeria's first act had been to enrage and take control of Tapu Bulu's actions. She'd led it into her pace and held it there all the way until victory. But Tapu Fini... Kahili wasn't even sure how to begin dragging the Island Deity from its pace into her own. How to break through to something so serenely and overpoweringly raining its strength down upon her. She needed to find a way. An edge to cut in. Or Tapu Fini would defeat her with ease.

Kahili would not let this battle be the end.

The part Water-typing of Tapu Fini meant Steel had no deep effect upon the body of the Land Spirit Pokemon, but choosing Skarmory Kahili still felt her confidence. It should still hurt. Still draw the Tapu's ire. If she could just break Tapu Fini from where it floated, rising with the water's surface, continuing to command the liquid around it to attack, Kahili could truly begin her own in counter. She and her partners just needed to push through.

The pounding in her head just wouldn't stop.

Sabrina watched. And knew. Olivia had been resistant. Moon immune. And Plumeria, with unbreakable force of will, too strong for Tapu Bulu to drag down. But she, and Dexio... and Kahili... had neither the blessing of experience, a decade's determination, or a gift solitary within the world. Kahili had no manner to resist the pressure of fighting a Tapu other than her own focus. And it was a fine focus, valiant and wild and exactly what Sabrina wanted to see from a Trainer such as that woman down there on that stage, but it wasn't perfect. Cracks were already forming.

Was there any way for Kahili to rise above?

Mist was spreading further, the bright lights that floated around Tapu Fini — its natural power usually
packaged into concentrated form – shattering into fog. Though dark were the clouds overhead, thick the rain and fierce the water below, the wind and lightning from Oricorio had already faded away. The swirling water moving under Tapu Fini's sole control. The entire battlefield a storm of the deity's strength alone.

A storm into which Skarmory bravely flew.

Olivia and Moon had both exhausted the Tapu they fought. Olivia by leading Tapu Lele on, dragging out and evading more and more powerful attacks; Moon by striking with her own, Z-Move after Z-Move draining Tapu Koko's health. Plumeria's battle had been won by poison inflicted, harm inflicted, and Tapu Bulu's defeat had been more violent than either of the two that came before.

Kahili lacked the raw power to beat Tapu Fini down, or a team forged of the perfect strategy to drag it from a battling state. Sabrina and Dexio had both engaged their Tapu opponent in power and the Tapu had overwhelmed them both. It was a flawed strategy to fight them in such a field.

Mallow had done the best for someone unable to meet those deities head-on. Created a strategy, turned Tapu Bulu's own power against it, and maybe almost won. If she'd successfully performed her Z-Move... who knows how it would have gone. Kahili had admired deeply the Captain of Lush Jungle's efforts. She had been so, so close in the end.

But there was no grand strategy Kahili had for Tapu Fini herself. Perhaps if she were a Water-type expert she could turn the Tapu's power against it, but as a Flying-type expert the two were... meaningless to one another. Neither particularly able to use the other's strength. Leaving Kahili's match-up poor indeed. Her one attempt, to charge the forming storm with wind and lightning from the first Oricorio she brought to the field, hadn't stuck. Tapu Fini's power had already quelled the wind and lightning to nothing. All that was left was her one goal, what she'd carried from the very beginning, to expose the Tapu to a Grass-type Z-Move from her Toucannon and hope that attack was enough to allow whatever Pokemon could follow to beat the Land Spirit Pokemon down.

But to strike that attack meant she needed to weaken Tapu Fini first, and the more Pokemon Kahili spent leading up to that act, the less she would have to follow on. How many on each side was enough? She didn't know. She couldn't know. Had only her instincts and her abilities to guide her. Strong instincts, strong abilities, Skarmory dodging through the rainstorm, identifying Tapu Fini and closing in, scything a wing through a watery simulacrum of the Land Spirit Pokemon, but the deity was more powerful and more dangerous than Kahili possibly felt she could be.

If it were Olivia, or Plumeria, or even Moon, could they stop this one? This Guardian Deity of Poni Island? Kahili questioned that.

She wondered if any could.

From the dark clouds overhead watery hands reached out to seize at Skarmory, Tapu Fini beneath the water's surface directing such with waves of its own. The Armour Bird Pokemon was fast and evasive enough, but there was an implacableness to the way the deity of Poni fought. It would repeat these motions for hours without concern, wearing down any who stood against it.

Would take absolute crushing victory in this fight.

The exchange of Skarmory for Hawlucha came with Kahili's understanding where her opponent lay. High-flying bird Pokemon had fine vision even in conditions such as this, and Skarmory had spotted Tapu Fini floating beneath the water lapping across the surface of the field. So one changed for the other and Hawlucha appeared, high in the air overhead. A position perfect to fall from with arm outstretched.
The purple glow of a taught Poison-type move around it as the Wrestling Pokemon crashed through the surface of the water and slammed into the Land Spirit beneath.

Immediately Kahili knew the advantage this move took. Tapu Fini’s immense power was something most dangerous at range, part of why the Pokemon always pulled away from others, creating distance and distraction. Hawlucha held tight as soon as it struck, hitting again and again as the Land Spirit Pokemon raced through the water, unsettled by each Poison-type blow. Liquid hands grasped and pulled at Hawlucha, but the partner of Kahili kept hold all the same. It wouldn’t let go.

A surge of pink light washed out from its foe.

“Tapu Fini is using Nature's Madness.” Olivia's commentary was stark. Every time a Tapu used this technique it became a risk. This power of the Tapu, that seemed to halve the stamina of a Pokemon each time it struck, it was truly a dangerous thing. Immediately Hawlucha struggled, strength flickering, and let go. Moved to surface, to gasp for breath before it could return to the fight.

A watery hand wrapped around its legs and dragged the Wrestling Pokemon down.

With the water reaching up to her own chest now, just inside the barrier she stood before, Kahili’s eyes widened as her Hawlucha slammed into it, held beneath the water, pushed against the barrier wall. The bright blue eyes of Tapu Fini appeared from out of the depths behind Hawlucha, staring past it into Kahili’s own. The Tapu, its long blue hair waving ominously as the water swirled around it, made a clear motion of its hand. Kahili shut her eyes hard and looked down infuriated.

“I admit Hawlucha's defeat.”

Released from where it was held, the Wrestling Pokemon struggled to the water's surface and gasped desperately for air.

Little care did Tapu Fini show as the voice of the crowd turned against it, even members of Alola booing this Guardian Deity’s acts. Such cruelty, such viciousness, such lack of sport in these fights. The sight of the Land Spirit’s battle did not awe, inspire, or touch with fear. Only frustration.

The true nature of the Tapu of Alola on full display.

Kahili returned Skarmory to continue on. Tapu Fini raised up a pillar of water, rising within it while releasing another of the pink discs. Easily evaded by Skarmory, but also a sign that the Tapu would spare nothing in the way it fought. Reached out a hand and extended another column of water perpendicular from the one it had risen within. Then twisted that hand and more sprouted from the second.

Again and again Tapu Fini split the streams of water, cutting more and more of the battlefield into sections of air bordered by liquid lines. Skarmory flew through the gaps but moment by moment those gaps shrunk, the Armour Bird Pokemon losing speed as it moved to avoid the rushing water around it. The ideal was to return to striking distance of Tapu Fini, but it was so difficult a thing to do. Kahili grit her teeth and gave all the focus she could, even as her head pounded, anger amplifying the amount the Tapu weighed down upon her.

She wouldn't let it win like that.

Skarmory closed in on the Tapu but a wing clipping through water had all the rest respond, compress around it, and seize the Armour Bird Pokemon in a swirling liquid typhoon. Moon and Lana both saw that as an even more vicious display of the acts they had committed before.

Three left. Toucannon, with which Kahili would use the Grass-type Z-Move. Baile Style Oricorio,
Fire and Flying-type: was there even anything it could possibly do? And Mandibuzz, strong and able, but if it came before, Kahili would have nothing to stand up to Tapu Fini after launching her Z-Move. And she'd watched Tapu Koko take so many from Moon. Even Plumeria, hitting Tapu Bulu with a Poison-type Z-Move, so effective against Ula'ula's Guardian Deity, hadn't stopped it then. It had continued on for so long after. No single Z-Move alone could stop a Tapu in any way at all.

What should she do...

“Trainer Kahili, you must choose your next Pokemon!”

She was almost out of time. No choice. No choice at all. Fine then, she’d go for it now. Unleash her oldest and strongest, the Normal and Flying-type Cannon Pokemon Toucannon, the bright-beaked bird beating its wings as it began to circle the field of water below. Honestly, Tapu Fini beginning this battle by flooding the field was so brutal an act. Everything the Guardian did was brutal.

It was so frustrating to face.

“Bullet Seed!”

Grass-infused seeds spat at overpowering speed from the beak of Toucannon shattered against Tapu Fini's body, the layer of water wrapped around the Land Spirit Pokemon amplifying its defense. But turning to face and attack Tapu Fini was dangerous, too dangerous, as two giant spouts of water turned like limbs to ensnare around Toucannon before it could pull away.

Kahili continued to command, needing her partner to break through, but the reality of this was a hard thing to ignore.

She was facing a deity that if not enraged, was nonetheless determined to destroy any who stood against it.

“Beak Blast!”

This was a dangerous ploy. The signature technique of Toucannon caused the Pokemon to spend time generating incredible heat within its beak, before releasing that as an immensely powerful attack. Being caught by water, heating the water in turn, would hurt Toucannon too. But that moment of Tapu Fini holding her partner tight within its power's grip, then the water around Toucannon shattering as a great gout of heat was released, Kahili gambled on.

Without risk none could ever stand up to a power such as this.

The attack struck. Tapu Fini had too passively held Toucannon for a moment after catching it within the water it controlled, and so from that water Toucannon's most powerful attack was released. Shattered the water surrounding it, then struck into the shell coating Tapu Fini in turn. Pierced through that too.

Scorched the Land Spirit Pokemon's chest.

“Kahili is beginning a Z-Pose!”

“That's the Grass-type Z-Move!”

“It will be super-effective!”

Not Bullet Seed behind it. A stronger move Toucannon knew, Seed Bomb something that held more power in a single strike, but less than the multitude Bullet Seed could unleash. But versatility had its
rewards, and Kahili had learned long ago that ensuring a powerful Grass-type Z-Move could arise from Toucannon had its value.

Now more than ever.

As the Z-Power building around her transferred into her partner on the field, Toucannon closed the distance between it and Tapu Fini, the deity pulling up more water to grasp the Cannon Pokemon tighter than before. But it didn't matter. It was too slow. All that water trying to hold on meant nothing.

In a grand surge of radiant light, the power of the Grass-type Z-Move Bloom Doom washed out, broke through all around it, and encompassed Tapu Fini in its grasp.

She'd landed her strike.

Pokemon strong enough had shown it. Even Kukui's own Incineroar, still so young, in the battle before. It had used its own attack then to push through, a Z-Move even despite doing so much damage not necessarily able to stop an opponent strong enough. So Tapu Fini, scorched by Z-Power aligned with the Grass-type, an attack so incredibly effective against it, was still able to act. Pulled up a hand of water from the sea below even as the power of Kahili and Toucannon burned it.

In the moment that power faded enough to push through, the Guardian Deity reached that hand up further, grasped tight hold of Toucannon, then pulled it all the way down into the waves of water beneath.

“I admit Toucannon's defeat.”

Kahili knew. Knew immediately her partner would not break free, and Tapu Fini would only make its point clearer until Kahili was forced to say such. No sense wasting time. The deity, floating high in the air above, was clearly harmed. Body marked by the Z-Move to have fallen upon it. That was as much as Kahili could ask of any one of her partners in this fight.

Two left to go.

Kahili's fingers skipped over Mandibuzz's Pokeball. Then again as she attempted to grasp it a second time. She had to turn, and reach around with her other arm, to properly take hold of the ball and lift it from her waist. So this was a Tapu's pressure, weighing down on her like this. She was moving slower too. It felt like the early days, when she'd first begun using Z-Moves and had been exhausted by them, but somehow even worse. Malevolent, almost. An intentional pressure pushing her down.

Young children often admired the position of Kahuna, wishing to be one eventually themselves. Growing older, many realised the intensity of responsibility, and left those childhood dreams behind.

Today, as with the days the Tapu had appeared before, many reconsidered solely based on the connection required with these Guardian Deities of Alola.

Mandibuzz emerged and then immediately was forced to dodge, a beam of pink energy blasting out from Tapu Fini to where the Bone Vulture Pokemon appeared. Did Tapu Fini understand Pokemon typing well enough to know to target the Dark and Flying-type Mandibuzz with a Moonblast? Or was that mere coincidence, the act of the deity's aggression mounting after Kahili's successful attack?

Did it really matter?

Kahili directed Mandibuzz and it flew quick, dodging around the masses of water Tapu Fini continued to form, Moonblasts now travelling amongst them as the deity amplified its assault.
Mandibuzz was a ranged attacker best, which was challenging as Tapu Fini was too, but Kahili still knew what she had to do. Even if she could feel the thoughts and strength given through her Bonds flowing slower than ever before. Tapu Fini wouldn't give her relief. Not til this was done. Not til it had won.

But she would win.

Mandibuzz, closing in on Tapu Fini despite the deity's grand attacks, spat from its gullet a thick globule of purple, a poison so many Pokemon could be taught to produce.

The toxic lump caught the deity right in the face.

When Tapu Fini yelled it was loud but louder still was the crash of water, an immense wave of liquid hands immediately exploding out of the thick clouds overhead, and reaching up from the swirling sea below. Each hand extended far enough to grasp its opposite, and as Tapu Fini wiped at its face, water flowing around it, a field of water pillars covered the League stage.

Then exploded outward, until the entire battlefield within the barrier was water-touched, before compressing in an instant back around Mandibuzz again. That much pressure...

“Stop!”

The water did stop, at Kahili's fearful cry. Tapu Fini, its eyes locked on Mandibuzz, purple still streaked across its face, turned to look down at Kahili below. Kahili shook her head. The Tapu stared in silence. Waiting.

“I admit—” thrown against the barrier wall Mandibuzz, water-logged and hacking, slid down it until Kahili could catch it with the beam of her Pokeball. Just one left.

Against this?

“It's... cruel, isn't it?” Alexa had kept so silent on the Tapu, over each of these fights so far. They were Alola's culture, and she did not wish to speak as an outsider on the way their deities were. But this was... she couldn't keep silent at that. Anna said nothing.

Olivia spent a long moment considering what she would.

“This is how they fight. This is how they are.” That was all she had to say. Just reality. The way the Tapu fought, if it was cruel it was cruel. That was just what it was to them.

The real mistake was that they were here in this League to begin with.

Kahili stood there quietly, Pokeball of her last Pokemon, the red-feathered Baile Style Oricorio, grasped in her hand. Should she send it into this? Into this water-filled battlefield of Tapu Fini? A Z-Move had been struck. A powerful poison inflicted. And to have done this, all of this, Tapu Fini had to be drained. It could not possibly do so much and be fine, Kahili had to believe that. Was she close? Close enough that even with a weakness in Type Oricorio could win? She didn't know. Her head still hurt. She was tired.

Should she...

“Trainer Kahili, you are required to—”

“I know.” Her words were stern enough to be heard. The judge paused a moment. Kahili stared into the Pokeball still.
Then shook her head and returned it to her waist.

Some battles not worth the struggle at the end.

“Kahili has forfeited the battle! The winner is: Tapu Fini!”

The disappointment was clear. But the understanding moreso. As Kahili walked away, the battlefield technicians maintained the barrier until the sluices around it were open. Then lowered it and all the water drained away.

Still wrapped in water itself, Tapu Fini lowered back down to the ground. Retreated within its deep violet shell, its power wrapping around itself enough to cleanse poison and restore its spent strength. Was left to rest there, in the centre of the battlefield's stage, as the voices of Alola and the world further around questioned this battle seen. And the one to fight within.

Kahili looked up as she walked away, into the competitors' stands, and saw Kukui standing there at the edge, looking down to meet her eyes. Each nodded.

She'd be relying on him to ensure this was where the Guardian Deity of Poni stopped.

So that their finale could truly be of Alola's own.

“And so the second round of the first Alolan Pokemon League has come to a close!”

“Eight more incredible battles, and now eight competitors remaining to take part in the League!”

“Once again we will have a break, two more days' time, before with the tenth day of this League the quarter-finals will begin!”

“These battles will be to determine the winners of each block, who will then go on to face one another in the semi-finals!”

“Stay with us folks, the next four battles to come, I am sure, will be even greater still! We will return to you then, so until then, I'm Anna signing off-”

“and I'm Alexa,”

“and we will see you again soon!”

The First Alolan Pokemon League - Quarterfinals
And so the second round now comes to a close. The quarterfinals come next, which I am of course excited to get to. I'm excited for everything ahead. How could I not be?
I know it all.

My combat style changed a little this chapter. This is the most times I’ve referred to characters ordering actual Pokemon Attacks by name, which I think has happened plenty before but not vocally: characters have done it but I haven’t specifically written them saying it. The flow of this writing led me into it though, so it's interesting. It makes things different, and with so many battles already behind us, I hope constant change provides interest. The challenge of writing this League to be fascinating with so much combat within it remains heavy on my shoulders, but I am doing my best with it. I just have to believe my best will be good enough.

I'll do my best to do just that.

For now that's this chapter. As always I'd like to direct all readers to the following twitter and tumblr post advertising Eldritch, if you are able to share either to help bring Eldritch to more people, it would be dearly appreciated.

twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480

tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

That is that for this chapter. I may just be able to bring the next one a little faster this time, as I'm taking a week's break from work for birthday reasons (hb to me), but we will see. Either way, I'm extremely looking forward to it. Of course I am.

I hope you are too.
A gap of two days’ time lay between the end of the first Alolan Pokemon League's second round, and the beginning of its third. One day less than the gap between the first and second, one day less for the victors of that second to recover for their third.

After this third round, the quarter-finals of this League, there would be another gap of three. Then the semi-finals. Two more battles to decide the two strongest Trainers to go on. Then one last. At a time to be chosen by the two to compete, within the span of a week after the semi-finals day. The final battle, visible now in the distance ahead.

But to begin four more battles must first pass. The determination of who would stand at the top of each competitor's block. The winner of Blue Block: Moon or Lana? The winner of Green Block: Ryuki or Plumeria? The winner of Red Block: Hala or Hau? And the winner of Yellow Block: Kukui or Tapu Fini? Suspicions, beliefs, bets abounded as to who would win each, but the results could not be known until the battles were done.

So with two days' rest for themselves and their teams behind them, these eight Trainers reunited once again at the peak of Mount Lanakila and Alola itself. The quarter-finals round of the first Alolan Pokemon League: now to begin.

“Six.”

In a single word Lana drove Moon to silence, the younger girl asking Lana for her desired number – as Moon herself could match any the Captain of Brooklet Hill chose.

She still hadn't been prepared for the answer Lana gave.

Lana had six Pokemon? Moon glanced about the staging grounds, but besides the awaiting judge, only she and Lana were here: all others gone to the competitors' stands. Moon hadn't known that at all! Mina had always said only Ilima and Acerola had six. How long had Lana? That was really impressive! That was really cool!

Somehow being complimented in such a way by a girl four years younger with a full team of six herself did nothing to give Lana pride.

“Do you accept?”

The almost brusque getting to the point by Lana made Moon pause, her excitement at Lana’s revelation fading into concern. Was Lana okay? Had... Moon done something?
“Moon. Six Pokemon. Please.”

...yes. Six Pokemon. The judge awaiting nodded and moved away, Lana turning to follow after, Moon's call to the Brooklet Hill Captain answered with one thing said alone. Just the one.

“It's time for our fight.”

“In terms of raw power, Moon's team has shown far more, due to her ability to use a Z-Move with each of her partners and Ultra Evolution with her partner Salamence. However in technique Lana has an edge, the Captain of Brooklet Hill a more experienced battler. Lana won both of her matches so far with a significant lead, battling in a relentless manner that allowed neither Tristan nor Jackson to pull ahead. She'll be applying as much pressure as she can to keep Moon from using her Z-Moves, and the longer Moon is held down, the more advantage Lana will gain. This battle will be a significant test of each Trainer's ability to out-manoeuvre the other!”

“Furthermore, Lana's entering this battle with the revelation that she has six Pokemon in her team!”

Following on from Anna's analysis, Alexa stoked the crowd's excitement further by reiterating what was shown, six Pokeballs displayed beneath Lana's name on the boards around the field. The other Captains of Alola, Mina included, all glanced at each other before shaking their heads, not one aware. How long had Lana been keeping that quiet?

Was she... handling the demand alright?

“That in both her battles with Captain Ilima and Tapu Koko, Moon's entire team and their fighting styles have been seen,” Kahuna Olivia, third commentator for this match, gave her own opinions on how this was to go, “and two of Lana's partners are still complete unknowns, puts the advantage even further in Lana's hands. As long as she can stop Moon from using her Z-Moves – and Ultra Evolution especially – the battle is almost certainly hers.”

Oh how neatly those above framed it. As long as Lana cut off Moon's strength she'd win. As long as Lana didn't engage Moon in the way Ilima and Tapu Koko had she'd win. As long as she stopped Moon from going all out. As long as this, as long as that, as long as Lana did all these things to stop Moon she could win because if she didn't, if she let Moon use the full strength of her team, Lana would never win at all. That was what they were really saying.

That was what they really meant.

*Don't fight her as an equal because as an equal you will lose.*
Knowing that was true left deep a wound upon the pride of the Captain of Brooklet Hill.

“Go, Gyarados!”

It had been so easy at first. To go from five to six by just keeping the Magikarp Lana had fished up with her. Of course it had been easy: Magikarp were famously undemanding until they got going. Until they got a taste for the strength their Trainers could give. Then evolution came quick. Like a switch being flipped on inside their heads. Then it stopped being so simple a thing.

Then Lana woke every day feeling like she was swimming through the thickest sludge there could be.

This was the one no other had known to be by Lana's side, for months now the secret kept, the Captain keeping going at times through pure force of will alone. She would adapt, she would become strong. That was her will and to her will Gyarados – the Atrocious Pokemon a lengthy serpent of blue scale and cream underbelly, spined fin ridges along its back and a mighty jaw bearing fiercely large fangs – responded. Roared ferociously as soon as it appeared. Okay. Here they go.

Moon's choice had been what Lana expected, the Arrow Quill Pokemon Decidueye appearing again. With its Grass-typing that Pokemon was one of Moon's most dangerous to Lana, which in most cases would cause a Trainer to hold it back, but Moon both liked leading with Decidueye, and likely knew she had to strike hard against whatever Lana chose to begin.

Exactly what Lana had predicted and moved in counter to. Now.

Time to do this and win.

As Gyarados snaked forward over the League battlefield towards Decidueye Moon's partner pulled back, firing a Grass-infused arrow that broke over the Atrocious Pokemon's scales. Oh no, faced with a Gyarados, the Pokemon's intimidating presence already unsettling Moon's own, attacks like that wouldn't do a thing. Until the sixty seconds had passed and Moon could change Decidueye out, Lana would have control.

She wouldn't let go.

“Immediately Gyarados is attempting to catch Decidueye in its grip, driving Moon's Pokemon back further to the wall! Given Lana's preference for Ice-type attacks, it's almost certain that Gyarados has one and will use it as soon as it has Decidueye pinned down! Moon's in a dangerous situation from the very beginning!”

Nine months. Nine months ago Lana and Moon had fought, and the Captain of Brooklet Hill had crushed the young Trainer with ease. Not in a way of cruelty but of teaching, to ensure Moon knew how much further she had to go. To prepare her to do such. But then she did.

And Lana didn't know how to feel about that all.

Moon's commands were clear, Decidueye diving forward and evading over Gyarados's lunging bite, Ice-type energy infused into the Atrocious Pokemon's fangs. Moon wasn't panicking. Wasn't distressed. Was keeping her calm and matching Lana with everything she could give. Like an equal. Nine months to become that. Nine months in which Lana had been training so hard, pushing herself so far, even taking on a sixth Pokemon to make her one of the few in Alola to keep such at League level. And still Moon grew faster than that. This meeting here, for as equal as it was now, in just a few months would Moon be far beyond Lana's reach? The next time a League came around, if they met would Moon do to Lana what she had done to Moon those nine months ago? This rate of
growth, this girl before her, why did thinking about all these things infuriate Lana so?

She'd come so far, given her all, and brought six Pokemon to the quarter-finals of this first Pokemon League as a Captain of Alola.

Yet still all she felt was dissatisfaction knowing that the one before her would clearly be so much more.

“Gyarados, Rain Dance!”

Though the storm to form overhead was only a pale shade of what Tapu Fini had summoned before, it was still enough for what Lana needed it to do. Still time, as heavy raindrops began to fall upon the battlefield below, before Moon could call Decidueye back. Still time in which Lana could unleash all the power she and hers held. Still time to stop Moon from doing the same.

She'd win. She'd win and be the stronger of them even now! Even if Moon had beaten Ilima and Tapu Koko! Lana wouldn't let her win! It would be her! She'd be the stronger! She would!

Even if that meant every ounce of Lana's focus had to be upon preventing Moon from ever unleashing her full strength.

As Decidueye continued to dance amongst Gyarados's thrashing bites, rain falling from clouds summoned overhead, Lana gave her next command and her partner coiled around itself and tensed. She'd win.

Much like Kahili's Oricorio in the fight before. A rainstorm giving strength to the Hurricane technique, guaranteeing its reach. Not the strongest of Gyarados's attacks – the Atrocious Pokemon much stronger in those landed with its body than sent out from – but something like this catching Decidueye up still mattered. So as the Arrow Quill Pokemon was lifted by the suddenly raging vortex of wind, Lana continued her commands and Gyarados rose up through the storm with jaws opened wide and Ice-type power pouring from its fangs.

She'd win.

Even now, tossed about by the wind, Decidueye focused. Pulled upon the vines hanging from her leaf hood to close it tighter still around her face, narrowing her vision down to a single point alone. Moon was sending her intent, and from that Decidueye drew even more power to unleash. Lashed out a foot as Gyarados reached up, caught it upon the side of the Atrocious Pokemon's face furthest from where the Ice-type energy was flowing from its fangs, and allowed Decidueye to kick off and flip away from its opponent's grasp.

And to draw back and shoot an arrow in that same moment as well.

“That's a precise shot, though hard to call effective.” A Pokemon of Gyarados's size made for a different battle than most, and changed many of the rules about how the abilities of some would play out. Olivia considered Decidueye's attack, which had struck upon one of the two waving blue whiskers hanging from the Atrocious Pokemon's face. Chains had formed where the arrow hit, but were in no way slowing the Pokemon down. And that wasn't a critical place to score a hit either. Not the ideal target for damage.

If damage had been Moon's intent.

But as Gyarados lashed around to catch the Arrow Quill Pokemon before it could get away, Decidueye opened her wings to the wind pressure of the Atrocious Pokemon's attack. Was pulled in quick towards Gyarados's face and reached out for that whisker, grasping tight those dangling chains
in a fearsome talon grip.

Drew back and shot an arrow into the underside of Gyarados's jaw as the Atrocious Pokemon flung its head around to dislodge the Pokemon now hanging beneath its skull.

“Those chains do damage to whatever they're touching,” Alexa, having studied up on Alolan Pokemon as soon as she'd known she'd be joining as commentator for this League, made observation. “Especially with Decidueye being Ghost-type itself, that's a risky move: though it does seem to be paying off.”

Roaring, Gyarados slammed its head down upon the ground to try and catch Decidueye up but, swinging with the chain tying it to the whisker of its foe, Moon's Pokemon pulled up from the impact and caught on to the side of Gyarados's face.

“Gyarados uses its immense physical strength to attack its opponents.” Olivia made her own conclusions from this sight. “By keeping so close to it, Decidueye's preventing Lana's Pokemon from being able to swing its full power about. It's a defensive play for Moon to outlast the time until switching.”

Was it just defense? Lana didn't think so. Moon had so obviously set her Grassium-Z into that black Z-Ring of hers – another thing that made her different and special, whatever it was – and was obviously going to use it as soon as the opportunity came. Lana wouldn't ever assume otherwise: that Moon was not prepared to strike in a single moment's weakness. That the young girl was anything less than omni-capable. It was the only way to stand up to her. Lana had to feel that pressure, the fear of defeat, so strongly it would make her impossible to overcome.

She'd win and, to do that, Lana had to be sure that if Moon was given even a single inch this battle would be over.

It was the only way.

“Despite the strong opening on Lana's side, Moon's partner successfully kept a defensive long enough to enable a switch, Moon exchanging Decidueye for Milotic! Will Lana call Gyarados back, or keep her own partner out to face this next challenger?”

Lana knew that Milotic. Back in the months Moon had been training on Poni Island, Mina had the girl come train with Lana. The realisation hadn't happened then. Lana had considered Moon's growth impressive, but working with Milotic alone hadn't revealed the truth. The two Trainers each using only one Pokemon, for teaching and training, so that Milotic and Moon could learn from Lana the ways the Captain used Ice-type techniques in battle. So that Milotic might transform the watery-coating it used into new forms of strength. Lana hadn't realised then.

Not until the battle with Ilima did she fully understand just what power Moon truly held.

“Octillery!”

Moon had failed to unleash a Z-Move against Gyarados. Been forced to defend for the length of that fight, and retreated Decidueye with the Arrow Quill Pokemon having done little and suffered greatly for it. It was... almost disappointing for Lana that it had gone that well. Her mind was pulsing with fear of Moon's great abilities, but in practise Moon had shown nothing. Honestly, Ilima and Tapu Koko both could never have lost to someone like that.

Why did it feel like Moon here was so much less?

“Bullet Seed!”
The Jet Pokemon Octillery, that red-bodied octopoid, had a wide range of powers it could unleash, an attack of the Grass-type amongst them. Lana knew each of Moon's Pokemon well enough, having seen them give their all against Ilima and Tapu Koko, and so knew which of her partners she'd match against each. And, the pale blue Icium-Z set into her Z-Ring, just how her Z-Move would be used. When Salamence appeared, when Moon pulled out the power of Ultra Evolution, Lana would defeat it. She knew she would.

It was all she'd been thinking about from the moment Moon made history on this stage.

Yet even as Octillery's attack continued, Milotic's movement proved faster, the remnants of the rainstorm Gyarados had summoned before speeding up the Tender Pokemon's signature technique. Water flowing from its cream-coloured scales to form a liquid layer wrapped around it, a technique so similar to Wishiwashi's own, Milotic arched and coiled across the field, dodging each incoming attack. But though Octillery could not move quickly across any distance, the Jet Pokemon was both nimble within a small radius, and persistent in its assault. Even with its speed and movement, Milotic still struggled to reach its foe. The advantage still in Lana's hands.

The Captain tempered her confidence as soon as it arose. She couldn't be confident here. Had to be sure that Moon was beating her at every moment until victory was finally hers. The only way.

Milotic coiled, dodging around another attack, before opening its mouth wide – a high note sung out, backed by a pulse of purple radiating from its mouth. That attack, that was Dragon-type. Because of course it was: Moon trained by the Dragon Tamers as she was, all her Pokemon would have had the chance to learn such moves if they could. A clear answer to the resistances Octillery would have to Water and Ice. Moon would never be pushed down so easily.

Ultimately there wasn't anything she could not do.

"Ice Beam!"

The beam of Ice-type energy punched through the incoming Dragon Pulse, the former Type disrupting the latter, striking into Milotic and freezing a chunk of the Tender Pokemon's watery shield. Moving quick, Milotic swung its tail around and smacked the block of ice falling free, sending it racing back across the field.

"Hyper Beam!"

Yes, this was the pressure Lana had known would come, Moon responding to her every move. It had taken that much power to stop that chunk of ice, and in the time it took Octillery to recover, Milotic had already closed the distance and wrapped around its foe. Now what would Moon do? Try and use the Waterium-Z? Or maybe the Dragonium or Fairium? Maybe even the Normalium? But... all three of those latter required distance to properly begin. And... Lana craned her head to catch sight of Moon, there was still a green Z-Crystal in her black Z-Ring. Had she not changed? Was she not using a Z-Move?

Why?

Even with Milotic closed in upon it now, Octillery remained slippery, evading the tightening coils of the Tender Pokemon's serpentine body, blasting more Bullet Seeds into its foe. Milotic swung its tail around, catching the Jet Pokemon with it, but Lana kept her focus and made sure Octillery held its own, her partner now swimming within the coat of water surrounding Moon's Pokemon. There would be little Milotic could do to stop them now.

Of the little it could do, Moon's command, for Milotic to freeze the entire shell of water that
surrounded its form, was without question the correct one.

“Moon's strategies are risky things.” Olivia continued to analyse from above. “She and her partners willingly accept danger and harm to strike their opponents, knowing that's what it takes to compete with those stronger. It means that if she’s ever countered it will be disastrous for her Pokemon but... as long as it continues to work…”

It had. Again and again, Moon showed what looked like a moment's weakness, or surprise, to an opponent then caught and punished their response heavily. Against Ilima and Tapu Koko both. And now against Lana as well. By directing Milotic so close to Octillery – so close Lana had felt like there was no choice but to enter the Pokemon's coating to attack – then choosing to lose that coating – the now frozen shell cracking into chunks and falling free, the Tender Pokemon breathing mist with its body so chilled after being wrapped in such – Lana's partner had been caught deep within the attack. Was trapped within a solid block of ice, already blasting out water to try and break free but...

Milotic breathed out, positioned over the frozen Octillery, and its icy breath deepened the prison around the Jet Pokemon's form. Ah, Lana's blood chilled, that was that. Moon didn't even need a Z-Move with Octillery held in such a position. Just to keep the ice around it locked until their opponent could no longer move. An act cold and merciless like Tapu Fini, yet born from a hot-blooded and risky choice to begin with. Moon's battling style swinging wildly between temperatures almost too fast to keep up. That girl, she could do anything if she willed it.

What were you even meant to do against that?

“I admit Octillery's defeat.”

The judge would have called it had Lana spent even five seconds more. Waiting, letting Milotic spend more power, would only leave a more sour taste in Lana's mouth. She'd strike back. She'd pull ahead. Moon taking the lead here wasn't the end. It wasn't over.

She'd win. She'd win.

She'd win.

“Cloyster!”

As soon as Octillery was broken from the ice and returned to Lana, the Captain sent out her oldest and strongest to finish things up. Moon's partner was exhausted, from the damage taken, the power exerted, and the effect of being coated in ice itself. It would not be able to restore its watery shell, and without it not be able to compete with what came next. Lana had the luxury of this choice.

She made it without hesitation.

“Shell Smash!”

Moon's partner did not have the luxury to return. Not before, unleashed upon the field and immediately releasing its armour in turn, Lana's Cloyster, the Water and Ice-type Bivalve Pokemon, rained a series of fired spines from its shell upon the Tender Pokemon and had it pronounced defeated mere moments after. The score evened in an instant.

Now to pull ahead.

“Moon has chosen her partner Bisharp to match Lana's Cloyster! Given its Steel-typing will resist Ice, and the significant strength that Pokemon has shown before, this is definitely Moon's best choice
in this situation! We'll see what happens next!”

“The Steel-type Z-Move,” Olivia made her conclusion freely. Everyone should already expect such. “If Moon intends to defeat Lana here, that is what she will do.”

Oh Lana knew. She knew this Bisharp was old and strong, they'd said that and it had shown that. And she'd seen it use the Steel-type Z-Move before, stopped by Tapu Koko's bare hands. Not nearly as easy for Lana's Pokemon to do that though. If she wanted to stop that Pokemon, prevent it from overwhelming her own... she'd have to strike first. Take that Bisharp down. Not let it have its way.

She wouldn't let Moon win!

“Liquidation!”

By its released armour and own great experience the immediate battle – blades of steel from Bisharp clashing with the blade of water forming over Cloyster's frontal spine – was won by Lana's Pokemon, Cloyster scoring numerous slashes of its water blade across the metal body of Bisharp. Movement, Lana's eyes glancing from this battle to Moon opposite her, caught the setting of the silver Steelium-Z into Moon's black Z-Ring. She was going to attempt it. Lana wouldn't let her! Not even a little!

“Cloyster take it- dodge!”

Not again. Not after Milotic had countered her once already, and Lana had seen that Bisharp use its own against Ilima's Tauros before. When Bisharp settled into a stance Lana's focus directed Cloyster back, the Bivalve Pokemon instead firing a beam of ice to coat the battlefield around their Sword Blade foe. There, its movement reduced and its counter dodged. Lana smiled. Then paused, this moment, Bisharp slowly rising up from its counter-attacking pose, staring at the Cloyster before it, far too silent. Far too tense.

A moment far too free.

“Cloyster!”

Immediately Lana's partner surged forward, Lana desperate to prevent the Z-Move she was now sure was coming. How could this be? If she attacked Bisharp it would counter, if she didn't Moon would use a Z-Move. That wasn't fair! No way to stop that! No way she could see! And if she couldn't see it that meant she was failing. She wasn't going to fail. Not here. Not now! She'd stop it! She'd stop it!

Lunging over the ice, the Sword Blade Pokemon of Moon swung an arm around into Cloyster's watery blade and the two deflected from one another, Bisharp easily escaping the ring of ice that surrounded it.

Why?

Lana's thoughts crashed into one another. That was the moment! The moment she'd been trying so hard to prevent! The moment of freedom without pressure where Moon and her partner could have used a Z-Move! There should have been a Z-Move! For Moon to choose not to use one now, after so long... had she chosen the same before as well then? Had Lana made mistakes in fighting Decidueye and Moon ignored them to not use a Z-Move? Was she just ignoring it all together? That didn't make sense! She was supposed to be going all out! They all were! No holding back!

So why, as Bisharp clashed with Cloyster again and again, blades meeting blade, did Moon feel like so much less than the two battles Lana had seen her in before?
Cloyster remained faster, the swings of its water-blade quicker than Bisharp's steel. But Lana's focus was fracturing, her tension-built confidence of fear struggling with the thought Moon was somehow not giving the all Lana had built her up to be in her head. She didn't understand. Moon should have used her Z-Move. She could have won the fight right then and there if she did. To not use it, to so confidently keep fighting on, did she... not think she needed it? Was Lana to Moon... so below anyone she'd battled before?

A new panic ballooned and burst in the heart of the Captain of Brooklet Hill.

“Cloyster!” Lana's command was ferocious, her partner responding to her mood by surging into an even greater array of attacks, slashing and pushing Bisharp back, the Sword Blade Pokemon unable to break free of this assault. When Bisharp moved to counter again Lana had Cloyster strike into it, then immediately dodge the counter-attack and hit Bisharp again. What was so scary about that counter move? If Lana knew it was coming she could make sure Cloyster dodged every time. Moon couldn't do anything to her without a Z-Move. Without that power Moon would lose to Lana for sure.

So then why?

Cloyster faltered. Felt the intensity of its partner slip again and pulled back, another moment's freedom given to the Sword Blade Pokemon before it. Bisharp, another moment free to act as it wished, lowered its arms and stretched, rolling its head from side to side, a clear display of calm. Then raised its arms again, ran each blade over the other, sparks dancing along the metal, and dived back in.

Why?

Why was Moon not using her Z-Move? Lana had given her the perfect chance after showing Moon that without one she'd lose. Moon had used Z-Moves so freely against Ilima and Tapu Koko! Was she... was Lana... not good enough? As Bisharp clashed blades with Cloyster again, this time pushing through the watery edge with its sharpened steel own, Lana's mind burned. Was she already... so far below? So unimportant? She couldn't be. She couldn't be! She'd come so far! She was doing so well! She couldn't be pushed down like this! Made to feel so small! She wouldn't be!

She wouldn't be!

Bisharp, blocking a Water-type slash with one bladed arm, swung its other around and scored a deep hit upon Cloyster's core.

Why?

Watching, staring, shock tingling through her body yet keeping her so still, Lana could not believe it as Moon's partner overwhelmed her own. That Bisharp was... a monster too. How did Moon do it? Just go out into the world and meet some old and monstrous Pokemon and convince it to join with her? Z-Moves without limit. Pokemon without limit. Mega Evolution. Ultra Evolution. Never tired, never worn down, Moon could know nothing of what Lana was feeling right now! She couldn't understand what it was like to struggle to hold on to a team, to maintain their strength when every day it was a challenge to do so! Lana, she, she'd get through this! She wanted to be a strong Trainer! She was going to be a strong Trainer! She'd do what she had to be one! Even if she didn't know what exactly a strong Trainer was. Even if she'd never be able to consider herself one, even if only one person in the world stood above her.

Even as, confidence torn by Moon's seeming choice to forsake Z-Moves in fighting her, and with it and the strain of maintaining six Pokemon causing Lana to be unable to give her Pokemon her full
strength, her partner Cloyster, her oldest and strongest, was laid low.

Hit the ground, shell closing around it, with Bisharp standing tall and the judge raising an arm to Moon's side.

Second of Lana's team unable to go on.

“Discounting Mega Evolution,” Olivia spoke clearly in the moments before Lana's next Pokémon emerged, “that Bisharp is the strongest member of Moon's team by far. With its age and experience... it is an exceptional Pokémon that Moon has partnered to.”

...so what?

So what if Moon had that? So what if Moon had so many things that made her strong and Lana was still struggling to take one step when Moon seemed to take ten in the same time? She wouldn't lose. She wouldn't lose! Raising her head, eyes burning, Lana chose to return Gyarados to the field, the Atrocious Pokémon again giving out an intimidating roar. She'd make Moon acknowledge her and beat Moon at her strongest and be the winner of Blue Block! She'd do it! She'd do it!

That intense, consuming need for victory, untempered by any consideration of the fight itself. Any need to fight well, or find joy as the best Trainers would. Lana's successes, her great achievements for her own young age, had paled to nothing in her eyes compared to those of others around her. She simply could not acknowledge herself in this fight, nor in any of the ones to come before. Always another above her. Always further to go.

A lifetime without happiness laying ahead on this road.

Moon called Bisharp back.

Again Decidueye appeared on the field, again matched against Gyarados. But this time without being the target of the Atrocious Pokémon's opening roar. So what? Lana would still win. She'd win!

Gyarados charged forward all fury and power, once more crashing and gouging through the earth of the battlefield, Decidueye again quick to dodge and pull away, firing Grass-type arrows that struck far harder this time around. So what? Gyarados turned and blasted a surge of water to fill the gouge it had dug, then bit down with Ice-infused fangs, freezing the entire mass of water solid, ignoring the arrows striking into its side. So what? The Atrocious Pokémon pulled, mouth biting into the mass of ice, and tore the entire structure from the earth, a gigantic frozen blade of water grasped within its jaws. So what so what so what! Swinging the huge mass of ice overhead Gyarados slammed it down into the ground, Decidueye pulling back but the Atrocious Pokémon shaking its head and the mass of ice with it, the lengthy block catching Decidueye at the end and sending the Arrow Quill Pokémon flying.

Do it.

Gyarados, weighed down by the ice in its grasp, nevertheless closed in on Decidueye as the partner of Moon shook her head from the impact, thrown against a barrier wall. If Moon wanted to stop this much power she'd have to use a Z-Move. Lana would force her to. Force her to acknowledge her. Gyarados swung the length of ice overhead.

Decidueye, in a burst of leaves an instant before contact, shifted to standing atop the block as it struck the ground and drew back an arrow, firing it into the centre of Gyarados's forehead.
It was hard for anyone but Lana to know what exactly that order was for. Gyarados lashed its head up, jerked the mass of ice to point vertical into the sky, and threw Decidueye atop it all the way to the barrier ceiling overhead. Releasing its grip on the ice, pulling back for a moment before slamming upwards, Gyarados sent the block surging after.

Do it.

Decidueye landed upon and rolled down the length of ice even as it shattered against the barrier ceiling, coming out of the roll with an arrow drawn back to fire down into the next beam of ice Gyarados released. Was caught by it all the same. Fell with ice around its body only to be caught in Gyarados's jaws, the Atrocious Pokemon shaking the partially frozen Decidueye around before throwing it against the barrier wall. The impact broke the ice and Moon's partner dashed free, pulling further away, but Gyarados pursued without mercy. Lana's intensity remaining unbroken.

Moon had to use a Z-Move here. She had to or Decidueye would lose. Lana knew Moon wouldn't allow that. She couldn't allow that!

She'd promised, the same as everyone else.

No holding back.

Gyarados tearing its way across the battlefield to reach it, Decidueye turned to face the great serpent bearing down upon it. Body glowed with the energy of an attack. Moon commanded clearly.

Decidueye launched itself without pause up into the opponent before it.

And connected the Flying-type technique Brave Bird.

The force of impact, from Gyarados charging at full strength, and the far smaller Decidueye attacking with its own, threw both Pokemon back. Both hit the ground, both struggled to recover. Decidueye had taken more hits, but Gyarados had spent significant energy in the intense attacks it had launched, Lana's fervour driving it to give its all. And it was not like this was an experienced Pokemon, the last of Lana's team to join her in only the previous year.

Seconds passed by until the judge observing declared both Pokemon unable to go on.

Why.

Why had Moon chosen to attack that way? If she'd used a Z-Move instead, Decidueye might still have been able to continue! At this point Lana was actively ignoring that she'd given no freedom for such an attack. Had built up her mental image of Moon to something indescribably strong. There was no reason for Moon to not have used such.

So then why?

“With how difficult Lana is making it for Moon to use Z-Moves, it may be that Moon has chosen to ignore them altogether.” Olivia didn't know the exact answer to Moon's choice either, but did know more than enough of Pokemon and Z-Moves to give her opinion on the fight being shown. “Not looking for those opportunities, not focusing upon them, gives a strength all of its own. The power a Pokemon would spend performing a Z-Move, it isn't wrong to use that to continue fighting without. And with how consistently Moon's used Z-Moves before, not using them could be part of her strategy to escape prediction. That or...”
“Or?” Anna prompted, after Olivia’s moment of silence stretched too long.

“Or Moon understands that freely using Z-Moves won’t bring her any further than she’s already come.”

Olivia hadn’t intended to say that part, yet found herself unable to hold it back. Ilima and Tapu Koko both, they’d engaged Moon in competitions of strength. Allowed Moon to strike them in full so they might strike back with their own power. But for the opponents beyond... there was no way to assume they’d give Moon that luxury. So many members of this League could have eliminated her in her first round. And so many even her second. But if Moon was discarding the drive to unleash Z-Moves as soon as the opportunity arose, and instead focusing on the power her Pokemon could release in extended battles, then she was...

Trying to become something even more than before. Each battle taking her further still.

Ultimately the difference in this fight between Lana and Moon being that Lana sought victory over her opponent, and Moon victory over herself. One obsessed with winning. The other with growing stronger.

A deep inversion from the time they’d first met.

“Wishiwashi!”

Sylveon.

Lana had expected as much. Of Moon’s four remaining Pokemon, Volcarona was weak to Water and Salamence dangerously so to Ice. Moon would rely on Bisharp and Sylveon first, and Bisharp had taken a significant amount of damage from Cloyster in the end. For Lana the choice came down to answer with Wishiwashi or Araquanid, both Pokemon well able to match against Sylveon. But Wishiwashi in its Schooling Form, the Water-type Small Fry Pokemon manifesting a great mass of water around it into a dangerous piscine form, was the stronger of the two. And Lana wanted to deny Moon any chances still.

Although with the way Moon was battling... did she really need to?

Sylveon was quick to dodge, avoiding the blasting streams of water Wishiwashi rained down from its body upon the battlefield it floated above, but that did not make up the difference, and Wishiwashi’s continued assault still pushed its Fairy-type foe down, each blast of water exploding out into waves washing across the field. Sylveon retaliated, it’s own Fairy-type attacks blasting upwards into the water-covered body of the Small Fry Pokemon overhead, but the difference was clear.

Moon would lose if this was as far as she could go.

So then why?

Again Lana paused, again the Bond between her and her partner fluctuated and the Pokemon of the Captain slowed down. Why was Moon making this decision? It was obvious, so obvious that Wishiwashi was overpowering Sylveon here. If Moon didn’t do something about it using her power, she wouldn’t win. Sylveon forming barriers didn’t matter, because Wishiwashi’s water still washed over them and across the battlefield, power that Lana would make use of soon enough. A thick pink mist surging out from Sylveon wouldn’t make a difference either, Wishiwashi changing to attacks of ice that rose sculptures of frozen water and mist with every shot. If Sylveon hid itself like it had before, what did it really matter? As soon as it attacked Lana and Wishiwashi would know where to
attack back in counter. The only, the only thing that hiding would do for it would be if Moon was using a Z-Move.

But she wasn't.

Lana could see that clearly in the way the young girl stood across the field.

Why?

Why was Moon doing this to her? Denying Lana even the chance to stop Moon's impossible strength. Knowing it was coming, preparing for it, agonising over how she would stand against it, it had been all Lana had been thinking of. She'd been consumed by it. And now, at the height of their battle, to know Moon was not even considering such she... Lana was breaking. She hated this, how this felt. This wasn't what she wanted. This wasn't how it should be. This battle, if it continued on without Moon ever using a Z-Move, Lana would win. It was clear to her that she would. But not like this.

She didn't want to win like this.

She didn't want to... win?

The thought thudded heavy within Lana's brain, everything else around her fading away. Sylveon and Wishiwashi continued their battle, beams of Fairy and Ice-type energy exchanged from surface of field to sky, but Lana was not there in this moment. Solely within her own head.

Searching for the answer to the question that had fallen upon her.

Why was she here? To win? If it was just that then this wouldn't matter at all. But it did. It mattered to her so much. The thought of defeating Moon when Moon wasn't giving her all in return, Lana couldn't stand that. No. She didn't just want to win. She wanted to beat Moon. To defeat her in a proper Pokemon Battle. That was why she was here.

To battle with everything she had to give.

No holding back.

"Wishiwashi!"

How splintered had her thoughts grown? How little strength had she given those fighting alongside her? This fight so far, it hadn't just been Moon not giving her all, Lana too had failed to do so. Too consumed with the desire to win and fear of defeat to properly go all out. How easily she'd fallen from what she truly believed a strong Pokemon Trainer to be.

No more.

Wishiwashi dived, the water around it breaking apart into a great pool that rained down upon the battlefield, the tiny true form of the Small Fry Pokemon within falling with it beneath the layer of pink mist Sylveon had spread about the field. Confidently Lana looked up and met Moon's eyes, her opponent watching the field and Lana too. Lana grinned.

Here she came.

When the Schooling Form of Wishiwashi burst up from the mist, the water reforming around the Small Fry Pokemon after it had moved across the field, it was with Sylveon in its grip, caught within the Pokemon's massive form. Moon's directions were clear, Sylveon unleashing a surge of Fairy-type
energy to course through that watery foe, but the true body of Wishiwashi itself was too hard to strike. High up into the air Wishiwashi flew.

Then vented a geyser of water from its body, Sylveon within it, to slam the Intertwining Pokemon down upon the ground.

That pillar of water then freezing a moment after as the partner of Lana responded to the full strength of its Trainer's mind.

The pronunciation of Sylveon as defeated was followed by Moon calling the Intertwining Pokemon back to her, swapping one Pokeball for another. Now it was time. Lana was sure. Felt no surprise at the appearance of the blue-bodied Dragon Pokemon Salamence, the Pokemon immediately beating its red wings and taking off into the air.

Now to go all the way.

Moon raised a hand and placed it upon the rainbow Key Stone hanging from the cord around her neck.

The truth of this battle was that Lana herself was not the only one pressured by it. Moon had struggled to meet the Captain of Brooklet Hill's pace, and found herself unable to forge the moments for Z-Moves within it. Even when those few opportunities had arisen... Moon had doubted any were safe to use. Lana was too strong and too ferocious. Time and time again it had been drilled into Moon, that the moment she called upon a Z-Move was the moment a powerful enemy would strike. The understanding that simply relying on those would lead to Moon's defeat... she'd been forced to use Z-Moves wildly to match Ilima, who wanted to experience everything he could about fighting her. And there was no other choice but to unleash that power upon Tapu Koko.

But Lana? Lana had been too fierce and too relentless to ever feel safe doing such. Moon had relied instead on the strength of her partners fighting with everything they'd learned and been taught over their past year together. Kept the pace well, but only by either surprising Lana, or taking the advantage when the Captain's focus was fracturing from her own doubts.

That Lana, who was not at her peak, was now gone. And the one to stand in her place more relentless and able than ever before.

“Salamence is Mega Evolving!”

Mega Evolution was not as risky a thing as a Z-Move to unleash, Pokemon able to transfigure into that state even while on the move. They could not attack, giving Lana the freedom to make her own moves, but could move well enough to remain safe. Safer than the specific stillness a Z-Move required, at least.

Transformed into its Mega Evolved form, its red wings stretching out to form a crescent over its back that reached far past its head, Salamence roared and increased its speed through the air. Stronger now than it had been moments before.

But Wishiwashi was too.

Crashing into the ice pillars it had risen across the field, Wishiwashi tore from each chunks of ice to float within its watery body, the masses slowly breaking down as the water pulsed around it, chilling that water but expanding it too. As the Mega Evolved Salamence unleashed a stream of flames upon Wishiwashi's floating form, the Small Fry Pokemon responded with a beam of ice stronger than ever before, the two mixing into a powerful field of steam.
Moon’s strategies, taking great risks for strength, Lana would use the same. Chill the water of Wishiwashi’s form, but strengthen it too. Make her partner all the greater and all the more dangerous.

A true battle between two of Alola’s greats.

Moon’s partner was strong. Young, not a year at her side, but powerful even for a fully evolved dragon, even for a Mega Evolved form. Still it rose above the average a creature such as it was expected to be. But Lana’s partner was strong too. Older. More experienced. And Lana’s focus unrelenting. Beams of ice could emerge from any point of Wishiwashi’s watery body, something Moon knew well having raised her own, but even understanding this Pokemon wouldn’t mean Moon could overcome it.

Only understand the difference between her and Lana in this fight.

Again Salamence breathed out, this time the blue draconic flames, seeking to ignore the effect of burning away the water around Wishiwashi for simply inflicting all the more damage altogether. But Wishiwashi countered hard, a stronger still beam of ice as its watery coating chilled further blasting out to push through the flames and strike the Dragon Pokemon upon the face. Salamence pulled away from its flight to ram its head against a barrier wall, shattering the ice forming around it, giving time for Wishiwashi to claim more pillars and grow larger still. Grow stronger still.

Those to watch this battle, those who knew Lana best, even with the tension in the air still breathed out in relief. The feeling around Lana, that consuming intensity, was gone now. Replaced by a different kind, a joyous battlelust, that the young woman had shown many times before. But not here, where it most belonged. Whatever had been devouring Lana, preventing her from finding happiness, it had clearly faded in the way the Captain commanded her partner with wild smile on her face.

This battle already a victory as far as those who’d worried about her would claim.

Moon would have to do it. Lana knew. This battle between Mega Salamence and Wishiwashi, Lana was still pulling ahead. Not as clearly as Illima had, with his Evoboosted Eevee so much stronger than that Dragon, but still the advantage was Lana’s in this fight. The only way Moon would win would be with Ultra Evolution. But Lana was ready for that.

She’d been ready for that from the very beginning.

The Icium-Z, set within her Z-Ring. Wishiwashi’s watery body, so much colder than its norm, ice absorbed into it to strengthen that attack. Lana’s intent was helping keep her partner’s strength, the cold enough to affect it already, this strategy a risky thing but... Lana had made this choice. She wanted to rise above. To not just fight to deny and prevent her opponent’s strength.

To properly fight against it all out here at the peak of the Alola she loved.

Moon saw it. Saw Lana’s raised left arm, the Z-Ring clipped around her wrist and pale Z-Crystal set within it. A declaration. A challenge. In this situation, with the odds so against her, Moon struggled with it. There was danger. Risk. But loss was looming heavy over her now. She didn't want to lose. She wanted to keep going on.

So she'd take Lana’s challenge and break through it all the same.

That was her own intent.

“Both Trainers are performing Z-Moves!”
“Moon is again Ultra Evolving Salamence!”

“And Lana is using the Ice-type Z-Move to punish it!”

Once again excitement amongst all witness, the golden draconic form of Ultra Salamence appearing. But this time things were different – for the attack of Captain Lana, the unleashing of the Ice-type Z-Move Subzero Slammer from the chilled water body of Wishiwashi, slammed into that shining dragon hard.

A flower of ice bloomed across the golden being.

The power of Ultra Salamence was so much. It had overwhelmed Ilima's Eevee, even with the Z-Move Extreme Evoboost behind it. And clashed with Tapu Koko again and again without pause. But in this fight Salamence had already suffered more damage than even Eevee had inflicted before it transformed, the Ice-type techniques of Wishiwashi so strong. And this Z-Move, this Z-Move had gone beyond.

Lana smiled as ice rained from the sky above.

First from Wishiwashi, the Pokemon's Schooling Form cracking and breaking apart, the sheer amount of Ice-type energy released by its Z-Move finally freezing its body of water solid, the cold overwhelming the Small Fry Pokemon at its core. Lana called her partner back, fourth of her team to fall, with a soft smile. They had done so well. And because of that, Moon's was...

With a mass of ice wreathed around its centre Ultra Salamence fell from the air, its lengthy neck and tail still moving, but main body frozen over, wings refusing to move. The golden dragon thrashed as it crashed into the ground, the ice around it beginning to fracture and fall away, but there was something off to it now, its golden shape distorting and blurring, that said clearly Lana's attack had had great effect.

The form of Ultra Salamence already barely holding on.

“Tapu Koko defeated Ultra Salamence before,” Anna spoke into the hushed voices of the crowd at the swift felling of this titan, “but seeing it done through a non-Legendary Pokemon's Z-Move is something different. It's still maintaining its form but... clearly struggling. That Ice-type Z-Move has had great effect.”

“Lana's fifth Pokemon is Araquanid. She's clearly going to attempt to finish Ultra Salamence off!”

“With only Bisharp – which has fought already – and Volcarona – which is elementally weak to Lana's team – left, if Salamence is defeated without achieving anything, the win will be firmly in Lana's hands.”

Araquanid, on Lana's command upon manifesting, immediately unleashed another Ice Beam.

Salamence, still in its golden Ultra Evolved form, whipped its head around and breathed out a stream of bright flame in counter.

Steam rose heavy from the meeting of these two attacks, Salamence's flame pushing through Araquanid's ice. But even though the fire of Ultra Salamence was stronger, reaching all the way to lick across Araquanid's form, the Water Bubble Pokemon stood strong, the liquid layer around it resisting the fiery surge. And the moment those flames faded sending out another beam of ice to follow after.

A blast that struck and tore a deep howl from Ultra Salamence as the gold dragon recoiled from the
attack.

It was obvious now, the form of Ultra Salamence distorting further, blurring and warping from anything resembling a dragon into just golden light displaced. By the power of an almighty Z-Move striking it, Lana had dragged Salamence down from its height of power far faster than the long duel with Tapu Koko had before. As she'd promised herself to do.

She'd win. Not for the sake of winning or victory, not for what came next. Just for this fight of the two of them alone, two of Alola's best meeting here at this peak. Just for each giving their all.

No holding back.

The form of Ultra Salamence fading did not bring this battle to a close. Though Salamence could no longer hold on to that power, so deeply had the Ice-type Z-Move cut through its strength, it did not collapse as it accepted Moon's command to let that power go. Instead shone brightly, as the light around it burned away in a radiant surge, and lunged forward.

Neither it nor its Trainer ready to give up on this fight.

They weren't done yet.

It surprised Lana, to lower her arm from blocking out the light to see Salamence already having crossed the field, slamming its head against Araquanid's water bubble, pushing through to reach her partner's own. But it shouldn't have. Moon was the same as her, really. They both refused to ever give up as long as there was something they could do. That was what made this battle so great. Smiling, the Captain gave her command as Moon made her own, both Pokemon moving to respond.

Not done yet.

Inside that bubble, Moon directed, release as much flame as you can and burn it away! That bubble, Lana called, pull your head from it and freeze it around Salamence's own!

The mass of water, as Araquanid pulled its head free, spiked in temperature from Salamence's flames then froze over from Araquanid's frost. Heat and cold packed together reacted.

The frozen bubble of superheated steam exploded violently between the pair.

Moon was quick to call her Salamence back, that reaction far more extreme than either Trainer had expected it to be. The fourth of the Pokeballs beneath Moon's name darkening to black. Once again drawn even with the opponent she faced.

But things were not so well for Araquanid either. The Water Bubble Pokemon still standing atop its six massive green legs, slowly breathing out a new bubble to wrap around its head but... stumbling. Harmed deeply too. Even having been pushed so far to the edge, losing its ultimate power as quickly as it had gained it, still Moon's partner had done so much. Honestly... it was just like her. Lana grinned. So wild and intense, Moon was truly just... really... Lana should have been enjoying this way more from the very beginning.

So then Moon, what's next?!

Moon returned Bisharp to the field and without a second for pause set the Darkinium-Z into her Z-Power Ring and began its Z-Pose.

Ah.
Sure Lana directed Araquanid to move in counter to that. To raise up a barrier to try and block out the effects of that attack, to weaken the strength of the Z-Move Black Hole Eclipse. Had Araquanid done anything aggressive... there was no way Bisharp could not resist it and let this Z-Move loose. And without defending against that Z-Move, that would be it for sure. So Lana placed her hopes that even after the attack was unleashed, Araquanid with a barrier raised could still block enough of it to go on.

That it did, the Z-Move detonating into a great blast of power washing out across the field but not leaving Lana's partner unconscious, only lasted so long. Bisharp, sunk to a knee after the attack, nonetheless grimly returned to its feet faster than Araquanid did itself. Dutifully crossed the battlefield frozen, soaked, scorched, and sundered by the battle to have already taken place. By the time Araquanid was back on its own feet, Lana raising her partner's Net Ball to retrieve it, Bisharp was in too close. Struck once through the newly forming bubble around Araquanid's head.

The fifth of Lana's team to fall.

Sixth was Pyukumuku.

Lana would love to claim her final stand as one dramatic. An intense and overwhelming last-moment display of her skills. But the truth was this: she'd first taken on Pyukumuku – the Water-type Sea Cucumber Pokemon a small and round black-bodied creature with a number of soft pink spines rising from its back – because it was easy. Pyukumuku, much like Magikarp, weren't demanding at first, and the Pokemon had helped Lana grow her team from four to five without significant cost upon her.

Another famous native Alolan species, Pyukumuku were Pokemon incapable of attacking on their own, only when in response to another. Those counters were fierce, returning greater strength than what fell upon them but... not something that really fit with Lana's style. She'd failed to find a good moment to choose Pyukumuku before, preferring to attack relentlessly than take on a defensive approach, and because of that now... well...

As soon as the sixty seconds were up, Moon changed Bisharp for Volcarona and moved to bring this battle to a close.

In the end for Lana this was a lesson. Her constant desire to become strong enough to win, seeking to push her growth in any way she could, had left her unable to properly bring out her team's full strength. Looking back, there were many things she could have done differently, right from the very start. But she'd been fractured and consumed. Not in the right state at all. This result, as Volcarona lifted high into the air and lit the battlefield below it ablaze, one right.

She hadn't won this battle, but that didn't make this the end. Just the beginning of the next stage of her growth. The next time she and Moon battled, it would be to properly see who was strongest from the very beginning, not for one to try and defeat the other. A vital difference.

She was looking forward to it.

“Here.” With Pyukumuku returned, the Sea Cucumber Pokemon in no way able to deal with the Sun Pokemon floating overhead and raining down flame, and the battle called with one Trainer bested by the other, Lana and Moon met in the centre of the League field, clasping hands as two Trainers who had given their all. Lana smiled as Moon pulled her hand back, looking into the pointed object Lana had pressed into it. The pale blue Icium-Z. “I think you'll need this for what comes next. Make sure to get even stronger for our next time, okay?”

Looking up, Moon saw on Lana's face a smile, something so much stronger than the strained
expressions she had worn before their battle began.

And smiled her own in return.

She'd look forward to their next fight.

“Hey, so... I've got a question and I can't think of a good way to ask it so I'm just gonna go for it.”

“...and?”

Plumeria's cool stare did not stop Ryuki from meeting it, the Dragon Tamer's green eyes peering out from beneath the long fringe of white hair falling over his face. Their battle to determine the winner of Green Block – the one who would face Moon, winner of Blue Block – just ahead.

“Lemme just start with, that was one of the most intense battles I've ever seen. Super good reason for that but even so-”

“Your point?” Plumeria's words cut through Ryuki's attempt at setup. The red-clad man breathed out a long breath.

“Can you... do that again?”

Silence hung for a moment between them, the observing judge giving the two competitors their time to discuss and decide upon the number of Pokemon they'd use. Plumeria shook her head.

“Meaning?”

“Just-” Ryuki struggled with how not to say this in the rudest way possible and failed absolutely. “I wanna know: is your heart in this one?”

Even just being looked at by Plumeria caused the bronze-skinned musician to pull in a breath. Plumeria exhaled her own.

“You're blunt.”

“Kinda what I do.”

Another moment hung. Another moment where Plumeria neither confirmed nor denied. Then shrugged and gave a little smile that fit nothing of the moment or conversation.

“We'll find out. Tell you what, if I beat you gimme a ticket to your next show.”

Quickly did Ryuki's expression change, an eager smile winding its way across his face at the pink-haired woman's words. So simple to distract indeed. Like one of her dumb little brothers. Plumeria didn't hate that.

“You're a fan?” Ryuki tilted his head, casting his eyes over Plumeria's long pink hair, still tied back in the ponytail she had set after her victory over Tapu Bulu, the two tails of yellow still wound through it. “I didn't catch you at any before.”

“Hard to just wander into the city for me back then,” Plumeria found herself at ease dealing with Ryuki's now bouncing excitableness. “I've got a copy of *Dragons Roar Loudest Alone* if you're up for signing it.”
“Oh man oh man,” Ryuki was practically jumping in place now, “okay okay, forget every stupid thing I said before. If you can jive to my beat I ain't gonna doubt you even a second. Instead let's the two of us get up on that stage, get a dance going, and make the best music we possibly can, aight?”

“I can do that.” Plumeria's smile remained, Ryuki nodding again and again. “With everyone else going all out, I'll have to do the same. Five Pokemon. I don't have six.”

“You don't need six to kick butt,” Ryuki grinned back, “Okay five it is, I'm into this, we're gonna make a song! Yellow lines racing, all those hearts chasing, watch em crash and fall behind, no other at the finish line. I'll workshop it.” Inspiration had come to him so many times here already. And still so much more to experience ahead.

Ryuki Oda turned and marched happily off through the path to the League stage, Plumeria following behind after nodding to the judge confirming their numbers in the coming match. That had been easy enough, even with Ryuki asking the question Plumeria herself did not know the answer to. Was her heart in this? She’d find out soon enough.

They all would.

“With both Ryuki and Plumeria having shown absolutely incredible battling ability in the previous round – Ryuki defeating Kahuna Olivia after a fiercely extended match, and Plumeria besting the Island Deity Tapu Bulu – this match we're preparing for is guaranteed to be one of excitement! Professor Kukui, your thoughts?”

Called again to commentate here, Kukui considered. He'd been prepared to handle Plumeria's last match too, but Nanu had decided to interfere and do his usual Nanu thing of making a situation worse. Or somehow better. It was always hard to tell with the Kahuna of Ula'ula. Kukui would be lying to say he wasn't among the number that preferred the last.

No-one would hold that against him though.

“Ryuki and Plumeria's Pokemon have a good range of additional Types besides their main Dragon and Poison, yeah, which means at any time both Trainers will be able to strike effectively – and maybe even super-effectively – against the other. The very first match is going to matter a lot here, and both will have spent a lot of thought on it! I see this battle being one of momentum: whoever takes the lead is going to be very difficult to take it back from. Both definitely understand that going in!”
On paper Ryuki was the stronger. Plumeria's victory over Tapu Bulu came from advantageous Typing, a flawless plan, and raw determination of impeccable strength. Plumeria did not have any of those things here. Her battle against Jace, it had been backed by the drive to go beyond, believing Tapu Bulu would beat Mallow and be her next opponent in this block. But that was done now. And Kukui didn't know much at all about this Plumeria on the other side. Maybe she was an ultimate and unyielding power that would bring the same intensity down on her opponents time and time again.

But looking down from the announcer's box, seeing that woman standing there on the western side of the stage, that wasn't the feeling Kukui got from her at all.

Someone calm and focused but... calm and focused alone. No great power swirling within her form. As much as Kukui hoped to be surprised in the match ahead, he already had the result he expected to see in mind.

The winner of Green Block clear enough to all who could sense the strength lurking about the other Trainer down there on that stage.

“Begin!”

Ryuki's choice of Dazzle – his partner Drampa one of his most recent catches, but a Pokemon with its own lifespan and experiences here in Alola before they'd met – was answered by the Toxapex of Plumeria. The most dangerous of Plumeria's Pokemon to Ryuki was that tiny little Ghost and Fairy-type Mimikyu, but Ryuki had kept his confidence he wouldn't be seeing that little thing until their battle really got going. That Toxapex would've been a concern for Lilith, had Ryuki gone with her first, but Dazzle was a good every-dragon for starting things off. Ryuki trusted them well.

A good start as far as he was concerned.

“Drampa become increasingly aggressive and powerful the more damage they've taken, which sets it at odds to the defensive Toxapex that would rather counter its opponent's attacks. We can already see Plumeria's partner setting poison spikes around the field, which will cause trouble for all of Ryuki's land-based Pokemon to follow. And putting up defenses whenever Drampa attacks. Plumeria's starting well.”

As far as techniques for increasing strength went, Drampa was somewhat lacking, relying instead on its innate response to damage for power as fights went on. But what that meant was that Dazzle could harass Plumeria's partner without pause, electrical bolts crackling around the Placid Pokemon's body before launching out towards its Brutal Star foe, Toxapex closing its spiked limbs around it for defense, but proving unable to do much more than weather each attack. In between blocking the bolts the partner of Plumeria sent out more poisonous needles to spread about the field, but it was one block too slow away from serious damage by the power of Ryuki's Pokemon.

“Toxapex is most dangerous when countering physical-oriented Pokemon, but Drampa being a distance attacker weakens Plumeria's ability to fight back.”

Indeed Toxapex on its own lacked much in the way of long-ranged offence, its furthest-reaching natural technique Venoshock being strongest when an opponent was already suffering from poison inflicted. And Drampa was keeping its distance enough that a spray of poison wouldn't do well either. That was fine though. Plumeria's partner knew more than just what it learned on its own.

“Once again we see that the Ice-type remains a prime offensive choice, Plumeria's partner reaching with an Ice Beam across the field. Drampa offset the attack with a Hyper Voice, but with Toxapex's attacks forming faster than Drampa's electric own, Plumeria's seizing the pace!”
Drampa had a range of techniques to its name. A few Ryuki had taught it using TMs – the electrical Thunder attack amongst them – alongside its own natural array. Powerful roars – of both Normal and Dragon-type force – attacks with body wreathed in Flying or Dragon-type energy, and one other neat little trick. A little something where Drampa focused on an opponent and applied intense pressure to them with only the power of its mind.

The Psychic-type technique Extrasensory super-effective against Poison-type foes.

Toxapex, taking a brief moment's pause after firing its last Ice Beam that Drampa dodged around before focusing, stopped cold as Psychic-type energy fell upon it. Through their Bond Plumeria immediately understood, and felt distress. She hadn't known that Dragon, even as a native of Alola, nearly well enough to be ready for what it would do.

“Using Psychic-type techniques to weaken and stun Toxapex, Drampa is keeping Plumeria's partner locked down! It's not yet time for a switch, and if the pressure remains as strong as it is now, the first victory will be in Ryuki's hands!”

“Once a Pokemon is pronounced defeated and a new Pokemon sent out, the opposing Trainer will be free to respond to it. This is the beginning of a potential runaway if Plumeria does not put this to a stop!”

She'd do it. The same as Olivia had fighting Tapu Lele before. Using Dark-type attacks to snap through Psychic-type power, denying its effect. A defensive technique born from aggressive attacks. Focusing, Plumeria worked to time the moment, the power Drampa was exuding visible only in the faintest flicker around the Placid Pokemon's body, unable to be seen falling upon Toxapex at all. An unseeable power like that... didn't matter.

She and her partner could still see the field and all upon it in this fight.

“Bite!”

Toxapex's snapping fangs, coming from the body wrapped by its twelve great legs, projected well, tearing into the incoming psychic assault. Olivia, in the competitors' stands, found herself quickly impressed. Tapu Lele was far easier to counter using that for its power was so visible. Stopping the invisible force of that Drampa... Plumeria was well showing her right to claim the title of great Trainer indeed.

But that alone wouldn't slow Ryuki down.

“Thunder!”

Again the speed of attacks, the lack of a gap between them, defining the strength of the partners at his side.

To use Bite to manifest Dark-type energy and stop Drampa's Psychic-type own, for that Toxapex needed to lower its guard. To resist the Electric-type Thunder Drampa was sending out between each Psychic attack, Toxapex needed to wrap its arms tight around itself and defend. So which would it fail to do first? Which would it be a step too slow for, Dazzle just too fast to stop? This rapid back and forth, it was good, Ryuki liked it! Defend all you want he'd just go faster still!

“Dazzle break on through!”

Plumeria chose neither. Saw the writing on the wall, and threaded the needle of Dazzle's attacks with an Ice Beam from her partner in retaliation. It meant suffering the attack of Drampa, it meant a direct hit Toxapex could not resist, but Drampa suffered in turn, the beam of ice striking the Placid
Pokemon in the chest and sending freezing ice all the way up its neck. Unable to maintain itself in the air after such, Dazzle dropped down to the ground, thrashing its neck to try and break the ice wrapped around it. Ryuki grinned wider.

Nice!

“And while Drampa extracts itself from the ice, Plumeria has exchanged Toxapex for Muk! The Alolan Form of the Sludge Pokemon is Poison and Dark-type, making it naturally immune to Psychic-type powers, but unfortunately still vulnerable to everything else Drampa can use! Plumeria will need a proper plan to follow through on this change!”

First, if she could use Toxapex's Ice Beam to hit any of Ryuki's Pokemon after this, so much the better. Second, Crobat was vulnerable to Electric as well as Psychic-type attacks. Third, it wasn't time for Mimikyu yet. Ryuki... probably wouldn't use that Hydreigon. That Pokemon seemed to be a first or last kind of thing and it hadn't shown up first – this battle would be far worse for Plumeria if it had. But if Ryuki did bring out Garchomp and Mega Evolve it, Plumeria had a counter for that. Just needed Mimikyu ready to go. So it was really down to Salazzle or Muk.

Better something that cut off Drampa's Psychic-type attacks than was at risk from those too.

Fourth, Brick Break.

Plumeria too had used a number of TMs to shore up her team's moves. Muk wasn't the fastest when it came to closing the distance on a foe, but that Drampa was still struggling to break loose the ice holding on. Saw Muk coming in and gave a baleful stare, jaws opening wide to expose Dragon-type energy dancing within. But the ice still on the Placid Pokemon's throat was preventing proper power from flowing up from its core.

So Muk pushed forward all the same and lashed out a sludgy hand that momentarily hardened and struck the landbound Drampa hard.

Immediately the rage dwelling within the Placid Pokemon's chest burst into life.

“Even after taking an Ice Beam and Brick Break, Drampa in its berserk state is still showing incredible tenacity! The ice it was struggling to break free of melted away in a moment and the flames it is expressing are significant!”

“And it's changing regular Fire-type attacks for Dragon-type as it recovers further!”

The power of Ryuki's partner was so significant. As soon as Muk hit the Drampa it had responded with a roar and the ice around its throat shattering, fire pouring out from its mouth, shifting from red to blue and bathing Muk in a seemingly endless stream. Plumeria focused on an answer, a way to break free, as Muk shifted and raised stones around it to defend, but Dazzle didn't seem to be stopping for even a moment. If this kept up much longer...

It didn't. Ryuki knew his partner's stamina, and that following on from taking those Ice and Fighting-type attacks, then unloading so much power all at once, there wasn't a huge lot left that Dazzle could do. He'd rather not bet on finishing this fight here. Instead...

“Drampa paused its attack to breathe out a wind surge across the battlefield, uprooting and pushing away all of the poison needles Toxapex set before! Even though Plumeria's Muk was able to strike in that moment and knock Drampa out, it's hard to say that was the wrong choice! Ryuki kept his calm and made a smart choice, denying the threat of immediate poison to the rest of his team! That's the mark of a master Trainer indeed!”
Even with one of his partners the first to suffer defeat, nothing about Ryuki showed the slightest concern at all. Just delight at Plumeria's struggle against him. She had hot blood, the way her Pokemon took attacks to hit their own in return. Toxapex was roughed up and that Muk was both hit hard and struggling with the lingering effects of the paralysing glare Drampa had given before. Sure Ryuki was behind right now, but really only just for a second.

Lilith would change that all too soon.

“Ryuki has chosen his Garchomp to fight next! It was with that Pokemon that Ryuki used the power of Mega Evolution in his last fight, a power no other member of his team is equipped to use! Will he use it again now?”

It seemed not, Lilith immediately digging into the ground as soon as she appeared. Plumeria tensed, seeing the Pokemon disappear from sight. This was a bad situation. If she didn't counteract that Garchomp quick-

The earth exploding beneath it, Muk was thrown high into the air as Garchomp burst up from below, Ground-type energy surging around its form. Relentless, as was its partner's style.

Never stopping until victory was theirs.

“Without using Mega Evolution at all, that Garchomp has instead relied on its incredible digging speed to assault Plumeria's Muk from below! With the effects of Drampa's attacks before slowing the Sludge Pokemon down, Ryuki has now evened the number of defeats to one per Trainer!”

“And is now performing Mega Evolution!”

Oh, mean. Plumeria reached quickly for the one Pokeball she knew had to answer this. The right Z-Crystal already resting in her Z-Ring. So here came the real test. The big defining moment, Mega Evolution versus Z-Move.

Funny to think how strongly she was representing Alola here.

“Plumeria has chosen Mimikyu! We only briefly saw that Pokemon in her battle with Tapu Bulu before, but it appeared to show immense strength! And with a Fairy-typing, is a great threat to Ryuki's Dragon-type Pokemon! Professor Kukui, what do you see here?”

“If Ryuki's Mega Evolved, it's asking for a Z-Move answer, yeah.” That was the obvious one. Kukui strayed on discussing just who that Mimikyu was. “That Mimikyu is strong though. We saw Olivia's Lycanroc match Mega Garchomp in their battle before, I wouldn't be surprised to see this Pokemon do similar too.”

Olivia shifted in her seat, surprised to hear such said. Hala, who also knew the Pokemon to have once been by Holei's side, nodded slowly. Plumeria had already shown the same indomitable spirit her mother had always carried.

It was more than possible for her to go all the way.

“Lilith!”

“Mimikyu!”

The heavy stomp of the Mega Evolved Garchomp immediately sent a pulse of Ground-type force out through the earth, churning and splitting the League battlefield. But the partner Mimikyu of Plumeria was swift, long shadowy claws extending from its base to lift the Disguise Pokemon over the
shockwaves travelling towards it, the pale yellow-grey cloth wreathing its body fluttering at the edges. Tearing a piece of rock from the earth using her scythe-like hands, Lilith threw it upwards before headbutting it hard, sending the stone boulder hurling towards their Mimikyu foe. Ryuki had seen enough before, the first big hit that Pokemon took somehow absorbed by the flimsy cloth around it. Some Ghost-type power behind it all. He had to deal with that first and foremost.

If Lilith got in close and hit hard, only for that hit to do nothing, that Mimikyu would hit back scarily harder. Ryuki was sure of that.

Wasn't gonna take that risk.

But the Mimikyu was quick still to react, another shadowy claw lashing around and smashing the thrown stone boulder down. Droplets of poison, Muk having inflicted its own even while being thrown about by Garchomp before, dripped from the Mach Pokemon's mouth. Yeah, if Plumeria played defensive here, it would be as bad as it could get. So Ryuki couldn't give her that at all.

Not being stupid, but keeping it aggressive. Let's see what he could do!

“Garchomp are slightly slower when Mega Evolved, losing part of their streamlined shape for extra strength – in their arm-blades especially. But Ryuki's partner is still really fast: that's above average speed for a Mega Garchomp for sure.”

Mixing up the thrown stones she pulled from the earth, and stomps that sent out Ground-type shockwaves towards their foe, Lilith kept the pressure up. But that Mimikyu was relentless in its defense, able to lift itself over each Earthquake and knock aside each rock thrown. Lilith was approaching the Disguise Pokemon, working closer and closer, but still hadn't scored one good hit at all. Seriously, that Pokemon of Plumeria's was a strong one!

In the end sometimes the best answer was just to break on through.

“Poison Jab!”

Plumeria was already doing it. As soon as Lilith moved in against Mimikyu the pink-haired woman was beginning her Z-Pose. Set within her Z-Ring was a Z-Crystal of similar colour to Mimikyu's cloth, the Fairy-type aligned Mimikium-Z. Seems it ended up a family tradition after all. Plumeria didn't even blink through the pose the Z-Move asked of her, as Mimikyu's cloth body absorbed the immediate attack of Garchomp. Now the Mach Pokemon was right in close.

Now then.

Here they go.

Ryuki had expected it. It was the smartest choice as far as he figured and he fully believed Plumeria would always make the best move. She was cool. A real rockin' spirit. Alola had a lot of those folks kicking about. Really... Ryuki couldn't be happier having come here. Well he could, but it would take some pretty wild occurrences to fulfil those dreams. He'd focus on the here and now.

Focus on having Lilith continue to attack even as the cloth body of Mimikyu swelled up to enormous size and closed tight around the Mach Pokemon's form.

“The Mimikyu-specific Z-Move is named 'Let's Snuggle Forever', but don't let the name or Z-Pose put you off: it's terrifyingly strong.”

“With the Dragon-type Garchomp caught in a Fairy-type Z-Move, is there any result but for Garchomp to be defeated?”
“We'll have to wait and see! The expanded cloth body of Mimikyu is still in motion!”

If Ryuki had seen that Z-Move before, he might have tried something different. With it enveloping Lilith right now, if she'd dug into the ground just in time she might've even been able to dodge it. Who knows though, Z-Moves were wild. Something to try in another time and place. Not what Ryuki did at all.

Lilith had struck again. One Poison Jab, an attack only regularly effective against the Ghost and Fairy-type Mimikyu, to disrupt its cloth, and then another while it was unleashing its Z-Move. Then as many more as Ryuki and Lilith could unleash in the battle within the Disguise Pokemon’s grasp. The Z-Power around that Pokemon was making it tricky for Ryuki to feel out his own, their Bond remaining but his sense of it slightly suppressed. Which was... a really unpleasant feeling. Don't stray too far now, okay Lilith?

She didn't.

Mimikyu fell back, its cloth rapidly shrinking back down to a regular size, the small Disguise Pokemon shaking from poison inflicted to its body, many hits struck by the Mega Garchomp it had caught in its grasp.

But Lilith was beaten. Her Mega Evolved form gone, and the Mach Pokemon lying still upon the ground. Ryuki called her back to the Quick Ball that kept her as soon as he got line of sight, the result of this clash one impressive indeed. That Plumeria really was giving it her all. Or.. no, no, he'd promised to be cool. They were dancing right now, making the music of their souls fighting it out. Choosing Kommo-o next, Ryuki ignored the voices of the commentators surprised he'd select a Pokemon so weak to the Fairy-type. Did they not have eyes?

Kukui corrected Anna and Alexa quick.

“That Kommo-o showed a Steel-type move before,” the Professor pointed out, “and Mimikyu is exhausted. See, Plumeria's calling it back all the same.”

Calling it back and sending out Crobat in its place.

The boom of sound as Crobat closed in on Kommo-o was immense, Kannonade, the next partner dragon of Ryuki, immediately rattling its scales to a rapid degree, waves of Dragon-type energy pulsing within before exploding out. Stunned by the attack disrupting its own, Crobat held a moment before being pushed back further, subject to an inspiringly draconic roar. The voice of Kommo-o calling out was one both intimidating and impressive, something definitively belonging to a great dragon indeed. Plumeria felt her partner's confidence slip just so. Sent her focus to reinforce it even then.

They'd break through.

But Crobat was at its best a close-range attacker. At any real distance its best attack was a Flying-type one, blades of wind unleashed from beats of its four wings. Something that should be effective, but Kannonade was a defensive Pokemon when it needed to be. Raised a protective barrier with its rattling scales to deflect those wind-blades, then roared out again, its defense and confidence sapping Plumeria's partner's own further.

Ryuki, even pushed back now that he'd been hit by a Z-Move knocking out the strongest he had in this fight, was still revved up, going one-hundred percent without fail. Thrilled beyond measure to be here.
Nothing was gonna stop him from giving it his all.

By comparison Plumeria, fighting for... giving a good fight, to not disappoint everyone now that she'd come so far yet was no longer carried by her own drive, was not doing as well. Z-Moves were... new to her. Like Guzma she'd forsaken them before. Collected a Poisonium-Z similar to how he'd hoarded Buginiums but... only on her Island Challenge had Plumeria begun learning how to bear this power's weight. She'd done better with her experience as a Trainer than those young but, it was still something that took experience with Z-Moves themselves.

Necessary to stop that Mega Garchomp, but now with Plumeria's focus flickering, not backed up by determination of impossible strength, and Crobat finding itself distressed by Kommo-o's relentless defense...

“Kommo-o keeps pushing forward, defending against Crobat's Air Slash while countering with Clanging Scales and Noble Roar! Ryuki's Pokemon is dominating this match, even with a Type disadvantage!”

“A Type disadvantage, but an advantage in battling style,” Kukui corrected. “Sometimes that's all it takes to turn the tide.”

Plumeria’s partner pulled higher into the air overhead, as Kommo-o approached further still. Beyond range of Kommo-o's scales, and range of Crobat's Air Slash attack. But that didn't help it either. Once again the silvery Steel-type attack Flash Cannon arose, a beam of powerful energy forming and emerging from Kommo-o’s constantly rattling scales. Crobat, overhead, dodged around. Then took a Focus Blast, Kannonade able to use those two attacks quickly together, just as he'd shown in his battle before.

Fighting-type techniques weren't strongly effective against Crobat, being Poison and Flying-type, but it caught and rattled all the same. And sometimes that was enough. One more Flash Cannon hit clean and caused the Bat Pokemon to drop a ways from the sky. It caught itself before hitting the ground but...

“Crobat!”

Was now within Kannonade's reach.

“Kannonade make that music!”

All of Ryuki's Pokemon were relentless. Observing from the competitors' stands, Pitaya noted the slight changes in that Scaly Pokemon's style. Ryuki had gone and taken some of how her own fought for himself. The Guildmaster couldn't help but feel pleased seeing any learn from her no matter who they might be.

Even as it drove Plumeria's Pokemon to defeat.

“Crobat being unable to battle has once again evened the score!”

“But with Toxapex and Mimikyu both weakened, and Ryuki's two other Pokemon yet to appear...”

Plumeria had honestly done better than Kukui had first expected. She'd kept her cool and focus, and pushed back against the Dragon Tamer's relentless assault. But that had only lasted for so long. Cracks in her armour Ryuki had broken through, and now Plumeria was running out of ways to fight back. Chose Salazzle next, the last of her fresh Pokemon ready to go on. But Ryuki, with the sixty seconds passed, made his own choice in counter too, sending out Serena – his partner Dragonite – to continue this on.
The Dragon Tamer from afar battling with everything he had.

The battle of these two was vicious. Serena, the orange-bodied Dragonite, swung in close upon Salazzle without fear, wielding her greater size and strength with almost melodic precision. That did not make the fight easy however, Plumeria's partner her own oldest, and the one to which she was closest bound. Though Salazzle's Fire-type attacks could find no purchase here, the Toxic Lizard Pokemon not only freely unleashed Poison, but released a purple Dragon Pulse much to Ryuki's delight, even as Serena recoiled hard from the blow. This was good, this was good, Ryuki was loving this! Fight on. Fight on!

The battle ended in Ryuki's favour, but the state of Serena could not be anything short of wrecked. Breathing heavy, stained by poison that was weakening the Dragon Pokemon moment by moment more, Plumeria's partner had easily matched one of Ryuki's strongest own. That was truly impressive. He was happy.

But could they go further still?

Plumeria chose Toxapex, the Ice Beam the Brutal Star Pokemon had used before on everyone's immediate minds. Ryuki's too, as he exchanged Serena for Trixie, the red and yellow-shelled Turtonator appearing on the field for the first time this day. The last of Ryuki's team to appear, of the remainder two defeated and two worn down, but by contrast Plumeria...

Didn't bow to this.

“ Toxic.”

This time Plumeria attacked directly with Toxapex, not seeding the field for future advantage – advantage denied to her by Ryuki who, even appearing to be such a wild attacker, chose instead to wisely wash those previous toxic spikes away. But Trixie, fresh as she was, turned her shell towards Toxapex and manifested barrier, the purple sludge released splashing over and running down the protection Turtonator called.

Two defensive Pokemon, but one thoroughly exhausted already and the other still so fresh. In their exchange of attacks and defense, Trixie pulled ahead all too soon. Struck Toxapex once and then again, denying the Brutal Star Pokemon any time to recover.

Plumeria any chance to go on.

“...Mimikyu.”

Her last partner. Her newest, but the one she had known the longest of her life. Her mother had taught her all about the Disguise Pokemon, and when Plumeria had finally met it again amongst the ruins of Tapu Village- she needed to focus. To fight on. She wouldn't do any less than give her all, or at least the all that she could give. It was only right.

Forward they went.

The immediate danger of Turtonator was in the fire attacks she breathed, threatening Mimikyu from the moment the Disguise Pokemon appeared. But that was the trap of its species. And Mimikyu, a natural close-range attacker, was so weak to the Blast Turtle Pokemon's true power.

Under Plumeria's command it lunged forward, lashing out with ghostly claws towards its foe...

And Ryuki had Trixie show her back, the black spikes protruding from the Turtonator's red and yellow shell already glowing bright. Shell Trap, a signature technique of the Blast Turtle Pokemon,
through which those striking it would be consumed by an explosive reaction to their attack.

And from that great explosion Mimikyu fell, and in that Plumeria saw the end. Ryuki had shown relentless intent, and yet the slightest calm in his fervour that let him counter all she had tried to do. Strong. So strong indeed.

And now the winner of Green Block, the next member of the semi-finals of the first Alolan Pokemon League, was announced as the one so many had believed it would be.

His battle with Moon now directly ahead.

“We make a good tune.” His hand grasping Plumeria's, the Dragon Tamer grinned wide. “Come to my next show anyway, seat's on the house. Bring friends.”

“I'll gather up the whole family.” Somehow, despite being the one defeated here, Plumeria could not find it in her to be disappointed with this result. She'd come to the League originally under Molayne's request, his wish that her showing her battling spirit would help wash some of Alola's preconceptions of her away. But she hadn't really cared that deeply. Not until the battle-lines were drawn.

And the competitors she'd face revealed.

But that was done now. Behind her. She was... different, to who she'd been when this League began. Now with her place here done, it was time to figure out what that all meant. Who she was to herself.

This song she and Ryuki had played here a good opening tune for the next stage of her life.

“Alright! Ready to go!”

A computer connected to the Pokemon Storage System rested within the League staging grounds, available for those who would need it before their next match. None had made use so far, those pushing themselves – like Lana to maintain six, or Kiawe four including his partner Turtonator – instead practising bearing that weight. But that wasn't something Hau could do just yet. It was still too much to hold for more than just a little.

So he only went to six when the necessary time came.

“Tutu, I'm ready! Let's do six!”

For Hala, the sensation of surprise really couldn't be beat. He'd watched his grandson, just ten months ago, begin his Pokemon Journey. And never in his wildest dreams believed Hau would be challenging him to a battle of six against six in the quarter-finals of the first Alolan Pokemon League.

“Of course.” But he would not deny Hau a thing now. Would meet his grandson with all he had, to honour the request Hau had made not only of Moon, his very best friend, but of all he had clashed with in his meteoric ascent to this stage. No holding back.

“Show me all that you can do.”
“With the next battle just being finalised, we now have the total count and- wait, really? ...folks as you can see on the boards around the field, this battle appears to be a six against six!”

Moon, in the stands, felt her eyes widen to an almost impossible degree. Turned to look across the others around her, searching for understanding. Olivia looked surprised. Lana and Kahili too. Acerola... Acerola had a little smirk on her face all the same. And Kiawe and Mallow... both didn't look caught off either. When...

“The competitors are now taking their places on the stage!”

“And so another youth of Alola takes on the title of a Six Pokemon Trainer.” The voice of Ilima, still laced with calm, drifted easily over the crowd, the Captain joining Anna and Alexa for commentary of this match. As Captain of Melemele, and trained by Hala himself, Ilima was well able to pass judgement on this battle. Though it had been Acerola to have taken on Hau's training over the past months. She'd kept this secret hidden well.

Today two more risen further within the pantheon of Alola's greats.

The afternoon sun shone through the glass dome of the League Stadium, a different time of day for this battle than any Hala and Hau had taken part in here before. Theirs was the third battle of this day now, with only one more to follow after. The winner of this match to face the winner of the next.

Each Trainer now prepared for their opening exchange.

“Trainers at the ready!”

In tense silence the moments ticked down, Hala considering his grandson, who had grown so fast. Had found in Moon a relentless partner in his journey, and kept pace with her in a way perhaps no other ever could. His grandson and that girl, their friendship had brought them both so far. An essence of thankfulness swelled within the Kahuna's chest.

Then settled into steely focus. It was time to do right by his grandson, and meet the young boy with everything Hala could give. Some may call that unfair, but no true Trainer would ever say such. This was what both wanted.

This was what was right.

“Begin!”
Hala chose Hariyama again, as he so often did, the large-bodied Arm Thrust Pokemon always a strong and reliable lead.

Hau announced his first attack before his partner even fully appeared.

“First Impression!”

Hariyama turned and thrust out a quick palm, meeting the clawed arm of Golisopod that swung up towards it. Immediate was the burst of force of each’s attack meeting the other, the equal ineffectiveness of both’s Typing meaning neither shied from the blow. His grandson’s partner charging in close, attacking from the very beginning, Hala grinned as Golisopod swung its clawed arms again and again, Hariyama meeting the attacks with its own palm thrusts. A fine start!

But they could both go further still.

Hariyama knew a range of techniques beyond its natural set, powers that allowed it greater effectiveness against a wider number of foes. When the next palm thrust came crackling with electricity, a power that would be effective indeed against the partner Golisopod of Hau, Hala wondered just what his grandson would do.

Hau knew.

Not all of Golisopod’s attacks were of the Bug-type. Some of the thrusts of its clawed arms instead carried Ground-type power, the technique Drill Run taught thanks to Grimsley’s introduction of Hau to tutors around the region. Those hits were not nearly as strong as the others, Drill Run requiring movement to build into strength, but when they did hit the electric palm thrusts of Hariyama, the electricity was dispersed all the same. Unable to flow through the Ground-type technique.

Golisopod met each Thunder Punch with the opening move of a Drill Run, the power of each cancelling the other out, and thus each’s strike was reduced to nothing. But Hariyama’s regular Arm Thrusts, Golisopod met those with Bug-type power instead, the extra power nullifying those strikes too. This exchange, Hariyama’s rapid mix of Fighting and Electric-type attacks, countered perfectly – down to every last one.

Not a single blow out of reach.

“That’s... quite impressive.” The tone of Ilima’s voice made clear just how highly he thought of this fight. “Firstly that the Golisopod of Hau can attack as fast as Hala’s Hariyama, but secondly that every one of its attacks is the correct attack to cancel out Hariyama’s own. I do not think... I could do that. I am not sure how Hau is.”

Hau knew.

When Hariyama reached out to grasp, a single hand motion different amongst its thrusts, Golisopod pulled back. Water bursting from the Hard Scale Pokemon’s claws, it swung the blade of Liquidation into Hariyama’s grip. The Arm Thrust Pokemon was the stronger, clapping its hands together and stopping the blade, but in that moment of holding it in place, needles of Bug-type power burst forth from Golisopod’s scales. The power of Pin Missile was low, but still rained across Hariyama’s body as Golisopod continued to push the blade it had manifested against the Hariyama’s hands. Pulling the blade down, dragging Golisopod closer to it, Hariyama slammed its head down towards its Hard Scale foe.

Golisopod’s water blade broke as the Pokemon released its grip on that power and swung its arm up to punch the incoming Hariyama’s head with full force.
Hau knew.

Knew that next Hariyama would increase the force of its attacks, incensed now by being stopped cold. Knew that Golisopod could evade them by pulling back just in time, then step in quick to punch again when Hariyama tried to pursue. His grandfather's Pokemon, that was how it fought. Years of watching his grandfather had let Hau see such. Hariyama. Primeape. Bewear. Crabominable. Poliwrath. Even Lucario, rarest seen of the Kahuna's team. Hau had seen them all, how they fought, and how his grandfather worked with them.

He knew.

Knew what Hala's choices would be. Knew how his Pokemon would move. Could feel it, the pulse of the song of Alola, and the pace the Kahuna of Melemele was setting through it. All of these things Hau knew.

And moved in reaction to.

From long before his Island Challenge began it had been all Hau had thought about. Of one day becoming stronger than his grandfather who he admired, and beating the man in an all-out Pokemon Battle. Even when his journey began, Hau following the same path as Moon across Melemele, still that remained his goal.

And yet... it changed. The end goal... stopped being about one day surpassing his grandfather in a fight. Or rather, more beyond it appeared to Hau's eyes. Seeing Alola, becoming a closer part of it as the Island Challenge was meant to do, awakened Hau to the thought of doing just as his grandfather did now. Of becoming Kahuna. Of taking charge of care over the region. The thought... appealed to Hau. It really did. He didn't want to just surpass his grandfather, but inherit from him. Become strong enough to do that. To be the next Kahuna of Melemele himself.

That was now his goal.

But not just that.

Moon was waiting for him. On the other side she had risen above every challenge and was still going on. He'd believe in her. And as long as she continued on... he'd take from her courage and do the same. It had been truly, truly so long. But if she could... and if he could...

For Hau this battle with his grandfather here, something his younger self would've been beside himself to know would come, was not the end. It was important, and Hau would strive within it, but to win this was not the goal alone.

It was to go beyond further still, and reach out to the other side.

And to do that Hau would now give his all to this fight so that his grandfather could know it would be Hau to go on to the next.

The distant battle at the peak calling his name.

“It's... rather like what Kahuna Olivia did to Tapu Lele, isn't it?” Alexa's observation settled the feeling all were having seeing this fight. Of the Golisopod's long battle of equality with Hariyama, until the point Hala himself exchanged his partner for Bewear, only for Hau to answer with Espeon and immediately begin countering the Strong Arm Pokemon's actions as well. Everything Hala was doing... Hau somehow knew. Was acting in opposition to faster than sight alone could guide. More accurately than instinct could aim. This was more than just a battle of skill.
It truly felt like Hau could see the length of this fight before it even began.

“‘It's not.” Sabrina's voice, coming from the woman sitting amongst the seats in the competitors' stands, surprised those seated around her as she ignored Anna's correct statement to address the lingering thought amongst the crowd. Her eyes remaining locked on the stunning sight below. “It's understanding, not vision. Hau understands. Perfectly. He's not going to lose.”

Where Golisopod and Hariyama matched ineffective attacks against one another, burning more stamina than suffering harm, Bewear struggled under the Psychic assault of Espeon, the Sun Pokemon's powers enabling it to both push back and evade every move the Strong Arm Pokemon made. Despite Bewear's extreme physical strength, far beyond anything Espeon could muster were the large black and pink-furred ursine to catch hold of it, the way Espeon moved and attacked, always keeping distance and breaking down Bewear's own actions, kept the advantage firmly in Hau's hands. This fight too one of Hau knowing just how his grandfather's Pokemon would act, and moving perfectly against it each time. The Sun Pokemon not slacking its efforts for even a moment until the time of the next switch came.

Hala changing to Lucario as he searched for an edge to turn this battle's tide his way.

He'd never imagined this. Not in watching his grandson grow. Not in seeing the results of his Island Challenge, at this peak in this stadium during the Final Trials. Hau had never shown this, this deep understanding of Hala that led his young grandson to counter his every move. Had he hidden that all this time, to only reveal when the time came for Hau to surpass this old man's strength? The thought of being defeated by his grandson, a Trainer with not yet a full year to his name compared to Hala's many decades, filled the Kahuna with deeply mixed feelings.

He could be so proud of Hau. But his own pride, and his own Pokemon, wouldn't let this go.

It was not over yet. There would be a way to overcome Hau's actions, to break his constant counters, and defeat just one of his Pokemon, turning the tide and allowing Hala to defeat his grandson still. He wouldn't stop giving it his absolute all for as long as this battle went on. That was what it truly meant for a fight between two Trainers to occur.

Their battle not nearly yet done.

Hau's next choice drew the attention of all who knew his five, Hala among them, to a point. So this was the one, that Pokemon.

This was what Hau had done.

It had been... a lingering regret, for the young boy. An attempt to push himself beyond his limits that did not work, a struggle to match Moon's pace supported by the Captains but ultimately something Hau had to let go of himself. A Pokemon he could not keep at the time, caught for a moment, raised for a moment, then released on the northern slopes of Akala's mountains, in the southern reaches of Lush Jungle all those months ago.

He expressed the wish to Acerola. She advised him to go for it. He sought out Mallow and Kiawe. They helped him return to that point.

Hau found again that flock of Fletchling and Fletchinder, and called out for the one he'd partnered with for only a moment back then. He was stronger now. And needed one more by his side for what came ahead. Would it be willing to struggle with him to the peak? He wanted to try this again.

A piercing call answered and from that flock a Talonflame emerged to swoop down and settle before
Kiawe called it a sign. That the one Hau had partnered with on the slopes of Wela had grown so fast again, evolving once soon after capture, and again in the months since release. Hau had left his mark on that Pokemon, even for so little time spent together. It had grown strong. And returned to him so happily. Warbled a tune as Hau ran a hand along the feathers of the Scorching Pokemon's head.

Not all the time. Not yet. Hau could support five at rest, but six still dragged him down. But not for long. He could tell he would rise above. So for these battles please accept waiting just the slightest distance away, but Hau would call it back from the Storage System each time the moment came.

And one day when they joined together it would be the last time they ever had to be apart.

“Hau has exchanged Espeon for a Talonflame, continuing to maintain his advantage over the Pokemon of Hala's team! Is there anything Hala can do to take the advantage in this fight? And folks, how wild is it that I just said that?”

Loud was the crowd’s roar in response to Anna's words, the enormity of this battle almost hard to comprehend. It was so, so obvious that Hala was holding nothing back, his Pokemon expressing all the power they could with focus and experience both. But Hau was matching that. Countering that. Pushing back, holding Hala down.

Truly, a feat almost impossible to believe.

But this was real.

And Hau and Talonflame continued to show it.

Lucario’s greatest power was in the aura it commanded, forming spheres of Fighting-type energy to project out towards foes. Hala's partner was more than experienced enough to condense other powers as well, the energy of a Dragon Pulse able to be compressed into that shape too, but Talonflame was fast. Too fast to catch with spheres blasted into the sky overhead.

Faster.

Extreme Speed allowed Lucario to ascend into the air, to reach the Talonflame in a single moment's time. But somehow each time Lucario did Hau knew, Talonflame bursting into the speed of a Quick Attack pulling it out of reach without fail. Then charging back in with a flaming tackle to punish the now falling Lucario's miss.

Techniques of Fire and Flying-type both, backed by an understanding from Hau that permitted Lucario no way to surprise its foe. Hala knew, knew that Hau was predicting his every move, but somehow that knowledge was still not letting the Kahuna pull away. He was varying his tactics, seeking things he never did, different ways in which his partners could express their strength. But every time Hau seemed to know. Never once surprised. Never an action unexpected.

It truly felt as if the young boy knew every one of Hala's thoughts before he could even finish thinking them.

“Are you sure?” Dexio looked over to Sabrina as the fight drew on, Sina next to him leaning behind his back to get a closer look at the Psychic too. “Like, he's not awakening something special, is he?”

“It's not that.” Sabrina shook her head, so focused on the match. On studying the power swirling about the two to compete. “Hau understands. His instincts and reactions, his thoughts, are all so perfectly tuned to counter his grandfather's own. It is... so much greater a thing than psychic power
could ever be. Such a skill... that boy will be one of the greatest of this age. That... I don't even need psychic power to foresee.”

“Hala has switched again! As each of Hau's Pokemon pushes the advantage over his, Hala is clearly searching for the one match-up that will let him break through and start taking the advantage! Even one win could turn the tide of these battles from here! Will Poliwrath, whose Water-typing will make it very dangerous to Talonflame, let him do such?”

“...not with Hau's quick switch to an Alolan Raichu it won't!”

Such pressure... Hala felt strong the intensity of this match within his chest. This was nothing like the battle with Pitaya, the two throwing their full power against the other until one broke. Hau was... putting a stop to Hala's every move. Cutting him off and dismantling his every attempt to express his own strength. It was something that could only be done with the young boy's incredible sense for Hala's actions that allowed Hau's weaker Pokemon to still hold the edge.

But Hala still wouldn't give an inch here. He'd known that Raichu was amongst Hau's team. And would of course answer in perfect counter to his Poliwrath. Hau would expect Hala to know that too, and thus believe Poliwrath had the ability to defeat Raichu regardless of the advantage on Hau's side. That was true. But Hala knew Hau knew Hala would know that. So to defy Hau's ability to understand him, Hala would do something beyond understanding.

And change his Fightinium-Z for a Darkinium-Z to use the power of attacks beyond sense in taking the lead.

Except...

“A step faster. Hala had to switch Z-Crystals to change to this type. Hau had set the one he would use before this battle even began. Hands raised to his head, fingers pressing against his temples. Then left hand stretched forward, palm outstretched. The pink Psychium-Z, Z-Crystal delivered to Hau by the winds of Haina Desert, set within the black Z-Power Ring around that arm.

This the means by which the Psychic-type Z-Move Shattered Psyche was unleashed.

Sabrina, who had so intently been watching this battle with not only her eyes but her unique senses too, recoiled from the intense power of a form she had never before felt. Something different from every other Z-Move, because it was so compatible with she herself.

A power, she knew in her heart, that were she to hold it would be her at the peak of Blue Block and no other.

Such was the intensity of its union with those so deeply bound to that type.

The form of that Z-Move was in seizing hold of an opponent and slamming them, again and again, against barriers of psychic force, a cage of countless planes forming around the caught opponent that was shattered by the rapidity of their body being slammed against each side time and time again. By the time the Z-Move ended, Hala unable to aid his partner in breaking free – Hau striking far too fast in the moment the Kahuna had gone for a different Z-Crystal – the first of his six Pokemon, and first Pokemon of this entire battle, was announced defeated. The first win in Hau's name.

Incredible...

“Ahn continues to, without pause, act in perfect counter to Hala's every move.” Ilima's commentary
continued. “It is impossible to say if there is any other in the entire world Hau could do this too, for no other has he watched as closely over his life as his grandfather. As you said earlier, Alexa, it is so similar to Kahuna Olivia's understanding of Tapu Lele. Even still... I find it hard to believe.”

So too did the crowd. So too did Hala. But... his grandson had now used his Z-Move. Hala would never disrespect Hau so as to believe he would be stopped by such a thing, but the truth of using a Z-Move always remained, for any but for Moon. There was an effect. A demand upon the mind and body. As this battle wore on it would be more difficult for Hau having done that than not. And he would have no Z-Move to counter Hala's own when the time came.

This was not nearly yet done.

Lucario reappeared, manifested an aura-shaped bone in its grip, and threw the Ground-aligned attack at the Raichu which still had so long before its next switch.

Hala could bring this back right here and now!

Having known this would come, and having had Raichu taught a technique to handle such, Hau's focus did not waver as his partner's body surged with electricity and lifted high into the air. Too far from the earth for Lucario's attack to transfer Ground-type energy from it into its Mouse Pokemon foe.

“When an Electric-type Pokemon uses Magnet Rise, there is not a whole lot you can do.” Ilima passed thoughtful observation. “Alolan Raichu, being Psychic-type as well, still possess some weaknesses, but it is hard to know if Lucario- nevermind.”

Another orb of aura, this time darkened by Ghost-type force. Shadow Ball launching upwards, towards the high-flying Raichu overhead. But the distance wasn't good, the Mouse Pokemon riding atop its thunderbolt tail easily evading, raining down lightning from above. Lucario was quick enough to dodge that on its own, but the moments of launching attacks were still opportunities for Hau. A difficult situation.

Hala could not possibly be done.

Again Extreme Speed, Lucario surging into the sky. A Shadow Ball far closer, one then two, the Aura Pokemon throwing them at increasing speed. Then slamming its hands together even as it fell Lucario unleashed another, this time a wide-ranging Dragon Pulse. And remained prepared to burst into motion the moment it hit the ground again.

But it didn't.

And that was an issue all of its own.

Charging down Raichu pushed through the Dragon Pulse, taking the damage but by it evading the more dangerous Shadow Balls above. Then reached out its hands and manifested more psychic force. Caught hold of the Lucario before it could touch the ground, keeping it in place even as Raichu circled around it. Keeping it cut off from the ability to act against the ground and exert force, to break free of the grip held upon it. Hau's partner even stronger than Hala believed. That Raichu, perhaps of all of Hau's team... an explosion of Psychic and Electric-type attacks followed soon after. Enough that Raichu had to let Lucario drop first, but following fast enough to hit the Aura Pokemon before it could either turn or reach the ground. Not enough, not nearly enough to bring a Pokemon of Kahuna Hala down but... far more done to Hala's partner than to Hau's own.

His grandson simply refusing to give this anything less than an all far beyond any other's prediction.
Pride beat within the heart of Hala between each pulse of the determination to win this still. He would not stop and would not hold back!

But neither would Hau in this fight.

“Hau has switched Raichu for Talonflame, enabling his partner Pokemon to begin recovering from both performing a Z-Move and taking that Dragon Pulse before! This will enable Hala to make a switch of his own in counter, with whatever he chooses needing to be able to compete with a Fire and Flying-type foe! With Poliwrath defeated, Hala's next best choice is—”

Primeape. The Pig Monkey Pokemon was naturally fast, faster the angrier it got, and knew a Rock-type technique: Rock Slide being incredibly dangerous to the Scorching Pokemon circling overhead. Of course it required hitting to win; Hau's Pokemon could do extreme damage on a hit as well; and Hau would definitely understand all of that perfectly as well. So then, to win Hala had to go beyond his own self.

No better demand to be made of a Trainer seeking to reach the heights of a Pokemon League.

The longer a battle went, the more power a Primeape gained, its rage transfiguring into more and more strength. So the ideal time to strike such an opponent was always immediately, and the next best time immediately after. To never let the battle go on. They were hardy and their bodies made for their fury. All but impossible to exhaust. This the key way to taking the Pig Monkey Pokemon down.

And this Hau knew.

And that Hala knew.

And that each knew the other knew, a twisting ouroboros of one searching for the way to counter the seeming prescience of the other. And the other simply knowing what to do.

As simple as that.

Talonflame was faster. Struck Primeape with an arcing diving Brave Bird, the explosion of Flying-type force so strong that Hala's Pokemon could not counter-attack. Needed a single moment to recover before going on. A Quick Attack from Talonflame closed the distance before it could. Then Acrobatics followed at this close range. Then, when Primeape jumped and tried to start a Rock Slide, Talonflame flew faster and hit another Brave Bird on the way up. That attack draining its health to unleash, but savaging Primeape through it. And also the key way for Hau to go on. The timing he needed to win this absolute.

Primeape dropped, hit too fast and too hard, Talonflame's natural speed and Hau's given determination to attack without limit allowing the Scorching Pokemon to overwhelm its foe. But Talonflame fell from that too. Too much health and energy spent. A double knockout pronounced.

The first of Hau's Pokemon defeated by his own choices more than Hala's actions.

A fact the Kahuna of Melemele found deeply provoking indeed.

And now each was asked to choose a Pokemon in the same moment as the other. The first to switch being free to be countered by the other, the same as it had been before. Hau's choices so effective. So full of understanding of what Hala would do. And even the things he tried to do differently.

This pressure...
Hala was beginning to feel it push him down. And in realising that understand just what strength his grandson had found. But not yet. Not yet! Not for as long as the Kahuna of Melemele could still go on!

It wasn't over yet!

Lucario, who had taken such a beating already, but whose Steel-typing would ensure it against Hau's Psychic and Fairy-type team members. Was this a surprise, an unexpected moment to take the advantage in this fight? The means by which Hala could now pull ahead?

No.

“First Impression!”

Again Golisopod, returning from the first fight. Of all Hala's Pokemon Lucario the worst to be matched against Hau's Hard Scale own. He'd known. He'd known every time. And though Lucario was faster, pulling back from Golisopod as the Hard Scale Pokemon lashed out, Hau's partner pushed forward all the same. Raised its claws as Ground-type energy rose around them and spun into a drilling tornado racing forward.

Seeking to strike an attack Lucario could not overcome.

“Extreme Speed!”

Oh Lucario dodged. But Extreme Speed was an intense move to use, and for defense... the Aura Pokemon had already taken damage from Talonflame and Raichu both. Golisopod were Pokemon that could be shaken by a powerful enough blow, but the most effective types against it were not ones Lucario knew. And the time until switching...

Hala kept defensive. Lucario formed spheres of energy, mostly of the Dragon-type, but Golisopod pushed through them with its own heavy claws, pursuing Lucario with Drill Run and releasing long distance Pin Missiles to harass the Aura Pokemon for the length of this time. This wasn't a good match-up either. Switching to another Pokemon, Hau still had the freedom to do the same in counter. And neither Primarina nor Pangoro had yet appeared. It was truly maddening.

The Normalium-Z Hala set into his Z-Ring.

The time for a switch had not yet come. Hau commanded Drill Run, not for Golisopod to race forward but to dig into the earth. Seeing that response Hala broke his beginnings of a Z-Pose to command Lucario different, an Earthquake from the Aura Pokemon – a technique it did know – incredibly dangerous even when ineffective: if their opponent were deep enough underground.

But Hau's quick call for Golisopod to stop its digging, the Hard Scale Pokemon only slightly beneath the earth before lunging back out, shook Hala too. Even that bait and counter... Hau had understood? Bursting into motion this time Hala completed the Normal-type Z-Pose. Through the power of the Extreme Speed technique multiplied into the Z-Move Breakneck Blitz, Lucario would still strike true!

Golisopod, already returning to the hole it had dug, held up its arms over the entrance, armour plating raised in opposition, and tensed in readiness for the great power about to crash down upon it.

No other angle to attack from. No way to slip past this raised guard and strike. Lucario would have no choice but to break its Z-Move upon the armoured guard of Hau's Pokemon. He'd seen this coming too.
“It's... genuinely stunning.” Illima's voice remained calm, but the quake to it all felt. “Were someone to understand me so well as to overwhelm every movement I made, no matter how much power I held over them I... am not sure how well I would be able to take it. It is so... definitive.”

Lucario crashed down upon Golisopod, just as Hau had known it would. Unleashed the full force of its Z-Move that pushed Golisopod deeper into the earth, ground breaking beneath it even as its raised arms held up against the Aura Pokemon's force. But Z-Moves were still so great and Golisopod was still so deeply buried by the time the Z-Aura around Lucario burned away. Hala, focusing on his partner's strength, called Extreme Speed one more time. Lucario launched back out of the hole faster than Golisopod could follow.

One more time.

“Earthquake.”

And Lucario stomped down sending an intense pulse racing into the earth below.

There was naught more this partner of Hala's could do. Weathering the attacks of Talonflame and Raichu, then the cost of evading Golisopod's too. Using a Z-Move that did not strike fully, and following with two more movements so quickly after that. The Aura Pokemon had nothing left to give. Hala would not send it out again. But held out, just for a little longer, as Hau's Golisopod slowly crawled from the earth, made its way back to Hau and disappeared into the Friend Ball he held without any other action.

The Pokemon pushed that far at least.

Hau chose Primarina and Hala knew it was because Hau knew what he would next do. Return Lucario, and motion for the Pokemon to be marked as defeated under Hala's name. There was nothing more it could do.

But their battle was not yet done.

Bewear had suffered against Espeon because the Sun Pokemon's Psychic abilities had held the Strong Arm Pokemon in place. But Primarina could not do that. Could move quickly, yes, and sing Fairy-type power that endangered Hala's Pokemon well. But could not stop Bewear's movements.

And that in this fight mattered so much.

“Hala's Bewear is now showing off the immense physical force its species is known for, launching itself at Primarina and pursuing Hau's Pokemon even as it tries to get away! Each of Hala's Pokemon so far have shown so much more strength and stamina than Hau's, which speaks leagues of Hau's battling ability for the current number defeated! It seems almost impossible to witness another Trainer, especially one so strong, so thoroughly unravelled! Is there any means for Hala to pull ahead?”

Bewear, attacked so often by Espeon before, even now suffering Water and Fairy-type attacks from Primarina as well, still pushed through. Caught hold of the Soloist Pokemon as it attempted to slide away, swimming along channels of water-soaked earth it had sprayed as it moved about before. With Primarina's tail held tight in Bewear's grip, the Strong Arm Pokemon swung its opponent overhead and down into the earth, over and over and over again all around it without pause.

But even as it was swung about Primarina took from Hau its focus, and kept upon Bewear its assault. The Pokemon of Hala winning this match, its immense strength an overwhelming thing but... the cost great too. Bewear could do a little more, unlike Lucario before but... not much.
Another of Hala's Pokemon drained so much by Hau's own.

Golisopod, yet again, appeared and socked the Strong Arm Pokemon right in the face.

In the fading moments of Bewear's adrenaline in defeating this next Pokemon too, it collapsed immediately after. The battle drawn to three to two but...

Hala chose Crabominable and Hau brought Pangoro to the field in answer.

Their fight still on.

“Thanks to Crabominable's Ice-typing and Pangoro's Dark, both of these Pokemon are able to score super-effective Fighting-type hits upon the other! Because of that this situation favours Hala, whose Pokemon are all stronger, but Hau is still acting keenly on his seeming perfect understanding of his grandfather's moves! This battle... could still go either way!”

Pangoro was not a Pokemon of elegant movement or speed. Neither was Crabominable. The two met and conflicted immediately, each enduring the other's attacks. Hau's answer here, not for any great strategy, threw Hala's pace off too. He was looking for something to counter and finding nothing more than what was on the surface of these two Pokemon's fight. A conflict Crabominable was slowly winning, but the heavy-set Pangoro proving difficult to beat down. This equal exchange leaving Crabominable the winner, but not without its own battle scars. And that battle too furious for the Woolly Crab Pokemon to start anything else within. No hail summoned to fall as Espeon returned to the field.

Just the Sun Pokemon exerting its power and the Woolly Crab, having taken one beating already, proving unable to do much to resist it.

“Hala has a Crabominable and Hariyama left, both Fighting-type, Crabominable having taken Pangoro's hits, Hariyama having spent an amount of energy fighting Golisopod before. Hau has Espeon, who used its power to fight Bewear without taking damage, and Raichu, who used a Z-Move, still to go on. Both of his partners of the Psychic-type. Even with his ability to predict and move in counter to Hala, the battle has still evened out so far. Did Hala escape Hau's predictions, or were Hau's choices necessary to even stand a chance to win?”

“I can't... truly say.” Ilima shook his head. He'd seen Hau fight but a little. Hala a lot but... this didn't differ so much that the Captain could not understand it. And if he could, Hau must surely know how all of this was to go as well. The defeat of Golisopod and Pangoro, they both had to have been choices Hau knowingly made. So for the remaining two Pokemon of Hala, no others the better choice.

Now to see how this young child of Alola would go on.

Now to see how he would win.

Espeon was fast. Did to Crabominable as it did to Bewear before: maintaining its distance, circling its foe, and always keeping its psychic powers on the attack. This time Hau did not call for Future Sight to be sent forward, and so this time there was no gap in Espeon's actions to take advantage of. Crabominable had some techniques that projected, even with the distance between it and its foe, but Hau was seeing those coming as if Hala were shouting each long in advance. When Earthquake pulsed out Espeon leapt lightly over the shockwaves travelling through the ground. When Stone Edge was commanded, rocks bursting from the earth in a line towards the lilac-furred partner of Hau, it simply dodged around the straight line attack. The amount of energy necessary, to wear down Crabominable until it could do no more, was significant, and cost Espeon even for the lack of
damage it took. But it was enough. The Woolly Crab collapsing in defeat.

The fifth of the six Pokeballs beneath Hala's name now darkened to black.

And only one left to go on.

Espeon remained. This time cast its power forward, Hala's partner using that time to storm towards their foe. An immediate slap of its palms together stunning Espeon for a moment, Hariyama lunged with a Dark-type technique after to seal the win. Successfully landed it. And that hit so strong that even with only stamina spent before, that was enough to lay Espeon out.

The fifth of Hau's marked unable to battle as well.

And the final clash between Hariyama and Raichu now taking place.

Raichu rose high. Hariyama thrust a palm upwards and projected a wave of force. The Mouse Pokemon countered with psychic energy stopping the blow. Hau focused on the field. Hala focused on the field.

The moments to contact approached.

Hala would not be caught off as Hapu had been before. He'd seen Espeon perform that technique, knew a surge of Psychic-type power was racing in quickly from the incoming future. He would need to have Hariyama defend against it, and deal with Raichu's simultaneous attack – something Hau would enact perfectly given the boy's incredible feats so far. But Hala could do that. Psychic-type opponents were powerful, but not immaculate. Hala knew he could handle this. But also believed Hau must know that too. Was this Hau's final move, the best action the boy had found? Or was there still more?

Hala would react to that too. On his pride as Kahuna he would. And as a grandfather. His grandson had not surpassed him yet, though at this point it was only a matter of time. But not yet, Hala insisted.

He could still go further yet.

But so could Hau too.

The power Espeon sent through the technique Future Sight appeared. Hariyama lashed around a hand of Dark-type force, knowing the same as Olivia and Plumeria, how to tear through and deny those attacks. The other hand reached up to project another thrust, Hala knowing it had the strength to break Raichu's Electric attacks, and lessen its Psychic ones. If Hau thought Hala would use Dark-type with both and chose Electric, the attack would do nothing. If he knew what Hala was thinking, Psychic would still be reduced. And this moment of advantage broken.

That was Hala's plan.

But nothing did the Dark-type attack of Hariyama disrupt. The power of Future Sight came not for Hariyama but Raichu itself. Raichu, even with the force of using a Z-Move before taking so much, still sharing its partner's will. Hau unchanged. The battle stretched on so far, his Z-Move already so long ago. But Hau had not tired. Had not stopped. Had not let his intensity falter. Because that was part of what he'd promised to do.

And Hau was one who would never give up on a promise made to a friend.

The power Espeon cast forward, manifesting before Raichu, was seized by the Mouse Pokemon's
own psychic strength. No more anywhere else, none keeping it afloat, the Pokemon fell freely, its power mingling and building into something far greater than it could ever create alone. Into the projected palm thrust of Hariyama it fell. Pushed back for a moment.

Then carried through by the immense psychic force it swung down.

Upon Hariyama without falter Raichu slammed down that strength, the combination of Espeon and itself mixing together into something more. An overwhelming force to crash against any foe.

But was it enough?

The crowd hung in silence, the sight of the field keeping them still. Of Hariyama, standing there, and Raichu on the earth before it. Of the Mouse Pokemon pushing itself to its feet, standing there now so tiny before the Arm Thrust partner of Hala. A beat. A single moment of absolute silence, as not one here knew how this was to end.

Then the heavy thud that shook the earth around it of a Pokemon falling down upon the ground.

And the cheers rising up as Raichu breathed out relief with Hariyama fallen before it.

“Unbelievable! Amazing! In an incredible showing Hau has defeated his own grandfather, Kahuna Hala, in a full on six-against-six Pokemon Battle!”

For all the great sights to come before, for Moon discovering Ultra Evolution, for Olivia's defeat of Tapu Lele. For Moon overcoming Tapu Koko and Ryuki and Olivia's incredible duel. Plumeria's victory over Tapu Bulu something praised but carrying so sombre an edge. For all of those cheers before, nothing compared to the intensity, passion, and praise in those that echoed out now. For Hau falling hard upon his rear, breathing out heavily himself, Raichu quickly returning to be by his side, fitting its head under an arm. Against all odds, against power overwhelmingly stronger, still he had risen above. Still he had gone on.

Still he'd kept the promise.

Somehow, despite the volume of the cheers, the sheer impossible number of people calling his name, when Hau closed his eyes he was sure he could hear one key among them. Of Moon calling out, her cheers reaching all the way to his core. Yes, he'd kept the pace. Would keep on going as long as she did too.

So that they could meet again at the peak of the Pokemon League.

“The final battle of the quarter-finals has now come, with Professor Kukui facing the Island Deity Tapu Fini! The winner of this match will be facing off with Hau in the semi-finals, and then the winner of that against either Moon or Ryuki in the League Finals!”

“Perhaps more than any other of the Island Deities, Tapu Fini has shown overwhelming and relentless power in the League so far! But, against Molayne and Sophocles both, Kukui has shown the same! And having seen Tapu Fini's extended battles against Dexio and Kahili, Kukui is armed with much forewarning as to Tapu Fini's battling style!”

“I cannot say I know the winner of this match.” Pitaya's voice, as third commentator once again, followed after Anna and Alexa's prior. “But that means that the loser is not obvious either. I cannot claim that Kukui will win. But neither that he will lose. This battle... will be an intense one too.
Watch closely, all you Trainers of the world. What we are about to see will be one of the greatest yet.”

Strong words for the three battles to have come before. But as Kukui chose his first Pokemon down there on that stage, Tapu Fini opposite having descended from the south-western pillar above, none doubted them all the same.

This final battle carrying an intensity that could not be beat.

And then...

“And Begin!”

Immediate came the same storm as Tapu Fini’s fight with Kahili before, the Island Guardian rising into the air and unleashing its deific power upon the field. But the partner Magnezone of Kukui, the silver-bodied Magnet Area Pokemon, rose up directly after it, sparing no moment in unleashing its own attack.

It stood out, to every last person watching across the stadium and around the world, that Tapu Fini immediately chose the power all Tapu shared in response, the disc of pink energy that was the unique attack Nature’s Madness surging out from the Island Deity’s body. But Magnezone easily ducked under that ring of power, sending more electricity coursing up towards its foe. Kukui, commanding his partner from far below, sending all that he could give as well.

He wouldn’t stop here.

Legendary Pokemon were difficult creatures indeed to make harm linger upon, the Tapu easily shrugging off most attacks after only a moment’s distraction. Plumeria, after a long battle, successfully sunk a deep poison into Tapu Bulu’s form, and by that poison drained so much of the deity’s strength. Kukui would do the same with Magnezone’s electricity. Not as deeply effective but... the bolts dancing over Tapu Fini’s form as the Land Spirit Pokemon attempted to evade still stood out.

The immediate attack of the Pokemon Professor in the same vein as all the battles he’d fought here before.

His absolute all given without pause or mercy in each fight.

“Compared to the battle with Kahili, Kukui's Electric-type Pokemon is able to both keep closer to
Tapu Fini, and strike more accurately with Electric-type attacks because of that. This is forcing Tapu Fini to focus on defense and evasion, slowing down the speed at which its power covers the field. And unlike the battle with Dexio, Tapu Fini doesn't have the option of hiding its power beneath the earth. This is a strong opening for Kukui indeed.”

Next Tapu Fini unleashed the full power it so often kept wrapped around it. Normally a deep mist covering wherever the Pokemon went, it sealed that power into bright packages of stardust floating about its form. Now those packages were bursting, thick pink mist washing out – the same terrain as Moon and Hau's partners summoned in battles before. Kukui understood the power of such a terrain, and that it would negate the effect he was seeking in this fight.

So as Tapu Fini relied on that mist to hold Magnezone back, continuing to evade or block electricity with the streams of water the Island Deity commanded, Magnezone brightly charged up its own response.

Much like Plumeria, Kukui had a script to follow from beginning to end.

Electricity sparked and jumped through the pink mist before exploding into bright light, pushing apart that mist and leaving flickering bolts in its place. Tapu Koko, on the north-western pillar, made a surprised noise at the sight.

Tapu Fini, its own power overwritten by the Electric Terrain Magnezone sent out, reached up with both hands and great waves of water pulled out of the clouds to close around its Magnet Area foe.

But again at this distance there was little to stop the Thunderbolt bursting through that water and striking the Island Deity in its core.

“While Tapu Fini of course holds superior power, it's proving unable to leverage such against Kukui's Magnezone! And with all of Tapu Fini's greatest feats requiring it to build up its environment to suit it, Magnezone staying close and attacking constantly is denying the Island Deity the opportunity to unleash its full strength! This is definitely a result of Kukui's analysis of the battles to come before – Dexio and Kahili's efforts being carried on by him here! Tapu Fini needs to stop Magnezone quick, before those Electric attacks take effect!”

Seeing had helped. Watching Dexio and Kahili's battles, they'd crystallised what Kukui had known to do. But he'd already been taught that, eleven full years ago. Holei's understanding of Tapu Bulu was of course best, but the Kahuna had studied the other three deities of Alola too. Perhaps it was that, devising methods against them and teaching them to others, that truly angered the four the most. Was the reason the other three, not just Tapu Bulu, had looked so poorly upon Kukui in the aftermath. Another part of the reason he'd left Alola for a time. When he came back, it had been long enough that the past actions appeared to be forgotten, or more accurately ignored on the surface, and the Professor had been able to settle on Melemele in peace. And then, years later, Tapu Koko had willingly guided him and Burnet to find Lillie and Nebby, so it seemed as if that Island Deity at least had either forgotten, or decided Kukui's tutelage at Holei's hands was no longer worthy of its concern.

But Kukui remembered it all.

Tapu Koko lived for the fight. It could be drawn into equal exchanges, and would willingly take Z-Moves to allow battles to go on. Tapu Lele was vicious, but arrogant, and any failure it made would quickly lead it to making mistakes. Tapu Bulu was lazy, but direct when angered. It would always charge in straight lines, regardless of the attacks set against it. So make those attacks count.

Tapu Fini was almighty, but only beyond its own form. Its stamina the weakest of the divine four. So
stay close. Never give it a moment to summon the powers it could form. Strike hard and strike true, again and again and again.

Beat it down the way you have all your foes thus far, practising the art in that entertainer's form in battle after battle after battle all along.

Take those lessons and go on to the final stage.

Kukui did not set the Electrium-Z into his Z-Ring. A Z-Crystal was there already, not one that would be supremely effective against Tapu Fini, but the correct one all the same. The Professor had already planned this battle out. Plumeria's intensity had won one such fight already. His would win another. For his team numbered one more, and his Pokemon held greater experience and strength as well. Dexio had done well enough but been overwhelmed. Kahili even better; Tapu Fini retreating into its shell the second the battle was done. But Kukui, even with the feeling of the deity's pressure upon him, wasn't letting it bring him down. Because he knew why he was here and what he had to do.

The promise he too had to fulfil.

Magnezone, floating over the forming field of water below, rain still pouring from the clouds Tapu Fini had summoned overhead, stayed close to its Island Deity foe. Broke through the surges of water the deity called up, evaded the blasts of Fairy-type force it unleashed. Kept the assault, kept it constant, and thanks to the electricity crackling through the air, suppressing and overwriting Tapu Fini's own terrain, struck true.

Enough pulsing into the Land Spirit's form for it to finally, finally take hold.

Tapu Fini momentarily pausing as electric shock held its body still.

"Kukui is changing Pokemon! Magnezone for Snorlax! We saw that Snorlax in the fight with Molayne go on an immediate surprising offensive and- yes! Once again it is already on its feet!"

Once again Snorlax stomped down hard, Kukui's own motion in mirror behind it. An Earthquake sent across the field, sundering the surface beneath the water filled out atop it. Cracks and vents opening across the battlefield entirely.

The water already built up draining away within.

"Tapu Fini pulled water from the earth before but..." Pitaya continued analysis. "With it dispersed like this, it will still be harder to do than wielding a coating upon the surface. And if Kukui does maintain his assaul- and of course he is using a Z-Move."

It was the Z-Pose of the Normalium-Z. But not that Z-Crystal in Kukui's Z-Ring. Instead one of darker blue-green, similar to the outer fur of the Sleeping Pokemon Snorlax itself. Because of course it was. It was the Snorlium-Z.

"Once again, a Pokemon-specific Z-Move is for the most part stronger than a Type-specific equivalent. Pulverizing Pancake, the exclusive Z-Move of Snorlax, carries immense force indeed."

And that immense force Kukui directed upon his foe.

Tapu Fini struggled with the paralysis of the electricity inflicted upon it. Pulled up its own power to cleanse that away, but in that time was held still to do so all the same. Kukui's switch of Magnezone out, release of Snorlax and that Pokemon's use of Earthquake, then beginning of a Z-Move, all came so fast. All while the Land Spirit Pokemon first broke free of the immediate shock of paralysis upon it, then summoned up its own power to wash that effect away.
In that time Snorlax, Z-Power swirling around it, launched itself upwards towards its foe.

The western side of the audience saw it best, Snorlax's great bulk slamming against the barrier wall, and Tapu Fini caught by it squashed against it too. Stunned by the Z-Move striking it, the Island Deity did not fully recover as Snorlax caught hold of it as it fell, and dragged Tapu Fini beneath its mass as gravity pulled them back down to the earth. Recovering just before impact, Tapu Fini unleashed Nature's Madness to cut through Snorlax's strength, then moved a hand to open a hole in the ground through the water distributed before.

But Snorlax's heavy slam still sent the deity smashing through that water into the ground further below all the same.

Kukui, counting the moments as Snorlax shook its head and slowly began extracting itself from the crater it had created in the ground, called for Earthquake as soon as the Sleeping Pokemon was properly moving again. It stomped down for its partner and the battlefield shook under the power unleashed.

And Tapu Fini within the streams of water below was buffeted by the waves of force carried through.

“Kukui is following a clear strategy prepared,” Pitaya again passed commentary. “He has devised the means to best leverage his partners’ strength in this fight, and is executing such masterfully. It will be difficult for Tapu Fini to break free.”

The time until Snorlax could be switched was still so far away. Far enough away that when the earth erupted and, wreathed in a spiralling torrent of water Tapu Fini arose, Kukui didn't even consider drawing things out to that point. Using the Snorlium-Z was a big play, and though Snorlax's immense weight would make it difficult for Tapu Fini to move it, the Island Deity held no concern in closing in and using more of its Nature's Madness technique. Until Snorlax had nothing left it would attack.

But Kukui had expected that too.

Everything was still as it was planned to be.

Hyper Voice was a good technique, a howling cry that carried great force, even if weaker than most when executed by the physically-oriented Snorlax. But Tapu Fini wreathed in water found itself more susceptible to the attack all the same, and was forced to pull back from the loudly roaring Pokemon after just the first attack. Summoned up instead water from a distance, but even as the rain continued to pour from overhead, Tapu Fini's power constantly reinforcing the clouds billowing beneath the barrier's roof, there was simply not enough to move the Sleeping Pokemon's form.

Snorlax stomped heavy again, more water drained into the earth, and the Pokemon moved in closer upon its Island Deity foe.

“Giga Impact!”

Still Tapu Fini was trying to summon water up, still it was trying to hold Snorlax down. But not enough, not yet enough, to stop the Sleeping Pokemon from launching itself forward in another blaze of power towards its foe. This attack slower and weaker than its transfigured Z-Move, but still too strong and too fast for Tapu Fini to stop with its water, or dodge after the damage already done.

The Land Spirit Pokemon slammed against the barrier wall a second time that day.

Its power was in the water it commanded. The more there was, the stronger Tapu Fini would be. So
Kukui had to burn brighter and faster, his Pokemon having to give their all before the battle could drag on. If Tapu Fini had the same storm and water as it had used against Kahili before, Kukui knew there was little chance he could win. But he'd known to strike first. He'd known to deny that.

And would keep on doing so for as long as it took to win. Snorlax, even with more blasts of Nature's Madness pulsing through it, continued to push the Land Spirit Pokemon against the wall all the same.

A salt-filled blast of water conjured by the Island Deity struck next upon the severely drained Snorlax, bowling it end over end across the field, first of Kukui's partners defeated.

But the Professor remaining ready to go on without a single moment's pause.

“Next from Kukui is the Alolan form of Ninetales, Ice and Fairy-type! We can immediately see it adding its power to the falling rain, causing it to chill into snow instead! Will frozen water be more difficult for Tapu Fini to command? We're about to see!”

Much like how a storm of rain lent size to the Flying-type technique Hurricane, falling snow strengthened the Ice-type attack Blizzard. An immediate raging storm of ice unleashed, Ninetales magnifying the storm further as it disappeared amongst the frost.

Tapu Fini, recovering from the barrage it had already suffered, raised a hand and pulled water from beneath the earth with it, but a beam of ice from within the blizzard struck into that water and froze so much of it over. The next stage of denying the Tapu's strength.

Kukui's fight not remotely yet done.

“It does... appear that this environment isn't fitting for Poni's Guardian Deity.” Pitaya's observation served as the note on the building suspicions of those around the field, watching as Tapu Fini gestured more and more actively, water emerging from beneath the soft layer of snow covering the battlefield but... beams of ice from the Ninetales within the frost storm striking and solidifying them each time.

It so strongly appeared as if the Island Deity were already running out of things it could do.

“It is still a Legendary Pokemon.” Against the rising mood of the crowd at the sight of Tapu Fini failing to find purchase against the Pokemon Professor, Pitaya still hammered home that point. “Even denied so much it possesses strength greater than any one of Kukui's Pokemon alone. Do not forget that. And do not look away.”

Tapu Fini wrapped itself in what water it could call forth. Sent out a Moonblast against the next Ice Beam to burst from the snow, its attack pushing through Ninetales's own, Tapu Fini maintaining its coating from which it would slowly draw health. Though the Island Deity suffered injuries easily in direct physical contests, it was also possessed of means to recover itself if even a moment was given in opportunity.

The stamina of Tapu Fini quick to be drained, but quickly recovered too as long as the moment were free.

“Extrasensory.” From the snow-covered field Ninetales's attack continued, psychic powers now warring with the water wrapped around Tapu Fini's form. Dexio had already shown success, time and time again in his battle before, with striking the Island Deity using Psychic-type attacks. Kukui would take such from him too. Those two to go before each resting a hand upon his shoulders and pushing him forward in this fight.

Tapu Fini's moment of freedom just that alone. A moment. The healing it was seeking already being
held back. A duel of power from an unseen opponent upon the Island Deity floating within the snow that surrounded it. Oh Tapu Fini, what will you do?

It was an aspect of all four Tapu. That the more pressure they felt, the more power they unleashed. Time and time again each had shown it, and those to rise above them had each time denied that. Olivia had cut through even the greatest of psychic attacks with her partners' Dark-type moves in counter. Moon had outlasted Tapu Koko's surging electricity, using the power of Z-Moves so each of her Pokemon might push through. Plumeria, through Mimikyu, simply ignored the full strength Tapu Bulu released. And Kukui now had spent so long already acting to deny the power Tapu Fini so freely commanded.

But even then could not stop the battlefield from exploding into geysers of towering water as the deity screamed and unleashed its full strength.

Ninetales fought hard. Sent out more ice, dodging amongst the towering pillars of water, seeking to cut all the more of them off. But soon enough it was caught. Soon enough it was dragged through the swirling torrents, slammed against the barrier wall before being pulled before Tapu Fini, the deity unleashing another burst of Nature's Madness to ensure its opponent could not resist when cast back into the storm. The water was cold, and the snow still falling in place of rain, but Ninetales was no longer able to go on. Kukui called this partner back, thankful for all it had done.

Then returned Magnezone to continue their fight.

Tapu Fini maintained its assault. With the water summoned by its rage it now held more to attack, but its stamina in unleashing that strength was draining. Magnezone attacked freely itself, seeking to dodge the swirling grasping hands Tapu Fini called up, its bolts caught and dragged aside by the water wrapping the Island Deity's form. This leg of the battle was long, Magnezone dodging again and again, attacking in every free moment it found. Eventually overwhelmed, dragged down by the power of Tapu Fini, but in turn the deity's form left ragged as well.

Again raising a hand to its chest, again purging the lingering electricity that had coursed through it time and time again, Tapu Fini's blue eyes stared coolly as the next of Kukui's Pokemon appeared on the field.

As the Valiant Pokemon Braviary, one of Kukui's two partners for life, burst from the Pokeball its Trainer raised and raced out into the sky.

Tapu Fini was fast. Braviary faster. Water rose up quick. Braviary dodged it quicker. The deity pulled shields of liquid around it for defense. Its Valiant foe tore through them with ease. Nowhere in the sky for Tapu Fini to hide from such strength.

So the Island Guardian chose to race into one of the holes torn in the battlefield and hide beneath the earth from this foe.

Braviary raced after it still.

Left alone Tapu Fini would recover. Draw strength, summon more water, and emerge from the earth furious at being pushed so far down. But it was on the edge here, only so little under its control, the cold of the air from Ninetales before causing the water let loose to slowly freeze over as it hit the snow-covered ground. Kukui, even without eyes on his partner as it disappeared down one of the gouged holes in the earth, kept his focus calm. Braviary was strong. He believed.

His partner would duel well even enclosed as it was.
It took time, for Tapu Fini to re-emerge. For the Island Deity to burst from the ground and not rise into the air, instead barely floating over the frosted earth. Braviary followed after, held in a translucent watery hand, and was deposited as proof of the deity's win. But the scratches along Tapu Fini's black-skinned body, the cuts upon its blue-waving hair, spoke clearly of the intensity of that battle all the same. Kukui called Braviary back too.

Incineroar the next to charge in without fear.

The disadvantage should be clear. Water beat Fire, and Fairy beat Dark. But the Heel Pokemon chose neither, instead charging with electricity crackling around its hands. Kukui was an expert of Pokemon Moves. He knew what each could learn, and be taught. And often how to teach them. He'd prepared well.

And followed through even now.

Tapu Fini raised its hands and commanded the water it controlled. The frozen field, the layers of snow across the earth, shifted, most of the deity's water already dispersed. But even with the ice responding to Tapu Fini's control, it could not hold back the burning body of Incineroar as it charged.

The transfiguration of Tapu Fini's strength into a form Kukui's last partners could push through complete.

Incineroar hit Tapu Fini and continued its charge. Grasped the deity by the throat, hand crackling with electrical force, and shoved it all the way into the barrier wall again. Bursts of Fairy-type power came from Tapu Fini faster and faster, hammering into its Heel Pokemon foe, but Incineroar gritting its teeth pushed harder still. Summoned more strength still. Even as the deity it opposed stripped that strength away.

Still deep an effect it left before it finally slumped against its Land Spirit foe.

Struggling, Tapu Fini pushed Incineroar's body off of it. Remained against the barrier wall, its shell now firmly resting upon the ground. Little strength left to lift it into the air. Each of Kukui's Pokemon had burned so brightly and so fierce. Stripped away at the Land Spirit's strength, the Professor understanding that power and how to dispose of it over the length of this fight. Now it had almost nothing left to give. Just enough for one final round.

Just enough to try and stop the Lycanroc Kukui chose next.

"Accelerock."

Tapu Fini slammed again against the barrier wall by the intense speed the Midday Form of the Wolf Pokemon released.

"Stone Edge."

Pillars of empowered stone piercing through the snow covering of the battlefield floor, erupting around Lycanroc and throwing Tapu Fini into the air.

"Again."

Accelerock giving the Wolf Pokemon's body immense force once more, its upwards charge slamming Tapu Fini all the way into the barrier ceiling overhead.

"Rock Climb."
Lycanroc bouncing out of that previous attack, leaping off of one barrier wall to another, and soaring
over the falling deity, swinging down a mighty paw.

“Rock Slide.”

Summoned stones orbiting the Wolf Pokemon raining down faster than it fell, slamming the fallen
Tapu Fini further and further into the earth.

Stone Edge. Another pillar thrust Tapu Fini back out of the earth as Lycanroc landed upon the
ground. Accelerock. Again Lycanroc slammed its opponent against the barrier wall. Accelerock. Again
Lycanroc slammed its opponent against the barrier wall. Accelerock. Again Lycanroc slammed its opponent against the barrier wall. Accelerock. Again Lycanroc-

“Kukui!”

The voice of Hapu, the young girl having travelled down from the competitors' stands to the
battlefield's edge below, broke the man from this moment holding him still. The repetition of his
thoughts finally coming to an end. He stared at Hapu, the young Kahuna of Poni staring back. She
shook her head. Kukui turned back to the field.

Lycanroc stepped away from Tapu Fini's form, the deity unmoving there upon the ground. The
judge for this match, on the barrier's other side, looked through it upon the Legendary Pokemon that
had been laid low.

Then raised a hand to announce the final result of this fight.

“Tapu Fini is unable to battle! The winner is: Kukui!”

...it was over.

As the crowd roared and Kukui's Lycanroc returned to his side, Hapu travelling to see to Tapu Fini –
not faulting Kukui for his choices but knowing this was where it had to come to a stop – Kukui
looked to the blue sky overhead. The quarter-finals of his League come to a close. And... more than
that... he had...

...what no-one had understood back then, not he, not Guzma or Molayne, not even Holei, was that
the most frightening thing about the Tapu was not the power they held. It was in Alola's treatment of
them, the people of this region accepting the Tapu's capricious violence without ever allowing
consideration it might be wrong. When Tapu Bulu destroyed Tapu Village, those eleven years ago,
Kukui had seen it then. And understood.

Understood what he must do.

This League he'd made for the people of Alola, it was true. It was to help the great Trainers of this
place rise up, and celebrate the region Kukui loved with all his heart. And it would continue to be
that from this day forth.

But it was not the sole reason alone. Not the reason Kukui had so eagerly spoken of the League,
when tasked to convince the Tapu for their permission to create such a thing upon Alola's soil. No,
the reason he had so carefully but generously spoken of these fights, so as to tempt the Tapu's interest
without warning the Kahuna that was his goal, was for something else. Though in the end Kukui
suspected Nanu, at least, to have known. The Kahuna of Ula'ula could always tell when someone
was up to their tricks. But he didn't act in any way to stop it.

Did almost make it worse, interfering at Plumeria's match as he had, but even that, in the end, had
worked out for the better.

Maybe Nanu had thought the same as Kukui did all this time as well.

What Kukui had done through this League was drag the four Tapu before the eyes of Alola and the world. Show the way they were, the violence they committed as natural part of their beings. Then placed them against the great Trainers of this peak. It had been a gamble. A bet that those invited would rise above. But Kukui, with belief in his heart, had made it willingly. He knew Alola's greatest would do it. He knew the result would be as he'd foreseen.

And so the four Tapu of Alola did battle with its greatest Trainers, and the people of Alola, from all four Islands of this great region, cheered loudly for each Tapu's defeat. Saw them not as divinity but as Pokemon laid low, and championed the ones to do such each time. The reverent respect that permeated Alola finally broken, and the ability for its people to see the truth they'd ignored now bestowed.

Never again would the four Tapu of Alola, the Guardian Deities of this land, have the benefit of absolute belief from the people they watched over. Alola was equality. For the Tapu to receive the respect and praise of Alola, they must act in a manner to be given respect and praise. That was what Kukui had sought to do.

And that was what he'd done.

Staring up into the blue sky overhead, Kukui at long last breathed out the breath he'd been holding all these years. Yes. At long last. It was done.

There.

“That was for you, Holei.”

**The First Alolan Pokemon League - Semifinals**
First thing's first before anything else, I'd like to give a shoutout to tumblr user bakinbread for this wonderful fanart they sent me of Eldritch circa chapter 16! I'm very honoured, touched, and appreciative, so thank you so much!
Now then...

Something is different.

Yes, that is right, there are now only five chapters of Eldritch remaining. When I first plotted out the League arc I counted 13 chapters total, but didn't want to commit to that so soon, as it was possible things might change. But now that we have the final four-fight chapter behind us, I'm confident in saying this. We're on the home stretch now, folks.

Stay with me for it.

As chapter size ballooned over the course of Eldritch, each time my reasoning was simple: "this is what should be contained together within the span of a single chapter". The total wordcount may have increased per, but what I wanted to say in each has always been the same. As big as they were, each chapter was also "enough". I hope that's helped readability even as I ask you to handle them larger and larger. Fight scenes are like that. But if I created visuals that hooked the mind, and a flow that drew you along, then I've done the best I could do with the design I laid out, and I'll take satisfaction in that and go on.

Towards the finale we go.

So is that it? Five more chapters and then Eldritch is done? Nnnnnot quite. Sometime after Eldritch is finished, I want to come back and post some author's analysis. This will be me discussing my approach to story, setting, characters, pointing out things I did and set up, things I'd redo if I were going to (but I'm not, this fic was one take), and just generally talk a whole bunch about what went into this tale. I'm going to be pretty stark discussing how I did everything, so if that's the kind of thing that'd sap the magic then what follows won't be interesting to you. But if you would just like to hear me talk at length about what I did, what I liked, and what I'd do differently again, please look forward to that too. I imagine posting time won't be until a few months after Eldritch is finished, so just put it in the back of your mind that when this fic is done, down the line there'll be one or two more posts made to it all the same.

But make no mistake, the end of the story is chapter 61, and we are coming in fast.

Thank you to all readers and commentators, your support has continued to help me give my all to this work. If you do have any comments at all you'd like to leave, I'd be thrilled to hear them, so please hold nothing back! And, if you can, consider sharing either of these advertisement posts to help bring Eldritch to even more readers! It'd mean a lot to me!

twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

Thanks and I'll see you with the next one!
“This is ALO-TV, continuing coverage of recent and upcoming events within the Alola Region!”

“With the quarter-finals of the first Alolan Pokemon League complete, the final four competitors have been determined! Today we will be discussing each member taking part, their battles so far, and our predictions for what is to come ahead!”

“The first of these four is Moon, winner of Blue Block, a former Kantonian who emigrated to the Alola Region a little over ten months ago. Shortly thereafter she began her Island Challenge in Iki Town alongside Hau, grandson of Kahuna Hala, and third of the four semifinalists of this League!”

“Moon rose to public notice during her Grand Trial with Kahuna Hala, taken in an almost record-setting twenty days from the beginning of her Pokemon Journey!”

“Almost record-setting because Hau completed his own Grand Trial two days earlier than that!”

“During her Grand Trial, Moon revealed herself to not only be supporting a team of six Pokemon – including a Dragon-type and her starter Rowlet already evolved to Dartrix – but able to perform multiple Z-Moves essentially back-to-back!”

“Aside from an appearance at the Battle Royal alongside Hau again, the next time Moon gained public attention was in Malie City, challenging the then Boss of Team Skull Guzma to a battle in which Moon revealed her starter to have already evolved to its final form, as well as numerous other evolved Pokemon amongst her team!”

“And following on from that, just over one week later Moon battled Kahuna Nanu in his Grand Trial, and was observed commanding not only seven Pokemon, but one an Ultra Beast!”

“Then in the wake of the Ultra Beast Invasion, appeared with a second: a captured Nihilego she brought to the Aether Foundation that allowed the production of a cure for those suffering from the creatures' attacks.”

“Moon's guardians have specifically requested the young girl be given peace and space, however her feats have still circulated enough for the understanding of her situation to be known. To wit: Moon is an individual who feels no drain from the Bonds she shares with her Pokemon whatsoever, and is thus able to maintain a perhaps limitless number of connections with others, as well as provide the energy needed for Z-Moves and Mega Evolution without pause!”

“Multiple Pokemon Professors, from Professor Samuel Oak to Unova's Professor Juniper, have made equal expressions of interest in this nature and requests for caution in pushing Moon for understanding. It may be that as she grows older Moon will be able to work with such figures to explore the mystery that she is, but for now a mystery she remains!”

“Moon's incredible ability has allowed her to reach all the way to the semi-finals of the Pokemon League, using Z-Moves freely to battle far more experienced opponents, and even revealing a never-before-seen power in the form of Ultra Evolution: a combination of Z-Move and Mega Evolution transforming her partner Salamence into an even more powerful form!”

“But it's not just that gift alone that's brought her this far! Moon is also an exceptional Pokemon
Trainer, someone who is clearly deeply trusted in by her partners, and who has successfully raised those partners into the great strength and ability they all hold! Not just in this League alone, but in future Leagues to come, all of Alola is excited to see just what Moon will do! With fans and supporters from across the region cheering for her in her next match, Moon has made her mark and her name as a wonderful Trainer of Alola!"

“I saw.” Projected from the screen Moon held, Lillie's voice and visage brought warmth to the young girl's face. “Moon, you were wonderful.”

She... did her best.

“I know.” Lillie's smile was strong, her partner Charmander Sunny clambering over her shoulder into view, clearly content with his partner's happiness in this moment. Moon smiled at the Lizard Pokemon. It looked like he was growing bigger!

“Oh he is,” Lillie reached up a hand to the orange lizard's chin, scratching under it and causing the Pokemon to joyfully close its eyes. Moon smiled deeply at that sight too. How was Lillie's own Pokemon Journey?

“We are still finding our feet,” the girl so far away in Kanto nodded her head, raised hand continuing to occupy her partner's attention. “Sunny is growing well, but the Kanto Gym Challenge is a fearsome thing. For now I am happy with the two of us working alongside the many aides and members of the Oak Institute. It will be a long journey for us but... I know it will be an important one too. When it is finished we, I, Moon-”

She missed her.

“...I know. But Moon, this is... important to me.”

Important to her. Moon knew. She'd never want Lillie to do anything but what she wanted most. Just...

“I'll come back. You know I will.”

She knew.

“So be sure to be there to welcome me back with a smile, okay Moon?”

...she would.

“...now Moon, we can't have you so distracted with your next match just ahead, can we? You're facing Mr. Ryuki, isn't that right?”

She was, Moon breathed out a long breath. It was... even more than the thought of facing Tapu Koko, thinking about battling Ryuki was scary. But... exciting too. It would be amazing but... so much. She felt like a mountain was bearing down upon her.

“Climb one footstep at a time.”

Practical, Moon laughed at Lillie's advice. But she did laugh. She did feel better.

This moment of the two speaking together helping Moon prepare herself for what was still to come.
“As winner of Green Block, Ryuki Oda has continued a trend of Pokemon Leagues across the world: that master Dragon Tamers will always rise up to challenge the highest of peaks!”

“Ryuki joined the first Alolan Pokemon League on writ from the Hoenn Pokemon League, nominated to take part in our own as a guest Trainer. In the most recent Hoenn Pokemon League, Ryuki was eliminated in the first round by the Trainer that would go on to become Champion, but that only meant the true strength of this Trainer was never before revealed!”

“Ryuki is an expert of the Dragon-type, keeping six partners of that type, indicating his immense ability as a Pokemon Trainer! As a battler, he fought almost evenly with Kahuna Olivia, one of Alola’s own strongest, even before being forced to use his own secret weapon to finish the fight!”

“First seen in his battle with Sina Long in round one, then again at the end of his battle with Olivia in round two, Ryuki’s strongest partner is a Hydreigon of absolutely incredible strength! Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers Pitaya had this to say when that Pokemon first appeared on the field:"

“That Hydreigon... it's ancient. I've never... I didn't think that species could even live that long but that thing is... centuries. Its size, its markings, its fangs and the growth of its body, that Pokemon has been alive longer than any single one of us by far.”

“Given Pitaya is Alola's greatest expert on the Dragon-type, and indeed one of the tops amongst the world, these are no small words at all! Theories have abounded regarding Ryuki's greatest partner, with the most popular leading to belief the Dragon Tamer holds ties to a warlord of the Warring States Period, but the man himself has remained remarkably elusive about discussing such. Nonetheless what we do know is that while his partner Hydreigon is far and away the strongest member of his team, the rest of Ryuki’s Pokemon are amazingly powerful as well!”

“Even with her ability to perform Z-Moves and Ultra Evolution without limit, Moon faces an almost impossible task in battling Ryuki in the semi-finals. The odds are firmly against her in all respects, but plenty of Alolans continue to cheer for her, to win and make the finals of Alola be one fought by Alolans alone.”

“That said, Ryuki has plenty of his own fans too! His high energy approach to everything he does, and the music he produces, have continued to draw people towards him, and fans from around the world are supporting his efforts too! Whoever you're cheering for, the battle ahead for these two will surely be a sight to see!”

“Malie, are you ready?!”

Up on stage Ryuki roared out, Serena and Lilith behind him lending their own presence and cries to the mix as their partner played out his next song. Ryuki Oda stood upon the stage of a venue within Malie City, giving his all as he did every day in every thing. His explosive performances in the Pokemon League had boosted his shows’ numbers again and again, but Ryuki still knew it was his music right now reaching those cheering on the floor before him.

It was the song in his heart, so passionate and full of strength, that drew all up into his pace.

Plumeria, seated at a table off of the main floor, smiled watching over the crowd, so many of her little brothers and sisters amongst them. Even without Team Skull, a family was still a family, and she’d only had to say the word to come see a show and so many had flocked to her. Even those not of
Tapu Village originally: those who'd dropped out of bad homes; or couldn't find their place in the Island Challenge; or who simply didn't feel belonging anywhere else they went. Here they still belonged. No more Team Skull in name but... the spirit was still there.

Ryuki's song was a good match for it too- ah, Riley just elbowed someone in the face while cutting loose. The former big sister of Team Skull stood up. Time to put that to rights.

Whaddya know, the job of eldest sibling never quite goes away.

“As grandson of Kahuna Hala, Hau perhaps more than anyone else must have placed great expectations upon himself, but even then the results must be a surprise!”

“That is right: despite only beginning his Island Challenge ten months ago, Hau completed his in under nine months total: his Final Trials finishing a full day before Moon's!”

“To keep pace with someone who feels no strain in the Bonds they hold or power they give, Hau has demonstrated a potential of unmatched levels: evolving his own starter Pokemon to its final form; the rest of his team as well; and also bringing six Pokemon to the first Alolan Pokemon League!”

“Captain Acerola made the claim that Hau was perhaps the most powerful eleven year-old Pokemon Trainer in the world, and she was not wrong to estimate such! Not only has Hau shown great abilities as a Trainer, raising his Pokemon and commanding them expertly in battle, but he has also demonstrated an ability to understand his opponents that is entirely his own, with the unique way he defeated his grandfather Kahuna Hala in their battle before!”

“Fundamentally even reviewing the match, it is clear that each and every one of Kahuna Hala's Pokemon were stronger than Hau's own. For Hau to then defeat his grandfather speaks clearly not only of Hau's amazing sense for Hala's battling style, but also for Hau's ability to react to such, which demonstrates his and his Pokemon's own astounding strength as a team!”

“Compared to Moon with Ultra Evolution and Z-Moves, and the two older Trainers taking part, Hau is unquestionably the weakest in raw strength of these four. But given his victory over Kahuna Hala, we understand fully that strength alone is not the only decider in these fights! Will Hau as winner of Red Block be able to match against Professor Kukui in their next fight? We'll have to wait and see!”

“Having begun their Pokemon Journeys together, and travelled side-by-side for so much of it, Hau and Moon are known close friends and rivals, who have clearly pushed themselves as far as they have to keep pace with one another. It's not an understatement to suggest that it's possible neither would have made it here without the other alongside, and that perhaps even in this League too the victories of one have inspired the other to go on.”

“Much like Moon, Hau has the odds against him in his next match, but many across Alola have been praying for the victory of both all the same, so they might meet in the finals. It's an almost impossible task for the two, but it's really something that makes you want to cheer for them, isn't it?”

“It is, but let's not forget the other two taking part as well. Both Ryuki and Kukui have shown incredible battling ability, and a final match between them would be a height of the Alolan Pokemon League not yet seen! It comes down to how the next two matches will go!”

“That it does indeed!”
“Here, Moon, try this! Iki Town home-made malasada are the best!”

Accepting the offered food from Hau Moon bit into it happily, a delighted sound coming from her as she worked her way through the fried dough, Hau making short work of the one he had in hand himself: fifth of the night and counting.

At the table in the hall of Kahuna Hala, invited to join this family for dinner that night, Jewellery looked over the two young friends and smiled. Two young Trainers, two incredible youths. Moon had spoken about battling Hau to her, on the night Moon received Rowlet as her first Pokemon partner. Almost overwhelmed by the boy's energy, Moon had enjoyed the battle but... had not been ready for Hau to be as active as he was. Knowing her daughter had always preferred things quieter and calmer, Jewellery nodded and understood that.

But look at how things went from there. Look at how, with her Pokemon beside her, Moon had come out of her shell to be more and more active, more and more energetic, spurred on by her new friend at every turn. Hau was so encouraging and so friendly and so full of the life Alola promised that Jewellery could not help but smile at every little thing he did. And so clearly did Moon too.

To not only bring her daughter to this place Jewellery believed would be best, but for her daughter to meet the best friend of her own life, filled Jewellery's own heart with happiness each time she considered it.

It was good. This was good. It was all so, so good.

She had another malasada and her happiness in eating it was only partially from the delicious food itself.

“I heard from Lillie!” Hau's announcement drew Moon to nod, remarking that she'd spoken to Lillie earlier that day too. “Yeah! She said you were nervous!”

The spluttering of Moon dealing with the food she was eating only made Hau smile. “Hey, me too, Moon,” he nudged her with an elbow, “but we'll do our best and that's all we gotta do, right? Promise that: we do our best and give it our all!”

Moon held out a hand to Hau, raising a pinky from it as he raised his own. To each other and to Lillie who supported and would be watching them both.

They'd do their best.

No holding back.

“As a certified Pokemon Professor, Kukui is considered an expert in Pokemon Moves, which has shown time and time again in his battling style, and the wide range of abilities his Pokemon have used!”

“Each time relentless and overwhelming, Kukui has backed his opponents into corners and refused to ever let them recover. It speaks clearly of how powerfully he has raised his Pokemon, that each can maintain their strength so consistently that they're almost impossible to escape!”

“As founder of the Alolan Pokemon League, Kukui has stated that although he is taking part in this
exhibition League while the remaining League facilities are constructed for the full League in two years' time, he will not be appearing in subsequent Leagues! This makes this League his sole opportunity to take the title of League Champion, and as founder and the strongest Alolan Trainer remaining in this League, it stands to reason he will continue to give everything he has to be named Alola's first League Champion!"

“A student of the former Kahuna Holei, Kukui is peer to former Team Skull Boss Guzma, and former Captain and current head of the Hokulani Observatory Molayne. All three are extremely powerful Pokemon Trainers, but Kukui has made his name and presence known as the most powerful of that trio!”

“Having taken on the Kanto Gym Challenge, Kukui returned to Alola with battling experience different from most other Alolan Trainers, and set to using that to construct the Alolan Pokemon League! Initially his plan was beset by doubts from various groups around Alola, but with the Tapu's permission given to him, and continuing efforts made around the region in collaboration with Kahili Hano, Kukui convinced all to support the addition of a League to this Alola region!”

“Now we stand looking at the fast-approaching finale of the League, a finale in which Kukui himself continues to be part. As winner of Yellow Block he will be facing Hau in the semi-finals, a battle Kukui is strongly billed to win.”

“However even with the odds, nothing is ever truly known in Pokemon Battling, and Kukui will not for a second underestimate anyone he fights. His next match will be an intense one, and we are all excited to see it!”

“And that concludes today's ALO-TV review of the four Trainers taking part in the semi-finals of the first Alolan Pokemon League. Stay tuned tomorrow for replays and battle analysis of highlight matches from the rounds so far!”

“A rough and abrasive voice easily stood out amongst the silence of Tapu Village, echoing past fallen buildings choked by plantlife and filled with Pokemon giving this place empty of humans a new life of its own.

Kukui considered that, and how long it had been since he was last here, as he wandered forward. Though frowned at the greeting he received.

“Guzma.” The former Boss of Team Skull grinned wide at the displeased look on Kukui’s face, eliciting that exactly what the white-haired man desired. “How long have you been waiting here?”

“Ask her that,” Guzma jerked a hand, thumb pointing to a specific piece of stone different to all others set upon the grassy floor of the village. “I’m just doing my own thing.”

“I see Kahuna Hala hasn't been able to do much for you since taking you in.”

“Ha! It'd take a lot more than that old man's lectures to change the way I am by now!”

“And you're proud of that?”

“...shut up and apologise to Holei.”
Kukui sighed. Let his eyes slide away from where Guzma sat atop fallen wreckage and fixed them on that grave alone. Not even that long ago the thought of himself and Guzma being here would've been a source of panic for Kukui's heart. The thought Tapu Bulu would know, and wreck another level of destruction for their intrusion upon where they no longer belonged.

But that was then and this was now. Things were different now. In the voices of the people considering the battles seen, considering the Tapu's place, and what the Tapu did. What was right to praise. And what was right to condemn.

Things were different now.

He'd made it so.

“I did it.” Taking a knee before that stone marked with words of farewell and wishes for rest, Kukui reached out a hand to brush his fingers against the name. “It took me a long time to get back, I'm sorry for that. But I did do it. So now things can change. And we won't be bound to them in that way any more. Things can be different. And this won't happen again.”

He rose back to his feet.

“Alola won't let it happen again.”

On the second day, upon the back of her partner Salamence, Moon flew north and east. Away from home, her mother knowing well where her daughter was bound, and off to Akala and beyond. To a small series of islands located north-east of that greater one, where one man and so many Pokemon now lived.

To another place she called home.

The Poke Pelago, over the months since first contact was made with its caretaker and main beneficiary, had grown well. The number of Pokemon living within the archipelago had swelled, Moon catching them from across Alola to live together under Mohn's care. And in turn Mohn, with the Pokemon of Moon agreeing to her request to listen to that man, put his vision and wholehearted effort into transforming these once empty islands into something more. Somewhere lush, and able to support all these Pokemon and more.

Together Mohn, Moon, and all her Pokemon, creating another piece of Alola out here amongst the blue sea.

Yesterday Moon and hers had rested. Tomorrow they would rest too. The day after tomorrow the semi-finals would begin. But today? Today they would train. Upon a smaller island Mohn had asked of Moon's Pokemon to clear and prepare, a battling field created for the young girl to give her best upon, she stood. All of her Pokemon, those with her in the League and all those living here but still so adoring of her, working together so that Moon's team might gain the strength necessary to go on.

Together, as one, they trained.

Arrows met and splintered, Decidueye shooting down each its doppelganger fired, the illusions shot by the disguised Zoroark packed with enough Dark-type energy to serve as real enough for this moment. Ghost-type Pokemon caught by Moon, raised by their work here and their connection to her – Haunter, Drifloon, Phantump, and Banette – all eagerly lent their aid as well, changing the arrows in flight by accelerating, shifting the direction, and even making some disappear. Each
Decidueye still shot down.

She must be greater still to prepare for the onslaught of Ryuki Oda ahead.

Loud were the barks of Type: Null, second of the three created by the Aether Foundation, gifted to Moon by Gladion on her twelfth birthday. Though their connection had not yet lent enough confidence for Type: Null to break free of the metal bindings upon it, it had warmed up considerably to Moon and her Pokemon in its time here, taking on a position of pack-leader of the groups the many living here divided themselves into from time to time.

Today the Synthetic Pokemon was duelling with Sylveon, its far larger and more powerful body and keen senses allowing it to hound the Intertwining Pokemon for the length of their fight. Sylveon would need far greater stamina, agility, and focus for what came ahead. The Fairy-type Pokemon a lynchpin of Moon's team.

It would give its all to be ready to do what Moon needed of it when the time came.

Twisting overhead Volcarona continued to soar, waves of wind wrapping around the Sun Pokemon as it flew. Other Pokemon flew with it – Trumbeak, Butterfree, Golbat, and Fearow – pushing the Sun Pokemon to increase its speed in the air. No fire rained from above, no scales drifting from Volcarona's form – the Pokemon training to master its speed without. To take even more control over the winds it could summon and command, and use them to go beyond the limits still upon it now.

As difficult as it was, it must obtain the greatest of powers to stand up to the same in the opponents it would face.

Twisting through the waters around the battling island Mohn and Moon’s Pokemon had created, Milotic continued its duel with a Gyarados, more speed and strength needed for the Tender Pokemon too. The water wrapped around itself, even while in the sea, was chill, bare moments from turning to ice and breaking away. But Milotic needed to be ready for this. It was so important for what came next. Better control over the power of ice, better resistance to the chill upon it, it needed all of those things.

Needed this strength to strike down the dragons before it.

Roaring loudly, Salamence challenged the many. A wave of land-based Pokemon facing off against the Dragon – Gumshoos and Furfrou, Ribombee and Tauros among them, all led by a mighty and determined Ampharos. Though Ampharos and Zoroark were not the strongest of those here amongst the Pelago, each had gained perhaps the greatest strength from Moon herself, and considered themselves the true leaders of this place. Allowed for Type: Null’s play at pack command, but placed themselves as the true seventh and eighth following after Moon’s team.

The first duelling with the first of Moon’s partners, and the second with the strongest.

Making sure they were ready for what came next.

And as Salamence fought off the many Pokemon seeking to break through its guard and pounce upon it, Bisharp faced off with one other alone. Dodged neatly, evaded poisonous blasts, and swung its blades to deflect and pass through lashing tentacles. None of the powers of Nihilego, the Parasite Pokemon, Ultra Beast joined to Moon’s heart, were particularly effective against Bisharp – indeed poison not affecting the Steel-type Pokemon at all, that being the reason this was the opponent each had – but Nihilego was fast and even being resistant didn’t stop the attacks that did connect from knocking Bisharp back. And so Bisharp duelled the Ultra Beast more and more. Pushed itself more and more.
So they could all be ready for their battle at the peak.

Moon’s commands passed from Pokemon to Pokemon, the young girl's attention turning from one to the other, aiding not only those of her team for the upcoming match, but also those challenging them as well. To feel the bond between them flare into life, for Moon's intent to travel through and join with them, each Pokemon connected to her rejoiced in it. Felt deeply the feeling of rightness, of this being where they were meant to be. Right here with her.

It drove them all to give all the more.

Watching over Bisharp next, Moon considered Nihilego as she focused upon it, the Ultra Beast increasing its speed and forcing Bisharp to give all the more to evade the combined power of Moon and Nihilego's intent.

It had not been so long, after the capture of Nihilego, that the Ultra Beast Task Force had reported what understanding they had. Nihilego as a Pokemon fed by parasitisation, latching onto a target and drawing from them energy as their victims lashed out of control. But the Nihilego Moon had partnered to, it showed no interest in the act. Was all but passive. In the end, the Task Force confirmed, thanks to the Trainer's Bond between them, Moon was sustaining the Ultra Beast such that it no longer required to feed. Could survive connected to her alone.

Great potential for the other Ultra Beasts the Task Force were responsible for, if they could find ways to safely connect with them to begin with. Moon had offered to help but, they'd requested she ask such at a later age. Still too young to demand such of.

And so she continued on.

Her training spanning the length of this day, Moon spent the night here, her Pokemon wrapped around her keeping her warm and content. Her mother knew she would do this, had specifically made sure she be introduced to Mohn after Moon revealed the Poke Pelago to her, and confirmed that with these Pokemon here, lovingly flocking around her daughter, that it would be fine. Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, Moon was safe.

So here she slept. Spent the next morning with her Pokemon too. Then returned to Melemele and her mother. Spent the day there after. And in the evening travelled back to Ula'ula, ascended Mount Lanakila once more, and retook the room she kept as a member of the Pokemon League.

To sleep and prepare for the semi-finals the next day.

The battle between Moon and Ryuki Oda soon to begin.

“Y’know, first time I met you, I knew.”

Standing before Ryuki, Moon looked upon the red-clad Dragon Tamer. The one she'd met so many months ago, so soon into the beginnings of her Pokemon Journey. The one who'd helped her find her way to the Bagon she'd partnered with, who would become Salamence, and then Ultra Salamence, lending the strength to bring her to this place.

Without question this man so significant a reason she was here.

“Not the infinity deal, not that you were without limits.” Ryuki waved a hand. “I just could tell... you were gonna be a shining star too. You just needed someone to light the sparks, and add some fuel.
It's not any kid that can take on a dragon, but you did and look at you now. For however much I did do, lemme tell you this, Moon. I'm real proud of ya.”

She...

“Hey now don't go getting psyched out, we've got a dance coming up, put everything else outta your mind and think about only that. You've seen me battle more than anyone else here: against those Captains back then, then that little showdown between Kannonade and yours truly. Then all the fights here. You were watching them all closely, weren't you?”

She was.

“So you're ready! You've got a team that loves ya, big wins under your belt, and a big battle ahead. You know what you do when that's the case?”

...

“Big smile, and say ‘I'm gonna win!', you got that? Now lemme hear you say it.”

She... was going to win.

“Louder, Moon! You gotta announce it!”

She-

“Louder!”

She was going to win!

And Ryuki's eyes glinted as he smiled his most vicious and excited smile to date.

“Then come at me. Six against six holding nothing back, right?”

...right.

Right.

And so the two travelled through the path back to the League stage, the battlefield upon which they had fought so many times before. But never against one another. Never like this.

This would be different to anything that came before.

“I must admit my bias before this battle begins.” Once more the voice of Pitaya, Guildmaster of the Alolan Dragon Tamers and an expert in Dragon-type Pokemon to the highest degree, echoed over the crowded League Stadium, the woman again joining Anna and Alexa in commentary for this match. For the first of the two semi-finals of the first Alolan Pokemon League.

“Moon is a student of mine. I assisted in her training, helped her raise her Pokemon, and instructed her in the ways of the Alolan Dragon Tamers. It was... prudent, at the time, to give her the structure of our ways.”

“Do you believe Moon can win?”

A long pause lasted in the air following Alexa's question, Pitaya breathing in deeply before putting her thoughts in order.
“If it is possible... she will have yet again surpassed all limits and imagination. But she has done such
so many times already. I would not be upset to see so again.”

Go beyond, were the Guildmaster's words in Moon's ear, or you'll stop here. How much further was
there she could go though? What else could she pull from nothing to win? No tricks, no secrets. Only
the strength of her and her team. Only her and hers against Ryuki and those with him, the red-clad
man standing on the opposite side of the League battlefield. The barrier had raised between them
now, and the judge was moving into position. It was time. It was really, truly time.

She breathed and felt like it rattled, her mind focusing more and more by the second. She could feel
it, her entire body moving with each breath. The pulse in the air so intense it was like a weight
pushing down upon her. Her heart beating so fast it almost hurt.

...wait, Moon paused, that wasn't right. It wasn't like her heart hurt, she did hurt. But not her heart.
Just... slightly lower down. In her stomach. That was right.

Like she was hungry.

She had only a moment. One moment of eyes widening, of understanding filling her mind, and a yell
of shock to emerge that went drowned out by the tearing noise overhead. Then the air itself shattered,
fracturing into slivers of rainbow light as through it a great winged beast crashed into the inside of the
barrier wall, an equally huge lionic creature slamming down upon it in pursuit. The two giant beasts
tumbled through the air, locked together in battle, as waves of force raced out from around them and
the barrier strained against the power they released. The entire crowd yelling shock at the sudden
Pokemon to appear from thin air in combat.

And then for the realisation to arise.

“Is that... Solgaleo?” Pitaya's voice charged the air with something else. Focused everyone for just a
moment upon the second of the two beasts to arrive. Yes, that giant white-furred feline, solar-mane
marked by yellow armour pieces ringed around it, indigo nebula forehead glittering with lights like
stars and two brilliant blue eyes, that was Solgaleo, Emissary of the Sun, one of the two Legendary
Pokemon of yore.

But the one it was fighting...

The beast locked in battle with Solgaleo, racing through the air as the Sunne Pokemon pursued it,
was a wide-winged creature of brilliant pale blue, shining with great energy spilling forth. Heavy
black crystalline covered its body, two grasping hands of the material lashing out to beat Solgaleo
back. Across the Pokemon's face was more of that crystal, within which rainbow light danced over
shining pink eyes. A creature that looked so much like... but not quite... the other...

“Excuse me!” A new voice burst through the speakers, Anna, Alexa, and Pitaya all looking around
the announcer's box unable to determine the source. A number of levels down from them, having just
patched in to the speaker system of the League Stadium, the scientist Colress made his report.

“The Pokemon in battle there with Solgaleo is a creature known as Necrozma. It is a Legendary-
level Pokemon that lives in Ultra Space and predates upon Ultra Beasts. At present, it is currently
possessing and controlling the Legendary Pokemon Lunala.”

Again a reaction flowed across the crowd, shock to hear that this was indeed the Emissary of the
Moon in battle with its eternal partner of Alolan lore. Colress nodded as he checked the reports
coming from the battlefield barrier walls. Holding up. For now.
“I have been preparing for an encounter with this creature for some time now, however as long as Necrozma is active, I will not be able to separate them. I would like to call for all available Trainers confident in assisting Solgaleo to help wear Necrozma down, so that I might apply my Colress Machine No. 1199 and split these two apart. Please all maintain your calm and rely on this situation to be promptly resolved.”

There, Colress deactivated his connection to the speakers, that was better. The last thing he needed was a panicking crowd rushing about as he attempted to make his way down to the stage and get to work. He’d caught the mounting Ultra Wormhole signals in time, the Trainers able to help would move into position, and he’d put his N-Lunarizer to the test. Honestly, of all the timings though, right as Moon’s battle was about to begin. Pausing a moment, the scientist quickly wondered if there was something that led this creature here to this place and time. Ah right, Necrozma consumed Z-Aura, didn’t it? Where was there more of in Alola than here after this long? That made sense.

He’d do some environmental scans after this was done.

Ryuki Oda, stepping back from the trainer’s circle on the western side, huffed. So was this just a thing Alola did huh, super-Pokemon bursting out of thin air to fight it out wherever? If this overrode, or worse postponed, his fight with Moon he was gonna end up in a real bad mood. But he wasn’t about to put any of his Pokemon in there to sort this out, not if his fight with Moon might still be on. She better not be thinking that either. Turning his head to the screens around the field as he stepped back, Ryuki looked for any more information on what was going on. Wait, what was Moon-

“Moon!” Olivia's voice rose highest of the three Kahuna present in the League Stadium, Hala and Hapu following behind her as the three, having descended from the competitors' stands, approached the barrier-enclosed battlefield. The four Tapu were not moving from their pillars, remaining locked in place as the two to have bested them once before continued their fight. But that would not stop the Kahuna from doing their own duty of protecting Alola in times of need.

Olivia approached the young girl still standing by the barrier wall.

“Moon pull back, it is too dangerous to-”

She could fix this! Moon's yell was enough to draw attention, one of the cameramen keeping their device trained on the battle between Legendary Pokemon swinging it around to point at her, then focusing it at the sight of the purple Pokeball grasped in Moon's hand. Wait was that a-

She had a Master Ball! Moon's voice was carried by the microphones listening for combatant's cries to the speakers around the field. Projected out across the world as all focused more and more on this stunning turn of events. Moon shook her head. She could make this right! Let her help!

The voices of the crowd surged again into a new pitch, shock at the device Moon was brandishing for all to see. Slightly burned, slightly warped by the flames of Celesteela, but still whole. Still in her hands. A real and true Master Ball. The rarest of all Pokeballs, an item produced in only the most egregious situations around the world. Why did Moon have one of those?

She could fix this. Moon stared down the Kahuna, as Solgaleo behind her duelled with Necrozma in the air. It was her fault to begin with, for refusing the Master Ball when Gladion offered it to her before. If she'd taken it then, before she'd gone after Lusamine in Ultra Space, she could have caught Necrozma then and there. Stopped it from taking Nebby. Stopped it from hurting Lusamine. Then Nebby would still be with them. Then Lusamine wouldn't have nearly died.

...then Lillie wouldn't have left.
“Moon...” Hapu hadn't known. Even in the time she and Moon had spent together, training over the months in preparation for this League, she’d never once heard those thoughts expressed. But...

Within the barrier Necrozma glowed brighter still, its shining pale blue body eclipsing to white as beams of every colour burst forth from its form, bending at strange angles to rain down upon Solgaleo from every direction. The roar of the Sunne Pokemon was loud, causing those closest to it to flinch back.

“Stand back,” Olivia took another step forward. “Even with a Master Ball, that Pokemon is too dangerous to drop the barrier for. We Kahuna will wear it down first with Solgaleo, then we will see about capturing it.”

Moon shook her head. Necrozma... Nebby... was hurting. She could feel it, the connection between them flared into life again. That pain, that consuming hunger, got worse with every moment that passed. The more energy spent, the worse it became. If Necrozma was batteldown to exhaustion... Nebby might not be able to come back.

Distressed, Hapu looked from Moon to the two older Kahuna beside her. Hala shook his head.

“Moon, we cannot risk not only your life but the lives of all gathered here by lowering the barrier while that Pokemon is active within it. Now, please move back.”

In a flash of red a Pokemon stood before Moon, a partner responding to her will. Raising a bladed hand, Bisharp took a warning stance as Moon shook her head again. No no no, she wouldn't let Nebby be lost, not with it so close! She'd fix this. She'd make this right!

“Moon do not do this!” The panic in Hala's voice was a kind only those who knew him could recognise. But it was clear. “We cannot leave Solgaleo to fight that being alone!”

Just let her into the barrier so she could catch it!

“We're not going to let you risk your life!” Olivia's voice joined with Hala's, the two determined in this standoff. Bisharp continued to brandish its blade, a clear warning that it would accept none approaching the partner behind it. Within the barrier Solgaleo roared and Necrozma screamed and Moon flinched as she felt the Prism Pokemon give more of the light it so desperately needed to go on.

She had to stop this. To make this right. But the barrier would not lower and if the Kahuna attacked alongside Solgaleo, Nebby might be... Moon's eyes fell upon the camera, the one of many watching her and the Kahuna instead of the Legendary Pokemon battling behind them. If everyone here could hear her...

In the competitors' stands Hau jolted, hearing Moon calling his name. From the moment Solgaleo appeared Hau had sat in silence, almost lost in this instant, unable to parse just what feelings he felt. But Moon's call broke him from that. Moon's plea for his help. As if automatically Hau rose to his feet, not even sure why. But... his wrist was warm. Looking down, Hau stared at the black Z-Power Ring, the transformed Z-Ring from his contact with Solgaleo before. There was... a Z-Crystal in it. But not like one Hau had ever seen before. It was differently shaped, a smaller crystal piece at each end, and bright orange in colour. A sun sigil set within telling its purpose.

Was this...?

Those around him stared at Hau as he raised his hands, then recoiled as Z-Power flared around him. A bright beacon, a burning bonfire visible from across the stadium stands. Steel-type, a voice that
was maybe his own whispered in Hau's ear. Slamming his fists together, he took on that pose.

And Z-Power flowed down from him in a great beam, pierced through the barrier walls, and entered the body of Solgaleo within.

The ultimate technique of the Emissary of the Sun – Searing Sunraze Smash – unleashed.

The light pouring out from the Sunne Pokemon stunned the three Kahuna looking up at Moon standing before them. But she, with her back to the barrier, was not so affected. Turned to see Solgaleo with Necrozma pinned to the ground, the speed and strength of the Legendary Pokemon pushed to its maximum by the power of that Z-Move. Solgaleo had outsped Necrozma, then slammed the Prism Pokemon into the ground so hard that the force washing out from its body left the barrier around it flickering in its wake. Holes momentarily carved open by the power of the light released.

A way in momentarily free.

For Moon there was no other choice. Not with Necrozma, with Nebby, so close to her. Not with the chance to fix this mistake she'd blamed herself for all this time. Without a second's doubt she stepped through the nearest hole, entering the barred field where Solgaleo had Necrozma pinned to the ground. Bisharp kept guard at that entrance, by its partner's request. Gave her the freedom to make her choice.

Moon raised the Master Ball. The guaranteed way of capturing Necrozma, and putting this to a close. This would end it. That she knew.

And by the Bond connecting them, that Necrozma knew too.

The ultimate Z-Move as affecting for Solgaleo as it had been for Nebby before. The Sunne Pokemon momentarily slowed. Necrozma, its black prism body, pulling free of Lunala so fast. Closing in around Solgaleo instead. The Master Ball striking the now freed Moone Pokemon, pulling it within and sealing tight with a click. Moon's stare, as the ball hit the ground and failed to do what it should, failed to be caught by the Pokemon Storage System and taken from this field. Was it because of the burn damage? Was the ball actually not working right? Wait, was Nebby-

Solgaleo thrashed as Necrozma embraced it, pulling away and ramming against the barrier wall, the creature of black knocked free and resuming its solitary form of dark crystal. But it did not shy back from reaching out its great hands to grasp hold of the Sunne Pokemon before it. Did not allow Solgaleo to throw it free again.

Moon raced to where the Master Ball lay. Was Nebby alright? She clutched the ball to her chest. She had to get away from Necrozma now. Turning, Moon looked to where it and Solgaleo were. Where they both were.

As one.

Solgaleo's body, now shining with pale golden light. Black prism armour, covering its forelegs, its body wrapped by those black hands, and armour settled over the Sunne Pokemon's head. That rainbow visage mounted over pale blue eyes.

The Emissary of the Moon abandoned in favour of a far stronger source of light.

“Moon!” The Kahuna by the barrier yelled out, Moon staring in shock as the great shining lion turned, and looked directly at her.
“Lower the barrier!” Hala's yell came, all three Kahuna unleashing a Pokemon into the field. Before Moon Tyrantrum, Hariyama, and Mudsale in an instant. Necrozma roared.

In the wake of that earth-shaking roar Moon blearily rose to her feet, not even aware she'd been knocked from them. Looked up, over the swept aside Pokemon of the Kahuna who had been bested in an instantaneous strike.

Into the lunging maw of Necrozma bearing down upon her.

A flash, once more of red, as Nebby emerged from the Master Ball, exhausted but still throwing itself before Moon. Still wrapping its wings tight around her to keep her safe as the glowing Necrozma fell upon the pair. As it extended its power and its hunger further towards the immense light it could now feel.

As it pushed this form further and took hold of those beneath it as well.

Moon's name yelled, again and again by those here. By the Kahuna, by Ryuki who had remained in watch, by those in the competitors' stands, and her mother in the family stands too. As a great golden light bloomed where the Necrozma-bound Solgaleo had pounced upon Lunala and Moon both.

And that light grew.

And grew.

And grew further still.

A wing. Then a second. Then two more, shining gold, alight with a surging power that transfixed and horrified all to see. A tail, stretching out, billowing against a barrier wall. The golden light rose higher, two massive clawed feet stomping down upon the ground. Further. Higher. The light resolved into more shape, a heavily armoured chest of the beast, the glow now strongest around its head as it pushed against the barrier roof.

A single moment of silence and horror.

Then with a roar greater than any other to take place on this stage the barrier shattered and a draconic visage burst free of the light wrapped around it, a head of wide jaws, shining prismatic armour, and two eyes, one shining red, the other brilliant blue.

Its true form restored at last.


One joyous.

For Ryuki Oda there could be no greater moment of vindication. No moment more clear to him, no instant more able to define him as right. From the very beginning he had known something was wrong with the stories he was told, with the way others had said it to be. It wasn't so, he'd argued back, it didn't feel right. He knew it wasn't right. But had nothing more than a feeling to guide him. Nothing but that.

But now, now he knew. Now it was here. He breathed its name and in breathing it knew it was true. Here it was, before him at long last. His birthright. His inheritance. The ultimate power summoned by his ancestor Oda Nobunaga so many centuries ago.
"The Black Then Gold Dragon."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2: The Black Then Gold Dragon is described as a partner to Oda Nobunaga, a being that "descended from the heavens" and whose enemies "burned under its light"
Chapter 8: Ryuki is introduced with the surname Oda
Chapter 16: Kiawe explains that the wig he gave Moon so she could compete in the Battle Royal was from a fictional retelling of the Warring States Period
Chapter 18: Hau and Moon play a copy of 'Conquest of the Warring States' under Kiawe and Mallow's watch, the next day those two Captains along with Lana meet and battle Ryuki
Chapter 20: Ryuki is mentioned as having been in the Hoenn Region recently.
Chapter 22: Olivia describes how records of the past are often based on guesswork, or assumption of how things might fit modern-day understanding
Chapter 24: Sina and Dexio point out that many historical records about Pokemon are misinterpreted as describing another
Chapter 28: The ancient record Lillie read described a light descending from the heavens followed by emissaries
Chapter 31: Discussing the legends, Moon, Lillie, and Hau wonder if the description of Pokemon descending from the heavens might be them coming through the Ultra Wormhole. Ryuki's sixth partner is described by Pitaya as truly monstrous.
Chapter 32: "Ancient legends always spoke in terms abstract, the true meaning often hidden from obvious translation."
Chapter 40: The potential of Ryuki's sixth Pokemon being Rayquaza is intensified by his interest in the Dragon Ascent move tutor on Poni Island
Chapter 51: Ryuki's sixth is revealed as Hydreigon, removing the main potential entrance Rayquaza had from the story. Why include Nobunaga's tale in chapter 2 then?
Chapter 54: "blue then brilliant gold" is used to describe Ultra Salamence's transformation
Chapter 57: The Black Then Gold Dragon has arrived
Chapter 58: ????

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I'll see you with the next chapter.
Bonds

Across the world all eyes turned to the Alola Region. All to the visage of the great golden dragon, the Legendary Pokemon born of two consumed by one other. Two and one further still. The young girl Moon, the impossible child who could provide power without limit to any Pokemon connected to her, also vanished into the light.

A shining beacon of Alola devoured by a far harsher one from a world beyond.

The morning still so early in Kanto, but so many around the Oak Institute still risen. So many prepared to cheer for the two closest friends of their youngest member that day. So many struck silent, horrified as so many were across the world by the sight shown to them.

Daisy Oak, seated next to Lillie, looked over to the young blonde-haired girl. To Lillie's wide-eyed stare at the screen, at the sight of Necrozma, then Nebby, then this.

Clenching her eyes shut, away from the golden light radiating from the screen before her, Lillie raised and linked her hands together. And prayed with every last fibre of her being.

“Moon...”

Moon...

She awoke in a void of light, an absolution of brilliance so complete and total there could be nothing else. Nothing but light. Light eternal, light omnipresent. She moved to turn but there was only more light. Impossible to know if she had even moved. It certainly didn't feel like it.

It didn't feel like anything at all.

She tried to close her eyes and nothing changed. Still only light. Tried to raise a hand, but felt no response. No body to answer her. No form she could feel, no self left behind. Just her faint will, alone in this realm of infinite light, endless and pure.

Just she, this infinity, and one other thing. One thing upon which Moon focused with every last element of her soul.

On the sound of the voice that had called out her name.

From the moment Solgaleo and Necrozma had first appeared, people had begun to flee the stadium grounds. The most nervous the first to go, with those confident in the barrier, and enthralled by this battle taking place, remaining behind. As things grew worse most remained transfixed, watching as disaster unfurled. Even as the golden dragon rose within that barrier, still they remained in silence.

But then when the barrier shattered, the beast rising so high as to break through that ceiling and stretch further still with an almighty roar, then did things change. Then did all present within the
stadium suddenly burst into motion, panic filling up their hearts. Then did all seek to flee.

Though some still required the aid of others to go on.

“Jewellery.” The mother of Lana held tight upon the arm of Jewellery, mother of Moon. A woman locked in place, the horror of this sight seizing so strong a grip upon her heart that she no longer felt able to move. Barely able to think. Her daughter... her daughter...

“Jewellery stay with me! We must go!” The blue-haired woman, so like her daughter, so able to focus with intensity when the moment came, pulled at Jewellery and forced her to move, her own youngest daughters, Lana's younger sisters, clutching at her skirt. She'd need to get all three of them to safety.

But with so many in the way...

“Mom!” Lana's voice rode high, her partner Gyarados stretching out over the heads of the milling crowd, the Captain of Brooklet Hill upon the Atrocious Pokemon's back. The other Captains could be seen in motion too, moving to help the crowd surging to flee the stadium, the masses jamming themselves into exits and only slowing escape as all tried to make their way.

An equal mixture of those clearing new ways for people to flee using their Pokemon's strength – Ilima, Kiawe, Mallow, and Tristan – and those able to airlift or move the most unwell or infirm quickly from across the stadium stands – Lana, Sophocles, and Acerola – the Captains of Alola all lent their aid. Lana reached out a hand to her mother.

The older woman passed her two younger daughters alongside Jewellery up to her eldest.

“Lana, help more children and unwell escape! I'll go with the crowd!”

For a moment Lana seemed willing to argue, looking out over the masses of people seeking to flee. But then she nodded and her mother smiled at the strength and conviction of her daughter atop that Pokemon's back. She was a fine Pokemon Trainer, a wonderful Captain, and a truly great person to boot. A mother's pride well felt.

Lana's Gyarados swept further up the stands to gather what people could latch onto the Atrocious Pokemon, before barrelling over the stadium's edge, helping those most in need safely leave this place behind.

Though oh so many still left to go.

“Please progress safely! You will only go slower by jamming together at the exits!”

The voices of Anna and Alexa, remaining in the commentator's box to help guide the fleeing crowd, continued as other Trainers joined the Captains in seeking to give their aid. Jackson and Mina, Asuka and Molayne all moved out, Benga atop his Garchomp's back sweeping high towards the commentator's box, to ensure Anna and Alexa could make their own escape from that place.

A level down from there, having emerged out into hastily cleared seats, the third commentator this morning, Guildmaster Pitaya of the Alolan Dragon Tamers, took a stand and raised a Dusk Ball to make her words heard.

She'd have her student back.

Out into the sky raced the Noivern of Pitaya, the Sound Wave Pokemon arcing up towards the head of the great golden dragon that had risen and broken through the barrier roof. It was clear, oh so
clear, the power that creature must hold, but also that it was not yet ready to wield it. In the moments after that roar and rise to its full height, the beast had moved in no way at all. As if unprepared for the power now coursing through it.

In that moment Pitaya would strike, tear it down, and pull Moon from its form without fail.

Unleashing its full force Noivern's body thrummed as an explosion of sound rocketed from its ears to wash over the great dragon before it. The Boomburst pulsed through that golden being, the dragon's body of light – oh so similar to another's – rippling as the power of the attack ran through it. Then stilling almost immediately after. The surface of its form undisturbed.

As if it had never been struck to begin with.

The great dragon turned, its gigantic head – larger than Noivern's entire body – moving slowly through the air. Pitaya's commands were sharp, her partner keeping out of the line of sight of the dragon's burning red and brilliant blue eyes. But that wasn't enough. The golden dragon's body still shifted as bubbles of light swelled up across it.

Then burst into pillars of radiance piercing the sky.

It was by the instincts of a master and a partner of great age that Noivern avoided that attack. That Pitaya felt it, as soon as her partner saw those bubbles beginning to take shape, and moved to react in time. Had Noivern dive, and evade the lines of scorching light bursting free of the gold dragon's form, surging off into the sky above. This power unleashed, burning energy left lingering in the air, a clear display of the danger this gold dragon possessed. As clear as the holes now pierced cleanly through the stadium roof, and layers of cloud overhead.

All the way into the blue sky beyond.

Across the stadium speakers crackled into life. Colress, having pressed himself into the side of a corridor as people continued to storm for the exits, nodded at the data he was already pulling from the League monitoring system, and made his first report.

“That laser attack is made of an extremely concentrated volume of light: I guarantee it will burn through whatever it touches without fail and in length... appears to be able to cover multiple miles before dispersing. For all Trainers moving to intercept: use only aerial Pokemon of great speed and do not lead this form of Necrozma to attack downwards in any way! I will provide more details as I can obtain- excuse me must you really shove me to get past?!”

At the feet of Necrozma the three Kahuna present in the League Stadium – Hala, Olivia, and Hapu – all retired with their bested Pokemon called back: Hariyama, Tyrantrum, and Mudsdale defeated in a single moment's attack. Looking up, Hapu felt relief to see the four Tapu of Alola racing down from the pillars framing the stadium and stands, each wreathed in power and intensity that said clearly what all knew.

That this was now a fight for the safety of Alola itself.

Those tasked to protect this land prepared to do what must be done.

Yet when the young Kahuna of Poni Island set the Tapunium-Z into the Z-Ring her grandfather had passed on to her, a hand settled on Hapu's shoulder, and a voice joined the shake of a head. Hapu looked up in surprise to hear it.

“Not yet.” Kahuna Olivia of Akala looked grim, shifting to observe the Tapu overhead lashing out all the power they held. Each was already using Nature's Madness – the pink ring of energy bursting
forth from each’s form – but the rings were breaking against the gold dragon’s own. Something powerful enough to resist such...

“Wait until Nanu is here,” Olivia focused again on Hapu, the two moving quickly with Hala to gain more distance from where Necrozma stood. “When the four of us are together, we can combine our powers as one. We must wait until then.”

With each’s elimination from the tournament so far, Hala and Olivia had both returned to five Pokemon in their team. A lucky thing, given the timing of this attack. Earlier, and neither would have been prepared to share their divine partner’s Bond.

The intensity each Tapu was feeling weighing equally as heavy upon the shoulders of their Kahuna below.

“Will Kahuna Nanu make it?” Hapu did not possess as doubtful an opinion of Nanu as many of Alola did, but for her it was a simple matter of logistics. In the time it would take...

“He will.” Hala asserted, watching as the crowd of the League fled, the Captains and great Trainers of this region all lending their aid in helping this escape. “Though he will have been complaining the entire way, Nanu will have begun his ascent the moment Solgaleo and Necrozma first appeared. That man knows when trouble is coming in a way no other does. He will be here soon.”

The three Kahuna, having made their way to the stadium side furthest from where Ultra Necrozma stood – the gold dragon beginning to take slow turning steps to follow the circling Pokemon overhead, leaving deeply sunken molten footprints behind – left able to do little more than support their partners and wait.

Wait until the time came that the four guardians of Alola may strike and finish this as one.

Ryuki, closest now, thrust up a hand.

“Black Then Gold Dragon! Answer me!”

Jaws opening as another roar echoed out, as more beams of light burst upwards seeking the circling foes overhead, Necrozma in no way noticed the tiny man calling from below. Frustration and concern mixing, Ryuki reached quickly for a Luxury Ball. He needed to forge a Bond quick, and have the dragon of his ancestor return Moon immediately. Activating that Pokeball, Ryuki allowed for a reunion of many centuries apart.

Hydreigon immediately bared her fangs and hissed with fury at the sight of the great golden dragon before her.

“I know,” putting a hand to her main neck, Ryuki did not flinch even as one of her other heads whipped around to snarl at him. “I’m not going to let you down that way. But we need to stop it and that means I need to take it on.”

Rejection, despise, and hatred coursed through the Bond between them, her feelings on this dragon oh so strong. Ryuki snapped.

“If we’re partners then help me do this!”

She paused. Each time he showed that unwavering focus so reminiscent of the one who had raised her up to begin with. Each time she felt nostalgia fill her mind. She didn’t want to let that go. Gave a new feeling, something far meeker than anything Ryuki had received from her before. A single, plaintive, request.
Please don't leave her alone again.

“I won't.”

Thus Dragon Tamer atop ancient dragon soared up into the sky.

To Noivern and the four Tapu of Alola, three other Pokemon raced. The Braviary of Kukui. The Mandibuzz of Kahili. And the Honchkrow of Grimsley. Still remaining in the competitor's stands, as so many others scattered to lend their aid for those seeking to flee, each of those three stood silently and in focus. Gave their partners every last piece of the power they had.

To occupy Necrozma in the air and hold the gold dragon in place for as long as they could.

“Shielding.” Sabrina remained seated. Eyes closed, vision expanded, her four Pokemon surrounding her. She could see it, the golden dragon burning before her, even without eyes. Even more than with her eyes. It was... so much. The gold dragon's body, light surging within it, was building in heat moment by moment, the air around it rippling from the great beast's strength. Already the Pokemon on the attack were in such danger, the heat threatening them at further and further distance by the second. Each maintained their strength, wielded what attacks they could to hassle the gold dragon, but in the end there was little they could do at all.

Splitting herself as best she could, Sabrina wreathed the four Tapu in the power she held.

Tapu Koko was already injured. One of the two arm shells of Melemele's Land Spirit Pokemon partially melted, the Legendary Pokemon rewarded such for a daring swipe at Necrozma's body before. Hands outstretched, Sabrina held her power around the four, wrapping them in an armour to resist that heat and allow them to remain close. To express as much of their own power upon their foe as they could. But it would only last so long.

This opponent one of more danger and power than perhaps any to exist before.

“Be careful!” Again the voice of Colress from the speakers around the field. “Necrozma's internal heat is building rapidly! The light energy comprising its form, it bears extreme similarity to Ultra Evolution and Ultra Salamence! I'm declaring this being as Ultra Necrozma, and by my readings it is Psychic and Dragon-type! It seems to be moving faster the longer it remains in this form – becoming used to the power it holds – meaning that the longer this goes on the more dangerous it will be! If there are any ways to stop it soon, I strongly recommend you do so now!”

Pitaya, standing so close to the peak of the stadium stands, clasped her hands together and shone bright with Z-Power. Her partner Noivern circling over Ultra Necrozma unleashing this power down. The Dragon-type Z-Move Devastating Drake falling fully upon the gold dragon's head.

So strange, to see that attack sink clearly into the dragon's body, and for it to respond with no howl of pain at all.

So horrifying to see its two eyes shift and lock on to Pitaya in the stands alone.

Necrozma's mouth opened wide as another beam of gold light took shape.

“I've got you!” At speed befitting its name the Mach Pokemon Garchomp soared through the air, Benga atop its back reaching out and taking hold of the Guildmaster. Wrenched from her feet by this force Pitaya gasped, the three just moments away before a beam of light pierced through where she had stood, stretching out far into the sky beyond. Colress's voice echoed from the speakers again.

“Keep high!”
Watching the Noivern retreat too, enough power spent by that Z-Move for it to be at risk close to Necrozma – a wise Pokemon to understand that – Ryuki, closer than ever to the gold dragon's head, turned his intent forward.

“Black Then Gold Dragon!” Standing atop Hydreigon's back, braving the intense heat, the four Tapu circling around this beast in attack, Ryuki outstretched a hand. He knew it. He knew it more than anything he'd ever known before. He could feel it. This was, unquestionably, the ultimate power his ancestor had summoned once upon a time. And the link was still there. Just as it had been within him and allowed him to meet and ally with the Hydreigon he now stood upon, so was there still a connection to this beast as well.

All he had to do was take hold.

“Answer me!”

Focusing on those attacking it again and again, not even for a moment did one of the two eyes of Ultra Necrozma settle upon Ryuki's form.

Instead turning down to observe another below.

One Pokemon remained upon the stadium field. One judging moments, with cold fury guiding its mind. No other. The connection it had been granted by fate, the one who had come to its side, now gone. And its demand for justice now made.

The Bisharp of Moon had spent its time in silence. Observed the great gold dragon before it. The titan of heat and power. How it shifted and stepped, how its heat was so great as to leave the ground cracked and burning beneath its feet. Just remaining this close, Bisharp felt pain, its metallic body affected. But with raw fury it powered through. Built its strength, Dark and Steel-type energy mixing together within its blades. Left ignored for so long by this dragon focusing on those above, Bisharp was given ample time to study how the beast stepped, and how the weight of its body fell.

Ultra Necrozma raised a foot as it continued to turn, eyes tracking the fast dodging Pokemon around it, even as great beams of light continued to surge into the air. And when it lowered that foot Bisharp slashed out the ground beneath it with a Steel-type blow as a stronger Dark-type one cut across the gold dragon's heel.

Immediately Necrozma's attention focused downwards, upon the Sword Blade Pokemon that had dared to strike it, and was now being punished by contact with its heat, was now struggling to pull back with arm blades sagging from melt. But Necrozma's intent to punish further, the opening of its mouth to form another laser beam, was instead punished by those around it in turn.

Two Dark Pulses from Mandibuzz and Honchkrow, accelerated by an Air Slash from Braviary, crashed into the gold dragon's mouth and broke apart the psychic power forming that beam. The light, so powerful, scattering with control for a moment dispersed.

A tree from Tapu Bulu burst up through the earth, wreathed in water by Tapu Fini's aid, piercing through Ultra Necrozma's momentarily injured leg – the Dark-type attack of Bisharp disrupting its form. Tapu Lele, its own psychic power immense, grasped and ripped, pulling the bindings of the leg further, causing the great mass of light within to spill out. For this piece of the dragon to shudder and shift.

Tapu Koko, who at its greatest of all speed had thrown the Bisharp of Moon back, the respect of the deity given to this one's brave strength, took charge of unleashing Nature's Madness directly into that now open wound.
As a great explosion of light rocketed out, burning the tree to ash and washing over the Tapu shattering the barriers Sabrina had given them too, Ultra Necrozma slowly fell, one leg destroyed and the black prism armour that had made up that foot thrown free.

The moment of celebration at this first great blow struck coming to an end as the gold dragon roared. Sabrina's eyes widened in an instant.

“Wait, it's-!”

And that was as far as her words came. Then the power of Ultra Necrozma spread out, the immense force under command of its mind filling field and stadium both. In an instant the dragon's full power taking a fundamental force of this world and making it more. Bending it to its will. If it were to be dragged down, so too would all those around it.

Gravity. Increase.

It was a power a number of Psychic-type – and even some other – Pokemon could use. Could target an opponent, or area, and multiply the force there that pulled all within down. A dangerous power indeed, yet to enforce one's will upon a cardinal rule of reality... took much. Only Pokemon of great training and strength could use this ability to any effect at all.

But it looked nothing like this.

Loud was the sound of Necrozma's falling form crashing into the earth, shattering through stadium stands and into the buildings beyond. The temperature in the air dropped – before this moment building steadily, rising as the power within Necrozma grew and grew – but now falling to match outside the stadium's chill, cold air let in through the shattered dome overhead. This attack, something that could only be done by the most powerful of Legendary Pokemon, had demanded much to do. Necrozma's fury eclipsing sense as the great dragon spent deeply of its power in this fight.

But the result of such... oh so much.

The Alolan Pokemon League Stadium, built atop the peak of Mount Lanakila, was collapsing. The stands ringing the field shuddering, portions already caving in as pillars and structure broke under the force of the gravity unleashed. Even beyond the stadium the attached buildings – Pokemon Center, lodgings, and shopping centres too – were straining, not crushed by the same gravity but affected by the great force washing out all the same. Those last to flee, stragglers left behind and those needing assistance to go on, panicking as these buildings threatened collapse too.

Then rejoicing at the sight of the Captains and other Ride Pager holders sweeping in and using the Pokemon those devices contained to rescue all they could see.

Colress, having made his way outside, breathed out. A lot of the systems he'd hooked into were offline now, shattered by the power of Ultra Necrozma unleashed, but those he remained connected to painted a grim scene. Though Necrozma had fallen, already the heat within its body was beginning to rebuild. It would rise again in moments. And in the wake of such an attack...

Was there anything that could still be done?

Inside the League building Ryuki groaned, shaking his head, feeling the form of his partner wrapped
tight around him. Hydreigon, she'd pushed through the gravity before it pulled her from the sky, sending her spiralling down further out over the League compound itself. She must have taken the full brunt of that fall too, given Ryuki was able to step out of her grasp relatively okay. She'd protected his life at risk of her own...

Placing a hand against her side, Ryuki felt the Bond between them flare warm.

They were inside of the League compound, the shopping and restaurant area specifically, having punctured through the building's roof. Looking around, Ryuki stopped in surprise to see two more, they just as surprised to see him too. Two others who'd been making their slow way out themselves.

Sina immediately swayed on her feet.

"Woah! I've got you." Dexio's hands on her shoulders, the Kalosian researcher kept his partner on her feet, Sina shaking her head again and again. She looked pale. Ryuki took a step forward as Hydreigon behind him groaned, struggling back to her feet.

"Why are you two still here?"

"Something's wrong." Sina's voice sounded half-ethereal, as if the woman were speaking from another world entirely. "It's so loud." She was almost slumping in Dexio's hold. The brown-haired man shook his head.

"She's been like this since it appeared, we can't move that fast."

Concerned but without understanding, Ryuki looked forward and didn't notice as Hydreigon, recovered enough from her fall, pushed past him and lowered her main head to Sina's own.

Dexio startled but couldn't do much as the Brutal Pokemon ran her tongue right across his partner's face.

"Pfft hey!" As if knocked back into focus by the coarse draconic tongue, Sina swatted a hand, making contact with the Hydreigon's dark blue skin. Then immediately pulled back, her eyes widening as she realised she'd just struck the dragon that had ruined her League battle before. Ryuki's eyes were similarly wide. He'd never, ever seen an act like that from her before.

Except...

"Wait-" wait wait wait. Ryuki's stare focused on Sina's face specifically. "You- you can hear that?"

His point, in the direction of the League battlefield, the direction of Ultra Necrozma, was clear. Sina groaned, putting a hand to her face, now wet with dragon saliva.

"Yes?" She didn't seem sure. "Whatever it is I... yeah I can hear it. Feel it. Whatever. Cause it's Psychic-type, right?"

"Hey Sina? I'm right here." Dexio's voice, by her side, made Sina look at him strangely, before understanding dawned. Oh.

"Wait, then why me-"

"You're another." The wonder in Ryuki's voice was clear. The overjoyed surprise. "You- you're like me! A descendant! You're descended from Oda Nobunaga too!"

A moment's silence passed as Sina continued trying to put herself back together. Eventually she managed to express her thoughts.
“Okay... and? Dude had kids. His kids had kids. There's gotta be Oda descendants all over the place. It's not that big a deal man.”

Loud was the sound of the person Ryuki Oda had built himself up to be shattering into dust.

“Oof,” Dexio expressed consolingly, watching the almost slow-motion breaking of Ryuki's entire pride and self upon the Dragon Tamer's face. Then he focused on the topic at hand. “Oh wait, so that Hydreigon literally is-”

“Y-yeah,” Ryuki nodded, the cocksure confidence the man always wore now nowhere to be seen. “I knew I had the lineage and, she immediately accepted me, so...”

“Okay,” Sina, holding a palm against her face, pushed off of Dexio to stand on her own feet. The gold dragon's pressure on her relented for the moment in the wake of its gravity surge. “So why,” she waved a hand around, “this?”

“That,” Ryuki took a moment's solemnity, dispensing this truth with absolute conviction, “is the Black Then Gold Dragon.” It took a moment, Dexio specifically looking with confusion and opening his mouth, before Sina spoke first. Made a displeased face.

“Ohhh, Black Then Gold. Man, whatever idiot came up with that phrasing was a misleading jerk!”

“So... no Rayquaza?” Sina and Ryuki both shook their heads in answer to Dexio's query. He frowned. What a mess.

There were some history book revisions to be made after this, providing they all survived.

“So what?” Sina shook her head again, trying to clear it while the pressure in her brain was lessened. “Does this actually mean anything at all? What's the point?”

“I was trying to form a Bond with it.”

Ryuki's answer received an immediate noise of surprise, and question as to his sanity, from the two before him. The Dragon Tamer shrugged.

“Is there anyone better?”

“Me, apparently,” Sina shot back, rubbing at her head. “That thing's Psychic-type and I've got a Psychic bias and apparently Oda blood that's connecting me to it. Maybe it'll listen to me.”

“Its Dragon typing and my bias and blood not enough?” Rare for Ryuki to express actual anger, but his core beliefs being knifed by Sina multiple times in the last minute were setting him off.

Dexio blinked.

“What if you both did?”

“Huh?” The exact same reaction from the two, the exact same movement and body language and intonation. The questioning sound in the exact same instant and expression. Like two peas in a pod. Two Exeggcute in a bunch. Two twins raised side by side for life.

Two people carrying the same purpose in this moment.

Each turned to the other, and understood.

“I'm... really sorry for screwing you over in the first round.”
“Ugh, forget it. I guess the lady there couldn’t resist checking me out since she could smell Oda on me too. We're in a bigger mess right now anyway.”

Sighing, Sina accepted Ryuki's hand, as Hydreigon pushed herself against the ground to allow the two to settle onto her back. Her leftmost head still rose up and hissed as Dexio stepped in. Oda family only.

“Hey,” Dexio looked up from where he stood, at Ryuki seated on Hydreigon's back, Sina hanging on behind him. “If you get her killed I'm gonna haunt you forever even if you end up a ghost too, got it?”

“Her life above my own,” Ryuki nodded back, his fellow descendant holding on tight as the intensity in her mind built again. Ultra Necrozma had to be recovering from that crazy attack before. Then Hydreigon rose into the air, carrying Ryuki Oda and Sina Long, descendants of an ancient dragon lord. Dexio, below, sighed, and could do little more. There they went.

“Guess I need to get distance so they don't gotta worry bout me 'til this is done.”

Inside of the League Stadium two bubbles burst free. The first, drifting down from the competitor's stands, depositing a quartet of people and Pokemon each. Sabrina's reaction only fast enough to express two words, but her thoughts enough to tell her partners what needed be done. To have them wrap their power around her, themselves, Kukui, Kahili, and Grimsley all, and keep them safe from gravity's touch.

The entire group kept safe.

Knowing her partners were now spent, Sabrina called each back as the other three with her returned Braviary, Mandibuzz, and Honchkrow too, those in the air slammed down hard upon the ground. Each now held in stasis by their Pokeballs, but needing desperate treatment before they could safely emerge again.

The power of Ultra Necrozma so much.

The second bubble, popping close to a collapsed tunnel once leading to the League staging ground, revealed only three. The Kahuna of Alola present: Hala, Olivia, and Hapu kept safe too. Though Tapu Lele held none of the elegance in its understanding of psychic abilities compared to the master Sabrina, its instinct born of a volume far greater than that woman would ever wield had allowed it to know all the same. To turn and stretch out its hands and make sure those three would be safe.

Before the power of Ultra Necrozma slammed it and its three fellows upon the ground too.

Yet strong were the bodies of the divine guardians of Alola. Still did each rise back into the air, injured but not beaten. Turned their attention to the fallen dragon, its body collapsed into the stands, great head buried further beyond still.

A chance.

“Should we attack now?” Hapu's query had Hala and Olivia both pause. They understood the power of the Guardian of Alola. And had felt clearly, by their own senses and their divine partners', the strength of Ultra Necrozma too. It hadn't been time then. Those great golden beings, as strong as they were, would not have stopped it. But now?
“Are you ready?” The question from Hala was directed to Tapu Koko, the Land Spirit of Melemele turning its head to consider its partner. The left side of Tapu Koko’s shell was burned, distorted, and sunken. It was true, bringing forth the power of the Guardian of Alola sooner may have resolved this. But had it failed to be enough, and neither Hala nor Olivia could guarantee it would have been, they would have let go of their best chance of stopping this monstrosity before far more damage was done.

The decision to hold then had been the right one. To act now was...

Tapu Koko pointed, turning the heads of the three Kahuna – and approaching four other Trainers – to one more. A Pokemon pressed against the ground, indented into it by the force applied against it. Clear was the broken metal scattered around it, and cracked body of red, to say that the Bisharp partner of Moon had suffered the most grievous injuries of all. Kukui quickly broke off to check if it still breathed.

Kahili led Grimsley and Sabrina to the Kahuna’s side.

“What can we do?”

“Do any of your Pokemon possess recovery techniques?” Hala's query answered Kahili’s own. The Tapu were strong, but it had already been proven that not one was invincible. To bear the power of the Guardian of Alola to its full height... if any recovery could be made in the time Ultra Necrozma lay felled – the gold dragon slowly beginning to shift, but with one leg missing and half buried in rubble failing to rise – now was the time to make use of it.

Grass was already spreading around Tapu Bulu, the Land Spirit of Ula'ula creating a field of recovery for it and its allies, Tapu Fini working healing water around them as well. But those were slow things. Sabrina, Kahili, and Grimsley all paused, hoping for another to speak: techniques that provided health quickly no common thing. After a moment’s silence, Sabrina proposed another idea.

“If they have abilities that can drain from others... my Pokemon are worn down, but each can still offer a little.”

Kahili and Grimsley both took charge of offering far healthier Pokemon should the Tapu require more energy to go on.

By the time Kukui returned, holding Bisharp up with one of its arms over his shoulder, the Pokemon swaying but still able to look upon the group with open eyes – though completely unable to stand on its own, the metal of its legs deeply cracked as well – Kahili’s Hawlucha and both Oricorio, and Grimsley’s Sharpedo, Scrafty, and Liepard, had all offered energy freely to the Tapu that could take such from them: Tapu Lele and Tapu Bulu restoring themselves before using their powers to amplify the healing terrain for Tapu Koko and Tapu Fini’s sake. Both Trainers called their Pokemon back, not one drained to unconsciousness but left weary all the same. The Tapu, for their efforts, looked far more alert already.

“We should go.” Kahili activated two more Pokeballs, manifesting Skarmory and Toucannon next. Each Pokemon able to carry two. Kukui added Magnezone, laying Bisharp – who managed a complaining noise at being removed from this scene but could not move in resistance – across that Pokemon before joining Grimsley on Skarmory, Kahili and Sabrina already on Toucannon’s back.

Olivia nodded at the group. “If you see Nanu on the way out tell him to hurry it up.”

“Will do,” Kukui nodded back, the Pokemon they were riding already lifting up. “Stay safe.”
As this group departed, Olivia, Hala, and Hapu set their eyes forward, the four Tapu before them, the shifting Ultra Necrozma further still. It remained buried through the League stadium and buildings beyond, tail rising up and lashing through the air, leaving a heat haze in its wake. As if it had a reason to remain so.

It did.

Hau had joined the crowds fleeing the League Stadium before. Ushered people, suppressing the panic and horror in his heart, while using his Pokemon to open new paths. The more that fled, the more Hau was able to help those left behind, continuously going back and searching for any who remained. Even when he was no longer seeing people at all, no-one responding to his calls for who was left, still Hau searched. To make sure. To make sure everyone was free. And... because he could feel something. Something keeping him here. A connection still.

A link to someone in need.

When the gravity fell across the stadium Hau was beyond it, but only just. Was not pulled down against the ground, but remained witness to all around him groaning and breaking still. As Hau pulling back from falling masonry, Golisopod manifested from the Friend Ball at his waist to smash aside whatever threatened to fall too close. In panic as he retreated, Hau ended up pressed in amongst fallen rubble, Golisopod before him holding guard. These two inside the building just beyond the League Stadium itself.

Front row seats to the walls before them burning away as Ultra Necrozma pushed its head further forward seeking out the other tied to its consumed still.

Its power was still unstable. Form new, and its devoured resilient. The dragon burned brightly, but as soon as it unleashed its full power was left collapsed, and hungry again. This then. Let this fill it.

Opening its jaws wide Ultra Necrozma pushed forward still.

Water pouring from between its armour scales, Golisopod surged forward and slammed one heavy claw and then another against the prism armour of the gold dragon's face, the combined water cooling the heat and Bug-type energy in the attack allowing the Hard Scale Pokemon to make contact and push back.

But nothing came of such an attack, Ultra Necrozma still shifting as it lay against the ground, pushing further forward all the same. Golisopod's feet digging into the ground but leaving grooves as it was pushed back nonetheless.

No way to stop a power such as this.

Hau yelled. Pulled further into the mass of rubble around him, watching as the gold dragon stretched closer and closer still. Almost tenderly, seeking to grasp this one before it without crushing him, but relentlessly all the same in the way Golisopod could do nothing to stop its approach. A deep fear settled in Hau, feeling the heat of Ultra Necrozma's form as it grew closer still. And the knowledge of just why this was.

Solgaleo within... Necrozma wanted Hau to join.

He thought of Moon and wondered if he'd see her inside there too.

“Hey future Kahuna! What're you think you're doing?!”

Alongside the silver-scaled body of Golisopod there was suddenly another. Another with both claws
slammed upwards, water coursing from between its scales, and Bug-type power pushing back against its Psychic-type foe. Two Golisopod now struggling. Two Golisopod now pushing.

Two Golisopod now seeking to save Hau's life.

“Get up here!” Riley swung down a hand from the ledge of broken rubble she stood atop, gesturing for Hau to grab hold. When he did she pulled, her legs hooked over jutting wreckage from the building collapsing in on itself, and allowed Hau to haul himself up to this higher point. Away from Necrozma.

The former Team Skull member, who'd been the first to race back into the collapsing League after the gravity had struck – Team Skull didn't abandon family, and if there was no more Team Skull she guessed that meant she was Alola and all was family now – still didn't have much more than a displeased snarl for Hau. Even at his grin to her.

“Eyes forward and make sure our partners get out of this alive. Us too. Don't give up on things yet.”

Nodding, Hau turned to face the Golisopod pair struggling against the prism-armoured face of the gold dragon Ultra Necrozma. Gave his will to his partner holding it back.

But still the two weren't able to keep it from pushing further forward.

“You took your time.”

Unknowing of the situation inside, unaware of Necrozma's target or actions beyond its slight movements, the three Kahuna greeted their fourth, the man swooping in on a Honchkrow just as Kahili and the others took their leave. Nanu just shrugged, setting his own Tapunium-Z into his Z-Ring.

“Getting a second person up here slowed me down.”

“Riley-”

“Stand firm!”

Two youths of Alola and two of their partners gave all they could to hold back a being of strength beyond measure. A being hungering for one of them and unwilling to be denied. Two and two alone not enough to stop it.

But... perhaps three...

“Oh you're making a real mess of things, ain'tcha?”

The slam of another silver-scaled pair of claws against Necrozma's prism face. A third Golisopod, larger than the two younger ones, pushing forward with even more force. And a crackling voice rising over the group as a third figure trudged up to tower over the two youths.

“Y'know, used to be I'd have said I didn't hate that, this wreckage you're bringing. Now though... well, you're smashing up my place, and I ain't a fan of that.” Riley stared up with delighted surprise, Hau just regular. The far taller figure slammed a fist into an open palm with a grin. “You crazy-ass
Pokemon, you think you can just destroy whatever you want, but you're second-rate here. You wanna see what real destruction looks like? Here it is human form!

And with the man's thrust of a fist forward, his partner slammed its own up into the gold dragon's head.

“It's ya boy Guzma!”

“Do we really have to hold hands?”

“Shut up and get ready.”

Within the stadium field of the Alolan Pokemon League, this place sundered to a degree beyond any battle here before, the four Kahuna of Alola stood. Four Kahuna and four Z-Rings, set within each a Tapunium-Z. Above them floated four more, the divine Tapu, power around them swirling further. Knowing what was to come. Hala and Olivia, from the moment Ultra Necrozma had appeared, had believed such: that a single Guardian of Alola, even two, or three, would not have stopped this beast alone.

Rather...

“Begin!”

Releasing their hold of each other's hands, stepping back from the diamond created, each Kahuna took on their Z-Pose. Power built around them, flowed between them, then up, four streams spiralling around one another, multiplying one another. Washing over and through and into the deities above, each Tapu sealing their shells tight. Each glowing with more and more Z-Power. The earth beneath them giving up more. More and more light of Alola pouring up from the land as the Kahuna pulled back further and further still. Light embracing the Tapu. Swirling around them. Wrapping around them. Light taking form and lifting them higher.

Light binding them together as one.

Olivia had known. Nanu had known. Hala had been told the tale by one to do such themselves, but the need had never come in his time. Such a necessity so rare a thing indeed. A time when a single Guardian of Alola had not been enough to overwhelm the greatest of threats to this region they loved.

A time when it had taken them all.

Hapu had not known. Had not yet been taught this lesson of the Tapu. Had not been instructed that by the four Kahuna performing this Z-Move as one, things would be different. Would not raise a giant for each Tapu, four great golden beings for the four deities of this land.

Would do something far more striking indeed.

And so this young girl, this Kahuna of Poni, power still flowing from her into the partner she had given her all to join with, watched. Watched as not four but one arose. One single giant of gold, taller, far taller, than any of the Guardians before. Tall enough to rival even the gold dragon at full size. Four heads atop its form, four side-by-side.

The true Guardian of Alola manifest for this fight.
Necrozma, unable to bowl over the three Golisopod holding it back, grew frustrated. Shelved its desire to reach Hau with care, and opened its jaws wider, laser light dancing within building into a torrent to dispatch those stopping its reach. Hau, Riley, and Guzma left staring into the mounting light before them.

Then two great hands seized hold of the dragon's back and tail and pulled, tearing the beast from where it lay buried within the rubble and hauling it overhead, slamming it down upon its back across the stadium's length. Towering and mighty, the Guardian of Alola stood tall, turning with thunderous steps to face its draconic foe. Roaring in shock at being thrown about, Necrozma glowed bright, rearing up from where it lay to fire a spread of beams through the giant before it.

Ignoring the holes opened across its body – already closing over by the Z-Power that comprised it – the Guardian of Alola stepped in and took hold of the dragon by the throat.

The Kahuna, witnessing this astounding power, followed the trail Necrozma had left through the rubble beforehand, all the way to where three Golisopod and their three partners stood. Hala's eyes widened to see his grandson where Necrozma's head had just been.

Guzma waved with a grin.

"I got the tykes, so get that thing outta here! And get that brat back too!"

And with a bark for Hau and Riley to both follow him, Guzma set off through the wreckage to leave this fight behind.

Leave it to the ones who could really save the day.

Necrozma lunged upwards, light pouring from its missing leg to support its balance once more. The fist of the Guardian met its face, the impact sending waves through the gold dragon's form. The four Kahuna were pulling back too now, having needed be so close to their partners to allow this to begin. But now it was done. Now they'd given all they could. It was up to the Tapu to end this. To stop this beast from another world before the destruction it unleashed spread further still.

And, each sent out the wish, to reach into Necrozma's chest and tear Moon free.

Against that prism-armoured chest the hand of the Guardian cracked, repeated blows hammering upon that core as its other kept hold of the dragon's throat. Necrozma roared louder, beating its wings and sending out waves of wind so powerful as to shift the rubble spread across the stadium and beyond. More laser beams bursting from its body, piercing through the Guardian's own, but proving little able to stop it. Changing to strike at Necrozma's face, the Guardian of Alola continued to hammer the dragon with all the force it held. To overwhelm and break down this foe.

Such was its will.

Such was its way.

Cataclysmic was the nature of this battle between Guardian and gold dragon, Necrozma tearing free of its opponent's grip and attacking furiously again and again, the deity quartet as one countering with all the force they could muster. Circling the ruined stadium structure, atop the back of the ancient Hydreigon that had seen such power once before this day, Sina and Ryuki observed.

"Looks like you missed your chance."

Ryuki said nothing in response to Sina's remark.
There was... a miscalculation. A mistaken belief. Understanding the absolute power of this gold dragon, the four Kahuna of Alola had united their power as one. Channelled it through the four Tapu into a single being, a great and mighty Guardian with the strength to throw this dragon down.

But the strength they wielded... it was the dragon's to begin with.

The missing piece returned at last.

Necrozma, never whole, devours light. Consumes wildly, to fill the raging hunger within its form. Even in this draconic shape, body surging with immense light drawn from those it had absorbed, still it hungered. And oh, the one to battle it now, how brightly they shone.

How full of a light more filling than any other there could be.

Z-Power the true form of what Necrozma had hungered for all this time.

Sabrina, beyond the ruined stadium now, standing alongside Kukui, Kahili, and Grimsley in watch, felt her eyes widen as she realised. As she knew.

“It's coming.”

The question from the three around her, each's died on their lips at the haunted expression on Sabrina's face. This time...

This time there would be nowhere to run.

“Z-Power.”

Necrozma ate. Even as the Guardian pummelled the dragon over and over, still the dragon ate of it in turn. Burning light formed around it, flames of Z-Aura beginning to ignite. The Guardian's body breaking, no longer whole, as Necrozma devoured its shape. Took that mass of light presented to it into its own form, and for this moment, this first time in an eternity, felt whole.

Beating its four wings as one Necrozma surged high into the sky as below it, their grand body dispersing into motes of sparkling dust, the four Tapu fell without the power to go on.

Their light gone into a far more horrific one above.

A radiant beacon hung over the peak of Mount Lanakila. A light far harsher and crueller than Alola's own, wreathed by corona of Z-Power. A draconic sun, burning and fierce. Filled with energy that demanded a form to be expressed. The power flowing through it driving it into this act.

Its mouth opening wide as an orb of warped and twisted light took shape.

The body of Ultra Necrozma, gold dragon of light, flickered. The Z-Aura around it, glowing brighter and brighter still, pulsed. The orb of light before the dragon's mouth, growing further and further in size, held all eyes.

All now aware of this coming end.

Once, months ago, the sight of Moon's Z-Moves had caused distress. The power pulled from her body into the attacks her partners used, it was of a deeper level than any other, for she had all the more to give. The sight of it to others something that tugged at their fear of the unknown.

By others' experience in witnessing her Z-Moves, and Moon's own practise in controlling the power she expressed, the shape of her strength became easier and easier to see. More palatable to the eyes
and heart. But this, this light now, this was that original form and so many times further still. This was the end state. The absolute. The pure infinity of light compressed into a single point, an endless power pouring out from its core. Necrozma's body warping, distorting, for a moment more wraith than dragon, as the creature twisted by its own immense power stretched out far beyond its own form to cover the sky. Eclipsing all light but its own.

A single black dot rose up to meet it.

“If we die I'm haunting your ghost!” Sina's yell as she gripped onto Ryuki fell behind the pair atop Hydreigon as the Brutal Pokemon rose higher and higher still, ascending to the golden being overhead, a mass of light forming beneath it of such power as to end... everything. Ryuki thrust upward a hand, and called out again.

Sina copied the motion and extended her own.

“Black Then Gold Dragon! Answer us!”

And, for a moment... a response.

"Answer us!"

Moon's head jerked, looking through the absolute light. A voice. Two voices. Voices that she knew. Moon looked around again. Things were... different. There was... shape? Form? She lowered her eyes to her hands, but there were none there for her still. Raised her eyes again.

Found herself gazing through Necrozma's own.

A forming Z-Move.

Mount Lanakila far below.

Ryuki and Sina.

The Kahuna amongst the broken League.

So many people outside the structure.

The Z-Move's light. And power.

Its immensity. If it... if it...

If-

Moon...

Never breaking her vision through Necrozma's eyes, Moon wrenched her head to the side, against what felt like impossible force.

And Necrozma's moved too.

The Z-Move fired.

It was... absolute. A volume of light of impossible depth, a concentration of power of impossible
strength. Whatever it would fall upon would be unmade. Were it to strike Mount Lanakila, it would raze the mountain to the ground.

But that is not what it did.

To Ryuki and Sina's vision directly beneath it. To all those further below, inside the League Stadium and not. It was clear. The sight of Necrozma's head moving, so quickly, and dragging the forming Z-Move along with it.

Then releasing it, the great orb surging off into the sky.

Then igniting, blooming into a star of brilliance and power that sent waves racing across Alola, blowing all clouds away, and leaving only fading flames spreading out over the region's horizon.

A Light That Burned the Sky.

Moon looked down into her hands to see two Pokeballs clutched within her grip.

In her left hand the Master Ball, the one she had been holding as Lunala wrapped around her, as Necrozma fell upon them both. Nebby... Moon clicked the ball and a beam of red lashed out from it into the light. Took hold. And pulled its bound back.

Come home.

In her right hand something different. An orb of blue, four ridges of yellow around it. Just holding it, Moon could hear the voice within. The one lost, devoured, surviving inside of a sea of light. Transfigured by that light. Kept safe within this sealed orb. And now, finally, having found its way back to her. Moon clicked that Beast Ball too.

And breathed out the name the one within whispered to her as she set it free.

Transfigured form of the Ultra Beast Poipole.

Naganadel.

Ryuki and Sina watched. Watched as the prism-armoured chest of Necrozma, in the wake of its Z-Move, the sky still shimmering with light from the attack released, shattered into dust. As it bulged, and rippled, and a form burst free. A form of purple, a great beast with huge crescent-scythe wings, pairs of silver needles emerging from its head and shoulders, a massive stinger body ending in three more, and a bright length of blue visor-like eyes across its face.

And, atop its back, arm hooked around its neck, the Trainer Moon set free.

“Moon!”

Her name yelled by so many. By those here. By those beyond. Those with cameras still running on the ground below, broadcasting this sight to the world in full. All seeing. All seeing her break free.

All seeing a miracle this day.

The gold dragon was no more. In the moment Moon had emerged its body too dispersed into dust. Now it was again the armoured Solgaleo, the Sunne Pokemon bound in the black prism armour of Necrozma's form. But the glow Solgaleo had held before was gone, the Pokemon's body with no shine left to give. It dropped, unable to stop its fall, and fell faster still. Fell all the way down from this high heaven to the earth below.
And slammed down hard upon the stadium floor.

“Now then.”

Returning to the scene upon his own Magnezone's back, the Unovan scientist Colress quickly approached the felled beast. No better time than the present, and an opportunist always knew when to strike.

He'd made the N-Lunarizer of course, but he more than anyone knew better than to skip ample preparation, and had enough records of Solgaleo's appearance during the Ultra Beast Invasion to make use of that data too. Colress Machine No. 1198 – finished first in fact because he'd had the more data on that Legendary Pokemon than the other – he'd remodelled into No. 1199 immediately afterwards. Point was, if Necrozma was bound to Solgaleo, Colress would just apply the N-Solarizer instead.

See? Preparation was key.

As the black clad Pokemon struggled to move in the aftermath of its great fall, Colress closed in and pointed the device he'd made at it, then pressed the activation button with a grin. He always loved getting to see his work put to good use. It was the sight of a job well done indeed.

The beam was narrow and small, but direct, striking the forehead of Solgaleo, the point where the black prism binding contained the triangle of rainbow light. The beam lasted only a moment, but that moment was enough. Contact made, and the result immediate.

The black armour of Necrozma falling easily away.

“Stay on guard!”

Hala, Olivia, and Nanu remained ready. Hapu had to fall back, supporting Tapu Fini and that Z-Move running her dry. But these three, they still knew what must be done. As the black prism pieces slowly reassembled themselves, the severed leg of Ultra Necrozma before returning as one of the Prism Pokemon's two great hands, each Kahuna brought another of their Pokemon to the field. Colress nodded, understanding. Necrozma's active body would never truly stop.

There really was only one way.

The three Kahuna each gave their command.

Stop!

The voice of Moon paused each in this moment. The sight of the girl, atop the back of the huge purple Pokemon she was riding upon, sweeping down from above. Ryuki and Sina, with Hydreigon, were descending after, but that Pokemon of Moon's flew so quick. A part of Ryuki's brain was already wondering whether he'd be fighting it.

He'd like that.

“Moon,” Olivia smiled so relieved, taking a step towards the girl dismounting the huge Pokemon she rode, “I'm... so glad. Please, let us finish this. It's alright now.”

Don't hurt it.

All three Kahuna stopped. Colress too. Moon shook her head. Let her do this. She knew what she had to do.
“Moon, considering your previous actions—”

She knew. But this... she knew what was right. Please watch over her.

And awaiting no reply, Moon turned and stepped closer to the slowly reassembling Prism Pokemon of black.

And held out her hand.

She understood.

She understood now. In that absolute of light, she had still felt it. Somewhere deep within, there was a darkness. A yawning void devouring the light, endlessly consuming it. Though the light of Necrozma had continued to form, to multiply and restore itself, still it had been eaten away. Still it had hurt.

Moon had felt that pain too.

She knew. If Necrozma ever ran out of light, the pain it would feel... she understood. Understood its pain. Its fear. The hunger that had driven it to do all that it had done. Even what it was feeling now, the Prism Pokemon so much larger than her yet still pulling back, as if afraid of the small girl before it. Moon held out her hand still.

For a moment that Z-Power had filled it. Truly filled it, and allowed it to live without pain. But the light it had taken had been impossible to hold. Had not lasted. Had not filled it for long.

But light given, that could end this. And that, that was what Moon could do. If it would trust in her, if it would take her hand, if, after being connected to her through Nebby for as long as it had been, it could feel her heart, then surely it must know.

So please.

Let her in?

Necrozma, slowly and shudderingly, lifted a clawed arm forth. Each Kahuna moved to react, but were each forced to jump back as the huge purple Pokemon before them hissed loud. Each exchanged glances as to what to do. But it was too late now.

Moon's fingers brushed Necrozma's claws and, willingly, a new connection was born.

Immediate was the flash of light, yet in no way did any recoil from it. Before the light of Necrozma had been so harsh, so painful to see. But this, this there was a gentleness to. A peacefulness and love.

Smaller, so much smaller than the great dragon of before, but that same dragon still arose. The golden dragon of light, but a light that washed out easily over the earth. In moments grass sprouting from between shattered stone, growing quickly and spreading further, trees bursting through fallen rubble, pure water bubbling from beneath the earth into surface streams and pools. In but an instant this fallen and broken battlefield transformed into a field of nature at Alola's peak.

The light of Alola here stronger than anywhere it had ever been before.

And so Ultra Necrozma, the light of Moon filling and reflecting from it, rose high into the sky as a shining beacon of new life bestowed. A being restored at long last to the true form it was always meant to be. As gratitude flowed down upon her, Moon smiled up as the dragon flared once, with a radiant and beautiful light, and disappeared from sight. Returned to the world beyond, the world
from whence it once came.

Its endless hunger finally, finally sated.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a long journey to this point. A lot of things that happened in this chapter, I've known were coming for the longest of times. It was an energetic chapter, lots of characters moving and acting, but if I did my job right, if I created the flow that helped you see and travel the scenes I described, then I am pleased. I hope you all enjoyed this.

Three now remain.

To all my readers and commentors, thank you so dearly for making this journey with me so far. You know, you do know, that I appreciate every thought you voice, and am delighted to see every new comment made. With the final three now ahead of us, now's an amazing time for new readers to start, so if you have anyone you can recommend this story to, I'd be endlessly grateful for that.

If you are not able, but still want to help, consider either sharing these twitter and tumblr posts below, or creating a post of your own on any other website.

twitter: https://twitter.com/Taurus Writes/status/1117187195503124480

Tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

Thank you so much for reading, and I will see you with the next chapter when it's done.

The finale's fast approach.
She awoke in a room of white, soft bedding wrapped around her, a heavy weight settled near her legs. Slowly rising up, Moon stared down the bed she lay within to where a large Pokemon's head rested at its end. In fact a majority of this room, this hospital-like place, was taken up by the massive purple Pokemon, coiled around a full third of it with ease. Ah, Moon found herself smiling at her first thought, there they were. Naganadel, evolved form of the Poison Pin Pokemon Poipole. They'd found one another in the light. Reunited at long last.

That made her happy.

“Moon-” her name, expressed with the speed and force of someone desperate to yell it loud yet trying to hold herself back all the same, drew Moon's eyes up, her head turning to see her mother standing there beside her. Shifting an arm, Moon raised it up to the woman who had birthed her, raised her, and loved her.

She was okay.

“Moon!” This time Jewellery did not hold herself back, sinking down to her knees alongside the bed Moon rested within and wrapping her arms around her daughter tight. “I was so afraid! So terrified I'd lost you! Moon I-” Moon tightened her own grip, though felt little strength in it. Far less than she was used to. A curious humming noise rising from further down the bed accompanied the relief of weight that had been there, Naganadel raising itself up, easily able to brush the ceiling overhead. Moon felt through their Bond relief. Another who'd been so worried. No doubt... there'd be many more.

How long-

“Seven days.” Jewellery's answer struck Moon silent, the older woman still holding onto Moon tight. “When that dragon, Necrozma, disappeared, you collapsed immediately after, the Kahuna said. You were brought to the Aether Paradise for medical attention, and have been asleep since. It wasn't... until the third day the doctors were able to predict you'd wake up again.”

Moon felt it. Felt the message in her mother's words. Tried to tighten her grip further still. No strength to do so.

She was sorry.

“Is this... what it's going to be like?” Jewellery's question was again asked without looking her daughter in the face. “This gift of yours, the life you live, will it keep being this way, you facing these dangerous situations, risking your life each time? Moon, I- I don't want that for you. I don't want you to have to live a life like that and... I don't know if I can bear it. What I felt, thinking you were gone back then...”
The nudge of Naganadel's head against Moon's arm pushed it just a little stronger against Jewellery, allowing Moon to just slightly tighten her hold. Naganadel was here now. And Nebby had come back too. Maybe... it was finally over.

Maybe this was the last time.

...Nebby!

“They're fine,” Jewellery finally leaned back from her daughter, the tears on her face clearly evident, looking into her daughter's deep brown eyes. The speed at which Moon had thought to worry for another already... honestly there was no way her daughter would ever stop worrying Jewellery herself, with the boundless love and care Moon had for others that drove her to act. Something to be proud of, yet afraid of as well. Jewellery smiled despite all the feelings within her.

“The Aether Foundation also took charge of caring for Solgaleo and Lunala. They've both recovered. Gladion took Lunala along with the rest of your Pokemon to the Poke Pelago.”

The rest of her- Moon tried to move quickly and failed, falling back into the bed weakly after attempting to turn. No Pokeballs at her waist. No others with her right now. Was she-

“It's okay.” Jewellery said it with all the firmness and love a mother could, calming Moon's heart in an instant. “Your Bonds didn't break.”

Long was Moon's breath out, staring up at the white ceiling overhead. Still connected. Still with them. And, those that had been inside of Necrozma with her, were still- “The Pokemon that were with you are fine. That scientist, Colress, suggested their Pokeballs kept them safe. And that that was how Poipole survived too.”

Naganadel. Moon said the name, her mother shifting to look at her in surprise. The name of this form was Naganadel. It had told her that before.

Jewellery believed her daughter with one-hundred percent of her whole heart.

“Naganadel.”

The huge purple Pokemon preened and shoved its head at Jewellery for attention, ignoring the huge size it held over her. Its evolution clearly changing none of its personality, it seemed. Moon could already feel herself fading again.

“Rest, Moon. I'll be here for you when you wake again. We all will.”

She'd... like... that...

Cameras flashed bright, reporters gathered before Hau'oli City's town hall for the conference organised by Alola's Professor Kukui, head of the Alolan Pokemon League. There'd been plenty of discussions in the wake of that event, one full week ago, but this was the first proper follow-up to be made.

The announcement of what was to come going forward.

“Professor Kukui!” The first reporter able to ask question of the man. “What is the plan for the remainder of the first Alolan Pokemon League?”
Some might claim Kukui’s standard garb, lab coat worn over bared chest, was far too casual for any appearance of note, but others would answer back that Kukui’s calm to appear so informally showed his conviction in what he had to say. Others still would describe him as flippant. Hard to say, most days, which it was.

Today it was not.

“Damages beyond the League Stadium have already been assessed and repairs begun,” Kukui spoke clearly and directly, eyes meeting all those gazing upon him, the sunglasses he so commonly wore not present at this time. “The workforce that constructed the League initially has been able to clear and repair essential infrastructure already, allowing them to begin work on restoring the complex to full. However it will take some time before the full extent of Necrozma’s damage to the area beyond the stadium can be repaired.”

“What of the stadium itself?”

“The final act of Necrozma overgrew the stadium – however while damaged, the core components of the stadium were not fully destroyed by its actions. The League battlefield itself, and the protective system that envelopes it, have already been repaired.”

“Is it intended to continue the Pokemon League?”

“It is.” Kukui’s answer raised voices, more camera-lights flashing. He looked out with focus still. “The attack of Necrozma, the events that threatened Alola so deeply, it is the wish of myself, the Kahuna and Tapu, and all those I have spoken with that we not let that change what our Pokemon League is meant to be. A celebration of Alola’s Trainers gathered at the peak of our region. It would take far more than one Legendary Pokemon to stop our intent.”

So strong a declaration. The charisma of the Professor, rarely exerted with his face so bared, touching many. Convincing many. Maybe it could be so...

“What are the consequences of Necrozma’s attack?”

At this question Kukui breathed out a sigh, understanding the report he had to make. The concession even after coming this far. One step back on the path forward. But only for a little bit.

“Ultimately,” the Professor answered clearly, “the surrounding stage and seating blocks suffered significant damage. Repairs can be done, but to restart the League in any timely manner, we’ll have to make cuts. When the final battles take place, we’ll only be able to host about a third of the crowd we could before. I’ve been in talks with those who can set further screens broadcasting across Alola, but far fewer people will be able to be there themselves. That is the main consequence.”

Noises of complaint and understanding. The limitations as result of such an attack clear. But surprise too. The confidence Kukui expressed in going forward all the same. He really intended to.

“What is the schedule going forward?”

“Once the necessary essential repairs are complete, the semi-finals will take place.” Louder surprise at this announcement too. “I have spoken to Hau, and the two of us are willing to hold our battle first while Moon remains in recovery. If there must be a gap between our match and hers with Ryuki, there will be so.”

Noises regarding Moon. The sight of her swallowed up into Necrozma, then breaking free after upon that giant purple Pokemon’s back. Many had already matched it to the far smaller purple Ultra Beast she’d been seen with long before. Though the true story remained barely known at all.
“If Moon is unable to recover in time, will Ryuki be pronounced the winner of their match and moved on to the finals?”

“She-

“Nope!” Loud was the voice that burst from the crowd, the red-clad and distinctive figure of Ryuki Oda pushing himself swiftly through, many shocked to find so identifiable a man having made his way so close to them without attention. All spread apart as Ryuki made his way to the front steps, whirling around to face the crowd. He didn't have a grin.

“No way!” His announcement was clear, own intent unquestionable. “Me and Moon have a match ahead! If you try to cancel it on me, I'm walking away! Then the League ends with just those two,” he jerked a hand over his shoulder, pointing a thumb at Kukui to indicate his and Hau’s match, “and not one of you wants that. We wait. Got it?”

So forceful a declaration. Some admired the Dragon Tamer's pride and honour, others questioned his sense. To threaten to walk away in such a manner, he lacked decorum for someone risen to the height he had. Ryuki didn't care. He knew what was right.

He knew what he wanted most.

“Regarding Hau and Moon,” one of the reporters found their way to the topic so many had considered thus far. “It's been identified that Solgaleo is staying at Iki Town now, close to Hau, and it appears that the Legendary Pokemon has a Bond with him. And by Moon's own comments during the Necrozma attack, it seems she has a relationship with Lunala herself. Is your intention to allow those two to bring those Pokemon to the Pokemon League?”

...Kukui paused for a moment, facing the question he'd long considered himself as well. But the answer was obvious. Easy to say at least. “As per the tournament rules, there are no restrictions upon specific Pokemon brought to this first League. If Hau and Moon are able to bring Solgaleo and Lunala, they are allowed.” More camera flashes, louder noises of query, of discussion, of question. One rose above them all.

“Hau and Moon are both children who have excelled as Pokemon Trainers to the highest of levels. They are both known friends, and now both revealed as partners to Alola's own greatest Legendary Pokemon. Should they win their matches, the final battle of the Pokemon League between them would be a match unlike any seen in any Pokemon League before. Giving them the freedom to use those Legendary Pokemon, isn't it asking for that result? Isn't it staging the final battle to bring the most attention to the first Alolan Pokemon League possible?”

Kukui felt a nerve inside of him twitch. He'd known this question was coming, but still to hear it asked, he-

“WHO SAID THAT?”

Ryuki's roar was loud, a blasting aura of intimidation seeming to rise around the man, his face set with passionate fury as he stared out across those gathered before him. None spoke up in answer.

“Who was it?!” The Dragon Tamer continued to demand. “Who's saying that me, that Kukui, that those two, fought with our everything all the way here just to do anything less than give it our all in the finale? Who's accusing those kids of being carried here, who's calling our passion, our efforts, the strength of our Pokemon, fake? Who dares say that here at this peak any one of us is going to hold back for even a second?”
Silence hung heavy in the air. The Dragon Tamer's heaving chest didn't calm. “Moon and Hau gave everything they had to make it here and you're going to accuse Kukui, accuse me, of insulting them to make a better story? How dare you. Don't ever say anything like that again. When I battle Moon I'm going to do everything I can to win, and so is she, and that's how it's going to be, got it? Understand? Have I made myself clear?”

No true response. No-one willing to brave the Dragon Tamer's fury. The one to ask that question pale as a sheet, wishing to disappear amongst the crowd. None at least parted to force them forward. Kukui took back over.

“Ahem,” he spoke with far more control than Ryuki, yet found himself not upset by the Dragon Tamer's outburst in the least. “As my fellow semi-finalist expressed, the upcoming matches will continue to be battled with our full intent. That Hau and Moon may have Solgaleo and Lunala with them does not change what we will do. And, in truth,” and here Kukui's smile finally showed that dangerous energy of his own, something that struck the crowd further, and rose both Ryuki's excitement and own measured concern. Oh if he fought Kukui it'd be a bloodbath.

That'd be fun.

“I'm very interested to find out what battling the Legendary Sunne Pokemon is like.”

“As far as we can tell,” far more focused the next time she awoke, Moon sat and listened as Gladion made his report, “your body is adjusting to the connection to Necrozma. Even if it's not stopping you from supporting all your other Bonds, the sheer volume it's taking is still wearing you out. But considering you are waking up again now, it's expected you'll be back on your feet soon enough. Just take it easy until then.”

Moon smiled at her bedside caretaker. She appreciated him being the one to come and tell her this. Gladion glanced away.

“I was... here, with Wicke and the others watching the match. Even if we'd gone as fast as we could, I wouldn't have been able to make it in time to do a thing. I don't even know if I could have but... not even being able to try left me feeling-”

Thank you. Gladion glanced back in surprise at Moon's words. She smiled further still. Her mother said he'd looked after her Pokemon while she was out. And even gone to the Poke Pelago? Was he-

“I'm fine.” Gladion said it firmly, his desire to not discuss that specific topic clear. “All of the Pokemon with you were kept safe by their Pokeballs, and are still connected to you. Mohn... said that all of the Pokemon at the Pelago got real bad for the period of time you were gone though. You'll need to apologise to them when you go and see them. Among others.”

Moon clearly understood what that meant. And Nebby?

“Also at the Pelago. Solgaleo recovered faster and left the Paradise on its own, but Lunala wouldn't leave until I specifically asked it to go with me to the Pelago for your own sake. It's staying there now.”

Moon breathed out, feeling relief. Considered her thoughts alone, glancing around the room, at the medical equipment still connected to her. She was not even close to being allowed to get out of this bed yet. To be honest she didn't feel like it either. Even if she wanted to see the rest of her Pokemon. See Decidueye and Salamence. Sylveon and Milotic. Volcarona and- Moon's eyes widened.
Wait, Bisharp!

Gladion breathed out slowly, posture tense. Moon's heart-rate spiked.

“Bisharp attacked Ultra Necrozma while you were inside of it. It suffered significant damage from remaining so close to that Pokemon's heat. We had the best Pokemon Doctors see to it, but there's still only so much technology can do. Bisharp recovered enough to stand on its own, but that's as far as it can go. That Pokemon can't fight anymore.”

Fear of loss mixed with relief at life continuing, yet still Moon felt a pang of pain knowing the suffering Bisharp had undergone all the same. She hung her head. Gladion shook his.

“Do you think Bisharp regrets what it did?”

She-

“Do you?”

...no. She didn't.

“There you go. And you came closer to death than anyone else that day. Honestly- a lot of us aren't even sure how you survived.”

She... heard Lillie's voice.

Long was the pause of silence as Gladion processed that.

Before he handed a tablet over to Moon's surprised grasp.

“I'll come check on you later.”

And without further ceremony Gladion swiftly exited the room, Naganadel looking between the doorway the blonde boy walked through and where Moon lay. Then shifting its massive body around the room to block the entrance and curl up around itself. Moon sighed, shaking her head with a smile at the sight, before activating the tablet given to her. Already connected online. Already prepared to make the call. Moon held her finger over the button for a long moment still.

Then pressed it down and the call began.

Dialling...

Dialling...

Dialling...

Connecting.

“Moon!”

Just hearing Lillie's voice lifted Moon's heart, set warmth in her veins and the feeling of recovery in her body continuing on. She smiled for her. Lillie, who'd been prepared for this call by her brother shortly beforehand, felt the rush of emotions racing through her body wash away all the words she'd thought to say. So she just called her name again.

“Moon...”
She heard her.

Lillie stopped, staring at the screen, at Moon's face looking back at her through it. Moon nodded, looking with her brown eyes into Lillie's green own. When she was inside of Necrozma, inside of the light, she heard Lillie's voice. Felt it holding onto her.

Maybe Lillie was the reason she was still alive.

To Moon’s great distress these words immediately made the blonde girl on the other side of the world break into tears.

“Moon you-” struggling through the falling tears, Lillie affixed the girl on the screen with an upset glare, something Moon paled immediately under. Something she never wished to see. “You keep doing this!” Recriminations came swift and deserved. “Always you put yourself at risk for others, thinking that you can make everything better even if it nearly kills you each time! What we did in Ultra Space- that was dangerous enough as it was, but then you immediately ran off after an Ultra Beast again, thinking you could make things better-” she did make things better- “That's not the point! And even now, you ran up to Necrozma to try and save Nebby and got caught up by it instead! What would've happened if you hadn't come back? How do you think I would have felt?”

She... she saved Nebby-

“And what if that killed you?!”

Moon was silent. Lillie continued unabated.

“Having to see that, having to see you run in like that and get devoured by Necrozma, what I felt... Moon, do you even understand what that feeling is like? We- I- I thought you died!”

She remained silent. Lillie did not.

“What you said, to the Kahuna. That you had to get Nebby back because it was your fault all of this happened, that it was your fault I left-” Moon's blood chilled. She... hadn't realised she'd said that in so public a way. If Lillie had heard her then... everyone had. Was she- “Hearing you say that,” Lillie ignored Moon's attempt to ask the question, “hearing you claim my leaving was a reason you had to risk your life, Moon I am incredibly upset with you. About so many things but that- I told you, so many times, that I was doing this for me. Because it was important to me to do so. Are you going to say again that my leaving was because of you? That I didn't make this choice, one of the biggest choices of my life, myself? That you forced me into it? Moon... are you going to say I'm still unable to choose my own way?”

No... she didn't mean... “Moon... I love you, I do. But you can't take responsibility for that. Or deny the choices I made myself. You can't use my leaving as an excuse to risk yourself, or blame yourself for anything I did. And I will not let you use me as an excuse to nearly kill yourself to try and fix something you did not break!”

She... Moon's mind was burning. Lillie's words all inscribing themselves deep within her heart. All the tearing through of Moon's actions, of the guilt she'd used to let herself risk her life, justifying it by saying it was for Lillie, all of that. But also... she...

Lillie said...

she loved her?

Slow came recognition. The widening of Lillie's eyes, the reddening of her pale skin. A hand raising
to her opening mouth. Moon, still staring through the screen, felt her own skin burning bright. Was she-

Moving the screen she held, Lillie brought it closer to her chest. Wrapped her arms around it, as close of a hug to Moon as she could give. Her words, slightly muffled, still came through.

“Thank you. For saving Nebby. Please never ever do something so dangerous again. I don't want to lose you.”

...okay.

 Visitors came and went over the days to follow. Moon's mother, always close by. Gladion and Wicke, each checking in. Jace, delivering the Beast Ball that had held Poipole – Naganadel – before, upgraded by the engineer's own hand. Naganadel could freely exit the device now, and it was registered with the Pokemon League too, meaning Moon could bring this partner there should she wish. She thanked the man deeply for that.

He said it was the least he could do.

The Kahuna of Alola came to see her too, even Nanu, the man providing a lecture for Moon about diving into danger and how that was a real easy way to get killed and leave everyone around her with regrets – a lesson many were hammering into Moon during her stay. Hau came with Hala, and stayed for a while after, chatting with Moon eagerly, the two sharing malasada the young boy had brought along.

Solgaleo, Hau confirmed, had shown up in Iki Town soon after leaving the Aether Paradise behind. Was basically spending all its time there now, mostly sleeping, or wandering around. All the adults were wildly out of sorts about it and all the kids were climbing over and clinging onto the Sunne Pokemon, who seemed fine with their attention. It was a crazy sight. He hoped Moon recovered soon so she could come see.

Moon focused on the black Z-Power Ring still clasped around Hau's wrist.

Was he connected to it?

“...yeah.” Hau nodded, after a long while. “I think... it's holding back what it takes. So it can connect to me with only the barest little. I feel bad again for Talonflame, they keep losing out!”

...was Hau okay?

“...I was really scared, Moon. Don't do that again, okay?”

She'd promised a lot of people already that she wouldn't.

“Me too then.”

...she promised.

Others continued to visit too. Kukui and Kahili and Pitaya. All of the Captains, Mina as well. All checking that Moon was doing okay, each day that passed her recovery improving more and more. Soon enough she was back on her feet, shaky but standing again. Her body settling into the sensation of the connection she and Necrozma now held. Moon was aware of it, that endless rush within her.
Like she now contained the void that had plagued Necrozma so. But it wasn't consuming her. It wasn't hurting her.

Its infinity couldn't overpower her own.

And so she was able to continue on.

“To one and all, all those here and all those watching beyond, let me proudly say: welcome back to the first Alolan Pokemon League!”

With excitement beyond measure Anna returned to the announcer's seat, the commentator's box of the Pokemon League Stadium not yet repaired, but a space made for her, Alexa, and their third to sit and still oversee the League stage down below. Across from them remained the Stadium Torch, the Moltres-born flame within still burning bright. Even after Necrozma's attack that fire hadn't fallen. A blessing of the Legendary Flame Pokemon from a region afar.

A sign that the spirit burning here amongst the hearts of all gathered had yet to go out.

“Though the League Stadium's a little smaller, a little less roomy for everyone than before, all of Alola's still here in spirit, watching from across this region with many more people from regions beyond! Today marks the first match of the League semi-finals, the two battles to determine the finalists of this first Pokemon League! Today we'll be witnessing the match between Hau and Professor Kukui, which absolutely everyone is excited to see! We've already had the match confirmed as a six against six, so without question it'll be an intense one! Joining me, as before, is Alexa – I'm so glad to see you back with us!”

“I'm glad to be back,” Alexa nodded, remembering having to talk her younger sister down from launching herself across the ocean to Alola to check on her and Kahili both. They'd each made it out safely. In the end injuries had been minimal, thanks to the actions of those holding Necrozma's attention during its active time. A miracle, in the end. One of many. “And also glad to be introducing our third for this match! Joining us as additional commentator, welcome back Kahuna Hala!”

“Thank you.” Hala's gruff voice still expressed appreciation well, the roughness of his tone never hiding the kindness it carried too. “It has been... a trying time for so many of us, but I am deeply proud of Alola for so quickly returning to this place. For being ready to witness the final battles of this League. It is a sign of our strong spirit. A good sign indeed.”

“As we can see, the League battlefield looks a little different!” Anna took back over. “We've elected to keep much of the nature that has grown here, clearing the battlefield to a flat field of grass, but leaving as much as we could besides that still! You'll see trees growing around, and even streams of water running through rock pathways set up! Given the battle will be within the barrier entirely, we feel comfortable leaving all the rest of the nature around in place. A strong sign of our resilient regrowth!”

The crowd that was here cheered. Nowhere near the volume of roar that could echo before, the numbers slightly over a third of what had been here prior, but their passion still the same. And all those watching further afield, those gathered across all the cities and towns and villages and settlements of Alola and beyond, they cheered too.

Cheered for what was to come.

“Kahuna Hala, before we begin, can we receive your expectations of this match?”
Long was the pause as Hala put his thoughts in order. Expressed what he had to say. Thought of the sight of waking each morning in Iki Town, stepping outside to exercise with his Pokemon, only to see Solgaleo stretch and rise with the sun too, the Sunne Pokemon turning its brilliant blue eyes upon him from across the town square.

A feeling far too humbling and unsettling to put into words.

“Kukui is unquestionably the stronger Trainer of the two: that is not up for debate.” Hala's words were strong and weighty, as the Kahuna's always were. “Hau does not have the understanding and experience of Kukui's battling style that he did of mine. What he has learned from watching Kukui so far we will see in this battle, and learn just what the extent of my grandson's ability in that field is.”

Another long pause. Long enough for Anna to prompt the Kahuna to continue. Hala breathed out.

“The full strength of Solgaleo we do not know. We do not know how to it Kukui can compare. And we do not know how much of it Hau can bring forth. Kukui's defeat of Tapu Fini was exceptional. If he has truly prepared, and if Hau is unable to properly fight alongside Solgaleo, it will be Kukui's win.”

“It was confirmed Hau would be bringing Solgaleo to the League some days ago, but hearing it again…”

“Watch closely the sight we are to see.”

“We all will.”

Cheers stoked loud and then louder still, as the two competitors for this day emerged from the League staging ground's path. First Kukui, turning to his left, making his way to the western ring. His six Pokemon all ready. He himself ready. It was time.

Then Hau.


Hau, partner of Solgaleo.

The Sunne Pokemon striding by his side.

Through cheers louder and louder Hau walked, the gigantic lion Pokemon walking alongside. As Hau turned to the right, heading to the eastern ring, Solgaleo moved with him, the Legendary Pokemon always staying close. He'd spoken to it, and felt in the Bond they had response. It was no fiercely devouring Bond, nothing draining of him, just taking enough. Enough to keep them connected and no more. Certainly not what this Pokemon must truly need to express its full strength. Hau couldn't help but worry he was going to let it down.

But it was too late for doubts now.

“Trainers at the ready!”

As Hau set foot within the eastern Trainer's circle, Solgaleo lay down, curling around the young boy. Hau chose a Pokeball from his waist, a clear sign that the Pokemon with him was not the one to begin. Kukui, on the battlefield's opposite side, smiled as the barrier rose between them, grasping a Pokeball of his own. Across the world all cheered, celebrating this battle to come. Lillie, in Kanto, let
her voice grow loud, those with her matching her volume with their own.

Moon, her recovery now almost complete, sat with her mother, with Wicke, with Gladion, Jace, and so many others, watching upon the Aether Foundation screen.

And cheered the loudest of them all.

It was time.

“Begin!”

“With the extreme disadvantage Hau has compared to Kukui in battling experience and ability, the very first choice of each Trainer is critical for him to begin! Having seen Kukui's three battles so far, Hau has to make a choice based on what he expects Kukui to use and what would be best in counter to it!”

“A choice that appears to have paid off, with Hau sending out his partner Primarina to face Kukui's own Incineroar!”

Two Pokemon manifested into the battlefield, a short-cut field of grass grown over thick packed earth, staring one another down. On the eastern side before Hau, the Soloist Pokemon Primarina, sea lion mermaid of blue tail, white body, and long aqua hair. Its deep blue eyes opposing those thick yellow and green irised of its foe.

Incineroar, Heel Pokemon, Fire and Dark-type in opposition to Primarina's Water and Fairy own. A disadvantage on every front. But as the giant humanoid feline stretched, muscles rippling beneath red and black striped furred limbs, grey and black furred torso, the belt around its waist surging brightly aflame, neither it nor its partner felt regret in this choice.

This meeting of two raised side-by-side here at the peak ordained.

“It's not as simple as that.” Hala's words brought down the mood of Anna and Alexa quick. “Hau may have the advantage in Typing now, but where Primarina is his oldest and perhaps strongest partner – discounting Solgaleo of course – that Incineroar is notably Kukui's youngest and likely weakest. If Primarina does not handily overcome Incineroar, the amount of strength cost in its defeat will favour Kukui far more than Hau.”

“O-oh.” Anna and Alexa calmed, realising the intensity of this match. The clear difference between its competitors.
Not one moment of its entire length would be easy for Hau in the slightest.

“Primarina!”

“Incineroar!”

“Go!”

The opening notes of Primarina’s song rose with the voice of the crowd, but only those notes were able to form before the Soloist Pokemon was forced into movement, Incineroar rushing it down in a fiery blaze. If the partner of Kukui was to overcome Hau’s in any way at all, it would need to remain in close combat to do so. Kukui knew that. And so did Hau.

A battle over distance the way this began.

The difference in what a person could give to raise a Pokemon changed from person to person. Some could only give the tiniest fraction of strength, and so their Pokemon would grow so slow, even with frequent battling experience. Others could become fountains, able to bestow as much power as a Pokemon was able to pull. This ability grew with age and experience, older Trainers often better able to give strength to Pokemon than those younger, and so the Pokemon they raised grew faster than those with children would. Those the simple logics of this world.

But here at the peak of Alola accepted logic had taken a step back. Kukui, an experienced Trainer with a gift for raising Pokemon and battling alongside them, came as no surprise to have raised that Incineroar before him. The Pokemon that had been the third of three starters offered to Moon and Hau at their Pokemon journey’s beginning just under a year ago. This Pokemon would not have the same skill and experience of Kukui’s oldest partners, but it would still have made the climb to the plateau all of his dwelled upon all the same. Strong, competitively, to the rest of his team. More than powerful enough to fight others here upon this stage. Kukui’s place and pace unquestionable. This something people could understand.

But Hau, Hau was different. Not limitless, like Moon, but with similarity to others still. Others who had risen to the highest of titles, those who appeared across the ages as the greatest of Pokemon Masters. Someone who from the very beginning held an excess of strength to give. Who might still struggle, might still need to grow, but would overcome their trials faster than perhaps any other, and reach the plateau of their abilities at a pace to which none could compare.

Kukui, alongside Guzma and Molayne, were in their mid-teens by the time their growth settled, and the strength they could give their Pokemon found its full shape. Younger Trainers: Acerola, Ilima were he to have spent his focus on Pokemon Battling during those years, and Hapu, the young Kahuna of Poni having found her way to the necessary height via astounding force of will, all carved their names among the greatest too.

Moon had existed at that plateau from the very beginning. There was no limitation upon what she could give, no need for growth in the way she bore her partner’s Bonds. Each Pokemon bound to her would take as much strength as they wished, and grow at a pace only the greatest of Trainers could match. Their experience, her experience, still lacking, but the strength of she and her team still high. That was her truth.

Hau had started at zero, not infinity, and grown at a speed matched only by the most notable of legends. Faster than Ilima and Jace. Faster than Acerola. Faster than Hapu too, the speed at which Hau’s team had swelled and grown was astounding. Perhaps a huge part of his growth was in determination. The desire to match pace with Moon strengthening his focus enough for the power within him to rise. But it was still a truth of the world that to do that, to come this far, Hau himself
must be exceptional all on his own.

Popplio evolved into Brionne faster than even the Litten Kukui had raised to Torracat. Through his continued efforts Kukui helped his partner reach the form of Incineroar first, but Hau still brought about Primarina at a pace only a master Trainer could. The strength he'd brought to this League, the team that stood alongside him, were all symbols of just how far he had come, and how much further he could still go. A true young legend of Alola making his name known.

And yet the funniest part of it all, the simplest little thing, was that by living his life surrounded by legends, raised under his grandfather's eye, and then going out into his journey alongside Moon, Hau had never once noticed that for himself. Was aware of his growth, but never once called it exceptional. Just enough. Enough to keep up.

Enough to make it here.

“Hau is having Primarina maintain its distance, using Water-type techniques for evasion while the Soloist Pokemon continues filling the air with more song-spun bubbles! Though Incineroar's charges are able to break through with minimal drain, the Heel Pokemon is still proving unable to catch hold of its foe!”

“Even with a distinct type-advantage on two fronts, Hau is still playing this fight incredibly cautious! But given Kukui's own relentless push forward, Hau being able to maintain a defensive is an impressive feat all the same!”

“Flamethrower!”

The surge of fire rippling from Incineroar's belt under Kukui's command punched through a wave of bubbles in the air, each bursting into a haze of steam that spread out across the field. The waving pink air of the Misty Terrain technique rose in response, Hau taking the moment to amplify the obscuring effect, but with the air now thick with dense mist and steam both Trainers and Pokemon were left unable to spot the location of the other. A situation oft benefiting the more experienced in a fight.

But there were ways to close such gaps.

Kukui didn't need to hear the announcers say it, they keeping their silence on what he could not see. He didn't need to hear the crowd's voice pitch, those able to watch on Hau's side reacting to his choice. He didn't even particularly need to be thinking of Hau's choices, predicting what the young boy would do. In this moment, with the mist and steam between them so thick, both Pokemon within for a moment unable to see the other, Kukui could just feel it coming. Ah yes, so this was Hau's choice.

Kukui set a Z-Crystal into his Z-Ring and made his own.

“Both Trainers are now performing a Z-Move!”

“Hau is performing the Water-type Z-Pose: either the Waterium or Primarium-Z!”

“Kukui is performing the Dark-type Z-Pose! Either the Darkinium or Incinium-Z!”

“It's the latter,” Hala stated firmly, eyes locked on the battlefield below. “On both counts.”

Primarina and Incineroar. Popplio and Litten. Raised together, as trios of Starter Pokemon so often were. Friends and rivals. Competitors on this stage. Each delighted by the other's strength, and each determined to overcome it. Kukui had suspected this match-up would come. But allowed for it even
with the disadvantage his partner held. No other desired this specific fight as much as it had. He
could not deny that passion.

Nor the strength his partner expressed.

Oceanic Operetta, Water-type technique, signature Z-Move of Primarina. A truly gargantuan mass of
water sung into existence by the Soloist Pokemon, calling even more from the air itself to wrap into
an orb that hung with menace over the field. Moments away from releasing its force.

Malicious Moonsault, Dark-type technique, signature Z-Move of Incineroar. A field of Dark-type
power piercing up through the mist, enhancing Incineroar within it with more and more strength.
Power enough that were it to crash down upon any foe it might be the end.

Power enough to oppose even the greatest set against it.

Into the descending orb of water that was Oceanic Operetta Incineroar leapt, its own body wreathed
in energy pushing that water back. This was a declaration, Kukui knew, that partner of his fighting to
show Primarina its full strength. But he didn't mind that. Such desires weren't all bad.

He couldn't fault its will.

The explosion of water was as the Z-Move always was, forceful rain pouring down upon the
battlefield below, the field of grass swaying and bouncing under the droplets falling across it. But
Incineroar, high up in the air above, Z-Aura fading away, was beyond its scope. Beyond its full
power. Had escaped that attack using its own.

And fell now from on high down upon Primarina below.

Neither Pokemon was so experienced as to bear that much Z-Power and move in the moment after.
There was a moment, a gap, where Incineroar fell and Primarina remained still. Kukui and Hau
already had their commands – the first for Incineroar to land a full attack, the second to once again
pull away and dodge – but still had to wait for the moment their partners recovered, the barest
seconds left to go.

Kukui expected the dodge. Incineroar would use an explosion of flame to change its flying angle and
-crash into Primarina all the same. His partner knew how to do that. They'd land this hit either way.
The only way for Primarina to truly fight back would be to attack into this falling force with its own.
Kukui understood that.

Wondered if Hau did too.

He did.

“Aqua Jet!”

Primarina wreathed in water launched upwards, slamming into the falling Incineroar as the Heel
Pokemon spun into its Darkest Lariat. A technique not particularly effective against a part Fairy-type
foe, but with the falling momentum added...

Well, it didn't matter. The moment contact was made, Primarina crashing into Incineroar, Incineroar
slammed its own claws tight upon its foe. Grappled at last.

Now for the real fight.

This was a battle in which Incineroar excelled best. Even against an opponent so resistant to it, once
locked in close the Heel Pokemon did not relent. Struck and threw its opponent across the field, never letting it have a moment to relax. Hau and Primarina did fight back well, but Incineroar’s passion was afire and the Pokemon unrelenting in its assault. Unwilling to stop until it was made to do so. Forced to bow down. Pushing through attacks of Water and Fairy-type both, it fought, and fought, and fought further still.

Showing its rival just how far it had come.

And demanding they go just as far themself.

This battle between the two did come to an end. Eventually one had no strength left to give, no energy to rise after the battering it had taken. But in return its opponent was truly exhausted too. A fight down to the wire, as it should be. Passion and determination making up for the disadvantage one held. Any of the three, were they to fight, it would be like this. That was simply how it was.

Incineroar smiled, despite no longer being able to rise.

“Incineroar is no longer able to battle!”

To say Primarina was would be a grand statement. It was clear in the way that Pokemon's chest heaved, in the way its head hung, that there was so very little left to give. Hau and Primarina would wait, just a moment, to see Kukui’s next, and then move in response to it. The advantage still his, for the moment, but the result of the next battle – one against a far more powerful member of Kukui’s team – the true determination of Hau and his own team's strength.

Now what would his choice be, to face the full power of the Alolan Ninetales Kukui brought to the field?

“Hau retreats Primarina and sends out Espeon against Kukui’s Ninetales! With neither Pokemon possessing a type-advantage over the other, this will be a battle of skill and technique, favouring Kukui! Let's see how this goes!”

Twice before. Against the Totem Minior partnered to Sophocles. And against Tapu Fini itself. Both times as soon as it appeared the pale blue-white furred Fox Pokemon sent its power out. Started hail and snow falling. A field in which it was at its most dangerous. And this third time too. The appearance, and then the howl and summoning. Did Kukui expect Hau not to see this coming? Or just to be unable to do anything about it?

Neither was true.

“Sunny Day!”

In the wake of the quarter-finals, Hau's grandfather had sent him to visit Asuka, head of the Pokemon Schooling System in Alola, and the opponent of Hala in the first round of this League. Asuka was an expert in teaching many things, battling amongst them, and proved keen to help sharpen Hau for his coming match ahead. In the time both before and after Necrozma's attack, Asuka had trained him. Helped him prepare. And, with a wink and a smile, made available her vast collection of Technical Machines to the youth. Kukui, after all, was a master at teaching Pokemon moves, so her helping Hau's team learn some themselves was just... evening the field.

She grinned and took eagerly to helping Hau decide the best choices for each of his team.

Through the forming snow overhead rays of intensified sunlight burst, incinerating the soft frost into mist that faded quickly away. Solgaleo, still curled around where Hau stood, raised its head and yawned wide, the sun's magnified light reaching it too. Then lowered it again, shifted slightly, and
continued to rest until called.

“Ice Shard!”

“Psychic!”

For the speed of the Ice-type technique Ice Shard, an ability that flung a chunk of ice at immense speed towards a foe, the reaction of Hau and Espeon was exceptional. The red gemstone in the centre of the Sun Pokemon's forehead pulsed vividly, psychic power emanating from it, constricting around the shard of ice stopped just scant inches from the Pokemon's head. Kukui called a second as soon as he realised the first had been blocked.

Slamming its psychic power against that first piece of ice, Espeon shot it back and countered Ninetales's second attack with the two shards shattering against one another in mid-air.

“High skill high cost.” Hala's judgement was harsh, but fair for a stage such as this. A display of such ability – Espeon stopping then countering two Ice Shard attacks an impressive feat indeed – still taking more from the lilac-furred Pokemon than its Ice and Fairy-type foe. The longer this went on the more power Hau and his partner would spend than their opponent. Although...

“Ninetales in Alola live on the snowy slopes of Mount Lanakila, where the sunlight is brightly reflected from the snow itself. Water-type Pokemon suffer the most in magnified sunlight, but even despite being an Ice-type...”

“The heat on the field seems to be troubling Ninetales all the same.”

It was true, Ninetales pawing at the ground a sign of stress, the bright sun more than just bright: hot as well. An environment the Fox Pokemon could not flourish within. Kukui could call for snow again, to try and change things back, but Hau would just call light to follow. The pace was his on that. Pretty impressive, all things considered, a sharp counter to Kukui's partner that he hadn't expected Hau to have. If he'd gotten access to the TM that taught Sunny Day, who knew what else Hau's team might know? Kukui grinned. Time to get even more into this, even more aware of the incredible Trainer standing there before him. Just leaning into his partners' strength wasn't enough. Kukui had to give them the power to go even further beyond!

Now was the time to really mix things up.

Bursting into movement Ninetales breathed hard, a field of mist pouring from the Fox Pokemon's panting mouth, leaving a trail of ice along the ground behind it as it circled Espeon's position. The Sun Pokemon surged forward too, psychic power flickering around its body as Hau prepared for what Ninetales would do. He didn't know, but his instincts told him how to move all the same to best be ready. And what to do to try and stop Kukui before his plan could start.

The first pillar of ice, a statue raised behind Ninetales as it spun around and blasted an Ice Beam across the ground, Espeon grasped at with its psychic powers and tore down, before sending flying after their Fox Pokemon foe. Espeon was spending power quickly, already far more exhausted than Ninetales could be, but to stand up to Kukui, Hau and his partners knew they needed to do such. Burn brighter and greater than even Kukui's far stronger Pokemon could withstand.

A feat only possible by the shared will of a Trainer and Pokemon that trusted one another with all their heart.

But it was naive of Hau to think he was the only one in such a state on this stage.

“Moonblast!”
Admittedly, Hau wasn't giving Kukui any of the room to set up. He'd been aiming for a few ice pillars, preparing the field with these prismatic statues, but given Espeon had already torn down and thrown the one Ninetales had made so far, it looked like Kukui would just need to make do with what he had. For those commentating, it was hard to even consider that Kukui and his partner were able to achieve what they did, and yet it was clear they had all the same. Had it been a gamble of fate, that the way that beam of light would be refracted through the ice would reach Espeon? Or were Kukui and his partner truly that able?

Hard to tell indeed.

However it was, when the Fairy-type beam of energy shot forth from Ninetales and struck the ice, it did more than stop the structure hurled by Espeon's psychic powers towards it. The light of the Moonblast refracted through, splitting into rays coursing over the field, with one striking Espeon all the same. Only a portion of the whole attack, the full power too dispersed, but a portion would still add up. Espeon for a moment stunned by the beam that had reached it in the wake of its own attack.

Enough time for Ninetales to glow with pulsing dark energy as it focused inwards and strengthened its own power further as well.

“That's Nasty Plot,” Hala took charge of identification, “meaning the special attack of Ninetales will have risen significantly. This is a bad situation for Hau.”

Oh it was quite a bit more than that.

Espeon had a technique known as Power Swap, which exchanged the strengthening auras Pokemon could create with one another in a snap. But Kukui, as an expert of Pokemon moves, had to know Hau's partner could do such. This was a dare, a challenge for Hau to try and take such power for his own. What was Kukui's plan to counter that then? How would he punish the attempt? Or were Hau's own doubts enough for Kukui to act on? Well too bad.

Hau decided to go for it without pause all the same.

“Power Swap!”

It required two things. Relative closeness. And a moment where neither was moving. The moment Espeon, recovered from the ray of Moonblast before, charged in, Ninetales pulled back. Hau's intent to thieve that power for his own made clear.

Kukui now the one to wonder, as Anna and Alexa questioned Hau's premature attempt, what plan Hau had to counter his own, and how Hau would execute it to catch him up.

His own mind-game turned swiftly back upon him.

What fun.

Quick Attack narrowed the distance allowing Espeon to come in close. A Dazzling Gleam washed out, Ninetales's nine tails spread out in a wide fan, glowing brilliant white. Though the power washed over Espeon, the Sun Pokemon's psychic energy still managed to maintain the barrier it had raised to block the attack all the same. And now a moment where Ninetales was recovering, and Espeon was able to act. A moment in close together.

Hau called the technique again and this time, this time the aura of power around Ninetales was claimed as Espeon's own.

Pokemon Battles could so often be defined by one single direct attack. So many dodged or nullified
in the moments leading up to that point, so many weakened enough to only scrape, or be turned back against their foes. The grand strategy and back and forth often one of trying to find that perfect attack, with everything else just preamble.

This entire conflict between Espeon and Ninetales, of each attempting to evoke their power while stopping the other's short, came to this moment. This instant in which Espeon pulled a great amount of power from Ninetales's form, and Kukui gave his own command in response. Espeon was in close, and standing still as Ninetales was, for the Power Swap attack to work.

But those conditions worked against it as well.

Both Pokemon performed their attacks, Hau's judgement that the psychic power around Espeon, increased by the strength taken from Ninetales, would be enough. Yet at the very last instant, as Espeon rose to the height of its strength, he envisioned it. What was next to come.

And commanded differently instead.

Espeon glowed brightly, swirling with immense energy. But beneath its feet ice crystallised, as Ninetales's own eyes shone brilliant white. Stand still so close... and the strongest of attacks may fall upon you.

The pillar of ice that was the Sheer Cold attack burst high into the air, encasing Espeon completely within.

An instantaneous and absolute KO.

Kukui knew. That final attack from Espeon, the power wrapped around it suddenly gone, that was Future Sight. A blast of intense – even more than the usual thanks to Power Swap – psychic energy cast forward in time. The judge for this match ruled Espeon defeated, but also that the Sun Pokemon must first be released from the ice before the battle could go on.

Something Ninetales could do, but only after...

The Fox Pokemon glowed with its own Psychic-type ability wrapping around it. It would sense the incoming attack and put it to a stop then and there. Closely the partner of Kukui watched for from where the attack would come, as the last rays of the intensified sunlight from before faded away.

But the Pokemon's sight was not nearly wide-ranging enough to realise before the power manifested and shattered the base of the ice pillar it had created, sending it toppling down towards it.

“Ninetales!”

“...in truth, I cannot fault the viciousness of Hau and his partner's attack. In the way they fight it is clear the strength of the Bond they share, and trust they have in one another, meaning even such risk-taking actions as this are things the two have agreed to do. It cannot be done without a great love between partner and Pokemon all the same.”

“Facing a far more powerful opponent, they gave everything they had to fight back, to a truly impressive degree. I don't think anyone will disagree with that.”

“You can see how impressive it was by the look on Kukui's face.”

Hala's, Anna's, and Alexa's comments played out from the speakers as Espeon was extracted from its ice prison, returned to Hau as his first defeated in this fight. But though Ninetales was still standing, having caught the falling ice pillar with its own psychic power fast enough to escape its full weight,
heavy was the Fox Pokemon breathing. Had been forced to spend far more of its strength than Kukui had anticipated.

A battle far more even than one between a master such as Kukui and a youth such as Hau should ever be able to be.

Another sign so clear of the potential dwelling within that boy.

“What stands out to me is that Hau is still going strong.” Anna made this observation as Kukui waited for Hau’s choice, the luxury now his to retreat his partner and send out another to counter Hau’s own. “He and Kukui both have already used their Z-Moves, and the battle since then has already been so intense. Look at him on the screen. He's still perfectly calm. You'd think there'd at least be a little wear on him by now.”

“Has there ever been?” Alexa added to the point. “Hau used a Z-Move in the first round facing Riley, and stayed in the competitor's seats for the rest of the day after. In the second round he used a Z-Move in the opening match against Hapu, and kept going fine after that too. And he used a Z-Move in the middle of his battle with you, Hala, and didn't stop after that either. It seems like... they don't wear him out at all?”

“He's not like-”

“He isn’t.” Hala's statement was absolute, shutting down all discussion on the topic as soon as it arose. He knew without question that Hau did feel his Bonds, did feel each Z-Move's drain. He could be worn down in the way Moon could not. But also Hala knew that Hau had pushed so hard to bear that weight all the same. Was someone who had faced every challenge of this world and given his all to meet each of them and grow.

“He is simply strong.”

Raichu came next, the Electric and Psychic-type Alolan Mouse Pokemon immediately rising high up into the air, riding upon its thunderbolt tail. Kukui retreated Ninetales as expected, sending his Midday Lycanroc out to the field. The initial plan had been Magnezone, who would have been so hard to harm by the Mouse Pokemon's majority techniques but... if Hau had gained access to any decent TM collection, there was a danger of attacks Kukui could not be prepared for. Lycanroc, fast, strong, and with a number of Dark-type attacks of its own, was the best counter here.

Raichu wasted no time in sending Thunderbolts raining down upon its foe.

“Again we see the impressive speed and manoeuvrability of Kukui's partner Lycanroc, the Wolf Pokemon easily able to traverse vertical surfaces using a combination of its more movement-oriented techniques!”

“Hau's Raichu is keeping to the centre of the battlefield, making it the hardest for Lycanroc to reach it, but also for Raichu's own attacks to make it back to Lycanroc itself!”

Electrical bolts exploded blasted rocks, the strongest long-range technique of Lycanroc still falling short. It was a Pokemon that excelled in short-range combat, and with Raichu using its electrical abilities alongside its psychic powers to suspend itself so high in the air, it held a strong defensive position in this fight.

Although even as Lycanroc slowed its pace, it was still quick enough to dodge each attack Raichu sent out.

“If Kukui holds the defensive, Raichu will spend more energy than Lycanroc will.” Hala continued
his analysis. “He's baiting out Hau's next attack to counter it, rather than attempting to reach Raichu as it is right now.”

For the unknowns that Pokemon still held, Kukui would be cautious. Hau had already proven dangerously quick-witted in all his Pokemon Battles thus far. Better to give him the freedom to act and counter it, than force Hau into those instantaneous situations he seemed to make shine.

Kukui's catalogue of what he expected from the Mouse Pokemon still didn't include what it did next.

Raichu had learned two techniques beyond its natural scope before this League began. Magnet Rise – to use its electrical power to maintain its height in the air, far beyond most foes' attacks – and Telekinesis – which did similar to an opponent, suspending them in the air and making them vulnerable to many more. Two more, thanks to Asuka, had been added to the Mouse Pokemon's repertoire. One that Kukui had rightly feared, the Fighting-type technique Focus Blast dangerously threatening to many of the Professor's team.

The fourth, which Raichu with the freedom to act now made use of, Kukui struggled to neither grit his teeth nor grin to see. Oh, that's a fun choice.

Hau was an intense opponent indeed.

By the power of the Water-type technique Rain Dance, storm clouds now formed overhead. Rain fell quick, an immediate pelting spray across the field below, swathes torn through the grass by the battle so far. Lycanroc, shaking its heavy fur coat, made a displeased growl to be caught in such a squall. But Kukui's focus kept his partner's locked on.

It was about to get much rougher than before.

“Thunder!”

With the clouds billowing overhead, the Electric-type attack summoned by Raichu fell faster and harder than it could ever on its own. Lycanroc's slam of its paws upon the ground, raising spires of rock through the Stone Edge technique, blocked the first bolt, electricity exploding through the pillar raised, but swiftly and easily did Raichu summon another. Given the freedom to act the Mouse Pokemon had created a most favourable situation indeed.

Kukui's bet, that freedom was something Moon made better use of and pressure Hau, had fallen short. That young Trainer was able to use any advantage as his own.

Kukui really, really liked that.

“Okay Lycanroc let's speed up!”

Accelerock blitzed beyond Raichu's line of sight.

By the time the Mouse Pokemon spotted where its opponent had moved, the wave of rock boulders that was the attack Rock Slide were already bearing down upon it.

Raichu blew them away with another Thunder cutting through the attack.

But using Accelerock into Rock Climb this time, Lycanroc quickly leapt from stone to stone to climb high up into the air.

So close now to its foe.
“Psychic!”

“Crunch!”

The projected Dark-type attack from Lycanroc would do the same as Olivia and Plumeria had done. Tear through any Psychic-type power reaching out to it. But Hau had expected that much too. Skipped trying to push Lycanroc back. As the Crunch attack from the Wolf Pokemon caught Hau's partner in full, a Psychic-type blast slammed down upon Lycanroc from above. Raichu, the powers suspending it in the air disrupted, fell. So did Lycanroc. Both sent falling after taking each's attack.

Hau's partner drew its arms together and manifested the move Kukui had feared all along.

“Focus Blast!”

Rapid techniques incurred greater cost. The array Lycanroc had used to catch hold of Raichu, the cost was now being paid as it fell unable to stop itself. Unable to stop the Fighting-type blast Raichu formed and slammed into it, sending the Wolf Pokemon flying all the way through the air into the barrier wall ringing the battlefield.

How much had Hau learned from Moon? How much had she learned from him? The two of them, they both did this, took those riskiest of strategies to land the greatest of blows against superior powers. The way Hau fought here, pushed to his limit, mirrored Moon's style far more than the way he had faced Hala before. Was that an adaptation to a foe Hau couldn't predict the same way? Or a closer look at the way the youth himself ran wild?

Behind the cheers of the crowd ringing this stage, many were finding their expectations of Hau's strength rising moment by moment all the same.

He was good.

“Rock Climb!”

But Kukui was still better.

Spinning even as it was hurled through the air Lycanroc flipped itself around, ending with all four of its legs pressed against the barrier wall, enabling the Wolf Pokemon to launch itself off in rebound with a loud howl of intent. Accelerating as it hit the ground into Accelerock, Hau's command for Raichu to recover itself was not enough to stop Kukui's partner slamming his own against the barrier wall opposite where it had just been. Hau's strategy and determination was incredible, but the raw power he faced still a measure too far. Lycanroc pushed a paw against Raichu's face and the Mouse Pokemon knew full well if it did a thing it would receive a most punishing attack in return.

Hau left accepting the judgement that this partner of his was done.

“...Kahuna Hala?”

“...he is doing as well as he could be for this situation. Perhaps better than anyone could expect. But the truth is still this: in power, in experience, in ability, in every aspect there could be, Hau is the weaker of these two. This is not a truth that can be changed at this time.”

Maybe someday, were the words Hala spoke silently, maybe one day in the future Hau would be the stronger of these two. But for now it was still Kukui. Kukui, who was one of Alola's strongest without question. Kukui, who could battle any Kahuna to a standstill when he went all out. Kukui, who had defeated Tapu Fini so effectively before. This battle really would come down to just what Hau and Solgaleo could do.
But as Hau sent Golisopod out next, his intent to battle on with everything else he had first was clear.

His determination something none could fault him for.

“...” Kukui kept Lycanroc on the field. The battle against Raichu, it had taken more from his partner than he would have liked. To face Solgaleo itself, Kukui would rather as many of his Pokemon be as fresh as they could be. Besides Golisopod here, Hau had an exhausted Primarina and his Pangoro left. Could Kukui with Lycanroc and Ninetales defeat those two and force Solgaleo to rise? Maybe.

...

That it was only a maybe made Kukui smile wide. He'd made this League to celebrate Alola's greatest Trainers at the peak. And here he was with one who would be among the greatest of them all.

How could he not smile?

“First Impression!”

“Accelerock!”

Golisopod hit first, surging through the last drops of rain Raichu had summoned before to strike with claws outstretched and catch Lycanroc's own charge. The moment slowed down to a tableau, the hulking Hard Scale partner of Hau holding the Wolf Pokemon partner of Kukui up in the air, Lycanroc caught between its claws but the arm outstretching those claws still shaking hard. The force from Accelerock still having made its way through Golisopod's form.

...

This would be quick and brutal.

“Liquidation!”

“Stone Edge!”

Using its forepaws Lycanroc pushed itself back from Golisopod, flipping through the air and landing with those same paws upon the ground, sending the pulse of Rock-type energy down into the earth and summoning those piercing spines of stone.

With water bursting and wrapping into the shape of a blade from its silver shell, Golisopod slashed quick, cutting through the jagged Stone Edge to pursue its Rock-type foe. The ground shifted, upset by the disrupting attack bursting from it. Lycanroc took this opportunity to form and send more rocks flying towards its foe.

Golisopod, suddenly wreathed in Dark-type power, immediately closed the distance and Sucker Punched the Wolf Pokemon directly in the face.

The blasts of Rock Slide still exploding hard across its body.

The Hard Scale Pokemon falling back a moment's step.

And Lycanroc slamming its paws down again, one more Stone Edge summoned.

Hau relied upon the technique his partner had learned to help them go further still.

“Drill Run!”
The spinning vortex of Ground-type energy surrounding Golisopod punctured quickly through Lycanroc's Stone Edge, the type-advantage allowing the attack to pierce through. At this close range Lycanroc could not avoid suffering such, Golisopod slamming into it again. And that one hurt too. Golisopod had followed on from Raichu well in hammering Kukui’s oldest partner hard. Alright then.

“Thunder Fang.”

Grimsley, watching closely from the competitor's stands, found himself delighted that Hau answered Kukui's surprise electric technique as eagerly as Kahili had his own.

Again a quick Sucker Punch, but this time with water bursting from between Golisopod's scales, the same way it had used that ability to hold back Necrozma before. The form of a technique the Hard Scale Pokemon was developing all on its own – one the partners of Guzma and Riley had shown too. It didn't stop Lycanroc's electric bite. Made it worse, honestly, the electricity surging through the water coating the Golisopod's fist. But that fist, those claws, colliding with Lycanroc and coating it in water too, meant it was vulnerable too.

When that electricity flowed, it flowed through the both of them.

Enough to bring this to a close.

Lycanroc defeated. And Golisopod retreated, the damage taken enough to push it over the edge. By the specific rules of this Pokemon League, a Pokemon retreating before sixty seconds had passed by its own choice was the equivalent of a forfeit. The retreat-prone Golisopod again a risky choice in such battles, their significant power the reward for bringing such to a fight.

It was hard to say that what Golisopod did achieve, laying low the mighty Lycanroc of Kukui, was anything worthy of regret.

Hau's next choice Primarina. Kukui's Ninetales. Both Pokemon having spent much stamina before, meaning that the advantage was still Kukui's in this fight. But no sign of distress or concern showed on Hau's face. Only determination still. Was it because of the Legendary Pokemon still curled about him, the Sunne Pokemon Solgaleo awaiting its turn to fight? Or was this just Hau's own nature, doing the best with the five Pokemon he had raised to this point?

Ask him, and he'd say neither.

He was simply doing the best that he could.

“Aqua Jet!”

“Ice Shard!”

The wrapping of water around Primarina as it charged did not stop the chunk of ice hurled towards it, but prevented it from stopping Primarina itself, the Soloist Pokemon closing the distance and slamming into its Ninetales foe.

“Moon-” “-Blast!”

The surge of Fairy-type energy from both Pokemon slammed into one another, erupting into a great nova of force washing over the pair.

“Sparkling Aria!”
“Blizzard!”

Even so close to one another, each still summoned an attack that flowed around them. Bubbles manifested in a great wave from Primarina, turned into frozen orbs falling from the sky by Ninetales’s response. The globes shattering upon impact, and raining down upon Soloist and Fox both. Both Pokemon burning down the last of their strength so fast. If each only had one last proper technique to unleash...

Primarina’s did not come as Ninetales’s eyes shone once more, and the Fox Pokemon expressed its strongest Psychic-type attack.

The Extrasensory of Ninetales, an invisible force that wrapped around and stopped one's foe cold, as effective against Primarina as it had been from Ryuki’s Drampa against Plumeria’s Toxapex before.

Hau knew. Before the attack even relented, the gap in which a Pokemon could act to try and escape it a second time, he knew that this was done. Primarina had nothing left to give. The Soloist Pokemon wavered and fell once released from Ninetales’s attack. So that was that. Hau called his partner back. Just one left now.

One left before...

The Daunting Pokemon Pangoro, Fighting and Dark-type partner of Hau, had evolved from a Pancham during the months of Hau’s own training, with the aid of Grimsley as the Pokemon required Dark-type partners alongside it to take this form. She was tall, almost seven full feet, and intimidating to gaze upon, but still, Hau knew, a gentle soul at heart. Oh she fought furiously as she needed to, but equally Hau had watched the giant muscular ursid laze about Iki Town, children playing dares to approach the Daunting Pokemon and she playing up her part by equally acting oblivious and faux ferocious.

She was kind, and felt great affection for Hau who had taken care of her after the Aether Foundation’s rehabilitation failed. And so with that will inside her, she intended to give her all here on this stage.

Kukui quick to call a Moonblast from Ninetales, the Fairy-type attack something exceptionally dangerous to a Fighting and Dark-type foe.

Hau quicker to order Bullet Punch and Pangoro to respond, crossing the distance and sinking a fist coated by Steel-type power into the Ice and Fairy-type Pokemon before it.

If Fairy was so dangerous a type to Pangoro, Steel was equally so to Ninetales.

An immediate and decisive KO.

Whoof, Kukui grinned, fair counterpoint. Look at Hau, he really had come so far over the past year. So far it was almost hard to believe. Moon was one thing, but Hau was... he was exceptional too. Without question. Choosing his next Pokemon, Kukui nodded with his smile going nowhere. Yeah.

Hau was really something else.

Asuka’s recommendations for Pangoro, when it came to Technical Machines, were abilities that could cover both its weaknesses in type and range. Here and now, Hau displayed what he’d helped his partner learn to wield, as Pangoro stomped a foot down hard and summoned up a ring of stones, the rocks orbiting her body before shooting high into the sky. At the very least with this he'd give that Braviary pause!
Second oldest of his partners, a Pokemon of similar strength and experience to Lycanroc herself, the Valiant Braviary of Kukui showed no concern in diving through the rising stones, spinning its body to break on through, and closing the distance on Pangoro without fear.

Both Pokemon entering this battle ones with great strength to their name – and little interest in defense – once the distance was gone there was nothing left to do but give it their all. Both their partners focusing to the absolute. Both providing the strength they needed to fight. So fight they did.

Fight until it was done.

“There isn't a situation in which the result would not have been this.” Hala remained harsh, but honest. “There was not one advantage Pangoro held over Braviary. She never could have won.”

“So that's that then,” Anna felt the excitement in her chest swell. Now... “With five of his own Pokemon, Hau has defeated three of Kukui's in an extended and intense battle! From everything we've seen at this League so far, that is an incredible feat! And for a Trainer of only a year's experience... more amazing than I can express!”

The roar of the crowd held passion and support immeasurable. Hau had given his all and so many had cheered for him. Wanted to see him do his best. He had not disappointed them. And now...

“No...” Hala said it and that alone. Hau, with Pangoro returned, nodded. Okay then.

“Please.”

By the rules of this Pokemon League, the only way for a Pokemon to enter a battle was through a League Standard Pokeball. Despite being able to enter the battlefield on its own even with the barrier raised, to fight beside Hau Solgaleo had to accept that requirement too. Rising slowly to its feet, the Sunne Pokemon stretched, its massive form inspiring. A Legendary Pokemon of the highest stage.

Raising the Pokeball his grandfather had given him, the bright red and decorated Cherish Ball, Hau activated it and called Solgaleo to him. The beam of red, the bright flash, pulled the Sunne Pokemon willingly within. For the length of time it would join Hau in this fight, Solgaleo had accepted to be bound by such. But Hau knew, knew in his core, that this was not something for life. Solgaleo was spending this moment with him, but would move on soon enough. He could feel that message from the giant Pokemon at his side loud and clear. But for this moment, while they were together, let them give it their all all the same. That was his desire. And that was Solgaleo's too.

Hau pointed the Cherish Ball forward.

“Solgaleo... I choose you!”

“To win, Hau and Solgaleo must defeat three of Kukui's Pokemon. Or perhaps, Kukui and three of his Pokemon must defeat Hau and Solgaleo to win! Even knowing that Solgaleo is a Legendary Pokemon of the highest level, I still can't predict how this battle will go!”

“No-one can...” Hala himself didn't know. Didn't know whether the Bond Hau and Solgaleo shared in this fight would be enough for the Sunne Pokemon to express even a fraction of its full strength. Hau had already told him Solgaleo was holding its Bond back so Hau could carry it. The Legendary Pokemon of Alola clearly desiring this connection even as it hampered its strength. What would this be...

Alexa, spotting the Kahuna of Melemele's knuckles tense upon his legs, smiled at the clear care and focus Hala was giving to his grandson on the stage below. Then turned her eyes back to the battlefield too.
It was time for the ultimate show.

Solgaleo, to Kukui's understanding, was a Psychic and Steel-type Pokemon. Incineroar would have been the best match of all the Professor's team, but he had been unwilling to deny the wish of that Pokemon to fight its fellow in the beginning. He couldn't reject that.

Lycanroc and Ninetales would have been terrible matches, so spending their strength up to this point was fine. Braviary could use the same attack it had used to bring down Molayne's Metagross, the Ghost-type Shadow Claw, while Snorlax's Earthquake and Crunch would do the best damage Kukui's team could. Magnézone was the most defensive of Kukui's remaining Pokemon to face Solgaleo, but that was only dependant on Solgaleo's active types. If it had a Fire-type move for example – something Kukui wouldn't put past the solar lion before him – that would just ruin his partner's day.

How to use the power he did have to bring this Sunne Pokemon down. How to safely learn the way it fought, the techniques it knew, and plan around and overcome them. How to defeat one of the greatest legends of Alola itself on this stage. All of these things Kukui was focusing on, the smile on his face growing wilder and wilder by the second. His heart was pounding. This rush...

This battle at the peak truly was the ultimate high.

Hau's heart pounded too, but not for the same excitement. He could feel it. Feel his blood pulsing through his veins, his skin burning hot. Solgaleo needed more. For this fight, it required more. At rest it took less than what Hau had given to maintain Talonflame. Now it was taking as much, an equal burden. But if Hau had any more to give... he was breathing heavy. Focusing, but feeling the intensity too. To battle alongside Solgaleo, he had to be more than this. More than just a source of strength the Legendary Pokemon was cautious of tapping into. He had to be its partner.

He had to be there with it in this fight!

“Go!”

It was slow to begin. The heavy footsteps of Solgaleo, the gigantic Pokemon moving ponderously forward, ominous yet not terrifying. Comparing Solgaleo as it strode across the battlefield now to how it warred with the Lunala-subsumed Necrozma before... it was far less to behold. Kukui would not be surprised, not in the least, if the demand of this Legendary Pokemon upon Hau was so much as to restrain them both. But he also would not allow himself to doubt the potential of this boy before him. He needed to think as if he were facing the full strength of the Legendary Emissary of the Sun itself. The Pokemon that, alongside Lunala, had laid the four Tapu low so many centuries ago.

He wouldn't give it any less than everything he could.

“Braviary!”

The attacks of Braviary came with a speed and mercilessness that awed, the Valiant Pokemon shifting across the battlefield with perfect precision, beats of its wings changing the direction of its movement alongside spirals of wind summoned to bear it aloft. In moments the Pokemon could attack at countless points across its gigantic steel-bodied foe, the ghostly energy of Shadow Claw in Braviary's talons sinking in each time. Hau could feel it, his partner's grumbling as this rain of attacks scraped across it time and time again. The wish for Solgaleo to fight back.

But... could he...

“Hold back!”
Kukui's order Braviary followed in an instant, its wings beating once sending a wash of wind across Solgaleo's face as the Valiant Pokemon pulled back to the barrier wall. The white bodied lion growled, tail whipping through the air with displeasure, the slight sheen to its body fading away. The reflective strength that would counter-attack a foe far harder than they struck it going to waste. Kukui spotting such in the Sunne Pokemon's movements. He was sharp.

Dangerous.

“A counter move...” Hala considered it. “But made so silently, I would say it chose to do that itself.”

It had. Hau had an understanding of some of the Sunne Pokemon's powers. It had revealed a measure to him in their short time together, Hau cataloguing each with the Pokedex he had – alas Rotom-less compared to Moon's own. Solgaleo had immensely powerful physical attacks, of a whole variety of types, and could teleport with ease as well. And when it roared... all those things took strength. Hau, feeling his partner's intent burning, knew he paled to that fire. How could he compare to the sun? Solgaleo snapped and raised a paw to swat at Braviary, but could not match the partner linked so deeply to Kukui opposite. How could Hau compare to any of this?

He still didn't feel like he belonged.

He'd spent so long chasing behind Moon. Admiring her incredible self, doing his best to keep pace with her. That he had, that that feat was so astounding a thing, had never settled within him. That he was here, and the others were Kukui, Ryuki, and Moon, Hau felt sure he did not belong. Could not parse how far he had come, even after defeating his grandfather before. In the end, if asked, he'd say he'd just done his best to match Moon's pace. But now she was behind him, and he was tasked to complete his semi-final match first. How could he move forward without knowing she would too? Doubts, weighing heavier with the amount Solgaleo asked and the little Hau could give, dragged him down further still.

To come to a place as high as this and still feel such, Hau...

“Don't give up!”

The cheer was from no one person in particular. No individual Hau knew. Just someone, out there in the crowd, seeing Hau's struggle and raising their voice to be heard. Just one, for a moment.

Then many more in the moments to follow.

“Go Hau!”

“You can do it!”

“Give it your best!”

“Show us!”

“No holding back!”

...no holding back.

Kukui felt it. The quiver in the air, the burning shine racing across Solgaleo's body as Hau's head rose. The almost shine to that young boy's eyes, as he met the Pokemon before him's will with all he had. No holding back. That promise. That absolute intent. If he didn't give it everything, everything he could do, he'd betray those words. Words not just made to Moon. Not just a promise to keep up with her. Made to himself as well.
Hau who was a Pokemon Trainer. Hau who wanted to one day be Kahuna. Hau who was part of Alola, and loved Alola with all he had. He'd come this far not just chasing Moon. Not just keeping up. He'd done it because Alola was with him and had helped him reach this height. And Alola was calling for him to go further still.

He would.

“Sunsteel. Strike.”

Solgaleo vanished. The teleportation that moved it unseen through space an aspect of the Sunne Pokemon's own will. How quickly it appeared in the air above, Braviary's most recent attack sailing through where the steel lion had just been. But that was okay. It would be back in just a moment more.

Wreathed in Steel-type energy Solgaleo slammed down upon its foe.

Absolute.

Kukui's grin stayed wide, Braviary having just escaped that downwards strike, unleashing a furious Superpower in response at this close range. Effective. But Solgaleo was still in motion. Swung its dodged paw fast enough to collect the Valiant Pokemon all the same and send it hurtling through the air, Solgaleo turning after to face it. Hau wished its next attack. Glowing strong, the Sunne Pokemon's crest mane shone bright.

A greater Flash Cannon than perhaps any had seen before.

“In a few rapid movements Solgaleo brings Braviary down!” Anna's excitement was in overdrive now, witnessing a Legendary Pokemon of the highest standing in action. “Hau and Solgaleo are in sync now, and Kukui's down to just two partners left! What can he do?”

Much, Hala knew. Hau was doing as he always did. Burning bright, shining like the sun himself. His grandson could not do this for long. His adrenaline, his determination, his peerless intent, were maintaining the power of Solgaleo, but for how long? Long enough to do this? Hala wondered that.

Kukui did too.

“Magnezone!”

He could tell. Any Trainer with experience could. Hau was pushing himself. That by pushing himself he could maintain the strength of Solgaleo, this much power at least, was another line in the legend of this youth of Alola, a young man who would one day be one of the world's greatest without fail, but still a sign that this could not last for long.

If Magnezone, who was already wrapping a barrier of force around itself as it ascended into the air, could hold back Solgaleo just long enough... well it wasn't the most gallant of methods, but a battle here was fought by giving everything one could to win. Sometimes that meant a strategy less noble and more efficient.

Kukui wouldn't listen to anyone blaming him for choosing such to stand up to a Legendary Pokemon like this.

“Flare Blitz!”

Ah.
Kukui knew that technique, the Fire-type attack Hau had announced. Of course he did, his Incineroar used it often itself. So Kukui knew the flames lighting around Solgaleo, and the momentary posture as it prepared to leap. The Sunne Pokemon would surge through the air and slam into Magnezone and do just an exceptional amount of damage bringing this match to all but a close. Unless Kukui did something about it.

Don't falter now.

“Charge up!”

The electricity around Magnezone intensified, the Magnet Area Pokemon pulling together more strength. The fact was, even creating more barriers, it wouldn't be able to stop Solgaleo's charge. Kukui knew that in his heart of hearts. And Magnezone was not so speedy as to evade this either. So when Solgaleo launched, surging through the air wreathed in flame, the partner of Kukui did not evade it. Braced itself and braved the fire, electricity strengthening still. Solgaleo slammed Magnezone hard against the barrier wall, the flames around the Sunne Pokemon washing across its foe, all Magnezone could do just barely maintaining a sliver of strength.

But it did, for that was its nature, and with an opponent so close and so much power built in response...

“Zap Cannon!”

There was no way its counter could fail.

Hau could feel it. Feel himself faltering already. And that electricity racing through Solgaleo, even as a Legendary Pokemon it still felt it. Still slowed from the jolting energy caught within its form. This was bad. And Magnezone was already charging up another shot.

If Hau couldn't give more... if his partner couldn't do more... he'd let it down here and now. It and so many others.

So not! Until! They were done!

The roar of Solgaleo came with its crest mane shining so bright once more, a weaker Flash Cannon than the last but Magnezone having taken so much more damage before it than Braviary had before. Still enough to catch the charging Magnet Area Pokemon and cause it to fall from the air.

But the cameras focused on Hau, they could clearly see the sweat beaded on his skin, the heavy breaths he was taking. This was Bond Strain, an intense form of it too. He couldn't keep this up. Not for long. And against Kukui's last Pokemon, the Sleeping Pokemon Snorlax again rising enthusiastically to its feet, how much could be done?

It was still so close.

The partner of Kukui could feel his passion. Upon this stage he had created, with this much energy in Kukui's heart, even the usually lax Snorlax felt it had to move. Had to answer Kukui's will. Rising to its full height, Solgaleo still towering over it, Snorlax raised a leg as Kukui did too. Again, they'd stomp down and send out their strength.

Again they'd declare they were here to win!

Hau knew the attack was coming and thus Solgaleo did too. Vanished again, another Teleport, appearing quickly overhead as the Ground-type attack Earthquake cracked through the field. But the electricity crackling through its body held the Sunne Pokemon still after. Gave Snorlax the freedom
to launch itself upwards, mouth projecting the Dark-type energy that made up the attack Crunch. And when it bit down Solgaleo roared loud. A powerful blow indeed. Hau could feel it.

He was fading.

Ultimately, even with an opponent using a super-effective attack upon it, Solgaleo would not be defeated by this. It was not Solgaleo this attack was to beat.

But Hau had so little left to give. Was still standing, as Solgaleo raised a paw to slam upon the Pokemon latched onto it, but standing barely. As soon as he fell the battle would be pronounced. If a Trainer was unable to continue... that was a means for defeat too. Kukui, watching Hau closely, considered this victory he was claiming. Not the best he had ever had, but he'd promised himself and all others he would give nothing less than his all. As Snorlax continued to occupy Solgaleo, the Sunne Pokemon still dealing with the effects of Magnezone's attack before, Kukui knew it was all but over.

Barely anything left.

“Attack.”

Hau mumbled it, vision blurring, and Solgaleo's eyes shone. Swung a paw around again, this time the Sunne Pokemon manifesting Fighting-type force. Struck a blow deeply powerful upon its Snorlax foe. Not enough, not yet enough, but Kukui felt his heart seize. One... no two more of those and...

Hau swayed, but stomped a foot down hard. Focused on the Bond he held. Still there.

“Attack.”

Only he knew he had said it. Only he and Solgaleo. The Sunne Pokemon attacked again. That same strike, Snorlax still holding tight. At the height it had jumped to latch onto Solgaleo in the air, falling would be too dangerous now. Kukui had to bank on Snorlax's grasp of Solgaleo, the jaws of Crunch clamped on, being enough. But...

The crowd held their gasp. Hau was standing there immobile. The two Pokemon locked in the air. None speaking at all. This moment. This moment.

This... mom... ent...

Moon, still in the Aether Paradise, watching this battle on the screen, roared out at a volume that shocked all those around her to hear.

Hau's eyes slammed open as he matched her call loud.

“Attack!”

Solgaleo, one mighty paw raised, electricity still crackling around its form, felt pleased within.

Then swung that paw down, connected the Fighting-type blow with Snorlax's head, and sent the Sleeping Pokemon plummeting into the battlefield below.

The seconds passed for Hau longer than could be believed. The length of time he forced himself to stand, to watch for the judge, to listen for the call. To feel the Bond connecting him to Solgaleo lessen its strain, and the sensation of the Sunne Pokemon's approval reaching his heart. But not until the call did Hau let go. Not until those words.
Only then could he stop.

“The winner is: Hau!”

The tension leaving his body along with his grasp on consciousness, Hau dropped and sagged against the body of Solgaleo, the Legendary Pokemon teleporting from the battlefield to his side and supporting him with its form. He had done well.

He'd kept his promise to them all.

To the final stage of this Pokemon League he'd go on.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I know I *SAID* five chapters before, but as I got to the end point of this one, with one more full battle ahead, I knew I had to split it here. Sun and Moon - Part Two, which will cover the second half of the league semi-finals, will be the next chapter now. Then the final two. I don't see that changing. We're still on pace.

I'm still going strong.

At the end of the Sun and Moon Pokemon League, the player character battles Kukui, who has declared that he's the last challenge before someone can become champion. But at the end of the Ultra Sun and Moon League, the player battles Hau, who made it there first. Logically to me, that means Hau beat Kukui on the way there. That is... an astounding feat even in the game itself, and I'm so proud of Hau for doing that. That was why Hau vs Kukui in Eldritch was always going to happen. He did it in the games to reach the top, and I am nothing if not going to take every piece of the games I like that I can. I hope you cheered for him making it here. Even being as incredible as he is, an equal to the other legendary trainers that would be protagonists of other games, Hau faced astounding challenges. But he did make it. I'm proud of him.

For all those reading, thank you so much, I hope you enjoyed this chapter. If you want to help support Eldritch, you can share either the twitter or tumblr link below, or create your own on any other social media. Or even just share with a friend! Every little bit helps.

twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
tumblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

The second half of what this chapter was initially intended to be will arrive soon enough, please look forward to it. We're still on our way. The ending is in sight.

I'll see you again soon.
Loud were the cries of the Pokemon, Moon quickly finding herself overwhelmed, swarmed by the many living across the Poke Pelago – the small collection of islands closely dotted together to the north-east of Akala's shore.

She'd known it would be this way: even circling overhead atop Naganadel – this the first day Moon was able to take her leave from the Aether Foundation's care – she could see her Pokemon gathering to greet her. But she didn't shy from facing them. Didn't turn away from apologising to them as she knew she had to do. Her decision, choosing to face Necrozma despite knowing the danger that Pokemon possessed, had affected far more than just her alone. She understood that now. And would take responsibility for her act.

But by the time the mass of Pokemon had curled around, latched onto, and generally settled as close to her as they could, even Moon found herself feeling like this was a bit much.

Mohn laughed at the sight of her.

"It's fair punishment," the blonde-haired man observed, standing a distance back from the mass of Pokemon packed tight around their beloved partner. "At the time you were gone... well, you owe them this without question, Moon."

She understood, came the voice from beneath Decidueye's wings, her longest-bound partner having managed to wrap herself completely around Moon. She was sorry. Mohn nodded at that, turning his attention to one of the few Pokemon holding back. During Necrozma's assault, the Rotom-dex given to Moon at the start of her journey had been with her mother, unable to be present while Moon was on the battlefield herself. And in the aftermath, Gladion had brought it along with the rest of Moon's Pokemon here. The Rotom-inhabited Pokedex seemed happy watching over the many Pokemon and cataloguing them, and had proven an enjoyable conversationalist for Mohn. But watching it fly through the air to go back to Moon's side, reporting its observations happily to her of the days it had spent here, Mohn nodded his head again. That was a better sight.

That was how things should be.

Where was Nebby? And... Bisharp.

The Pokemon around Moon began to scatter, Milotic uncoiling from around Sylveon and Decidueye pressed tightest to her, Salamence and Volcarona amongst the many others shifting back as well. Seeing them all again meant so much to Moon: this the longest time they had spent apart since first they partnered together. But...

A single Pokemon stood before Moon now, the damage it had taken clear. Pokemon Centers could go so far in healing wounds, curing sicknesses, but some things were beyond even such wondrous
technology. The shattering of so much of the metal that made up Bisharp, softened by the heat and broken by the gravity of Ultra Necrozma, had taken all the sharpness from its movements. It stood, it moved, but it was so, so obvious that it could not move the way it had before again. It could not fight that way again.

Moon pushed forward, her Pokemon giving way, taking halting steps to approach the Pokemon that had suffered so much fighting to avenge her loss. She was sorry. She was so, so-

The soft touch of Bisharp’s hand, raised and placed atop her head, easily brought Moon to her knees. Moving slowly, bending a single knee to lower itself down, the Sword Blade Pokemon brought its head forward to Moon's, its smooth skull – blade broken the day it and Moon met – pressing against her forehead. She felt no regret from their Bond. No mourning of this act or result. Simply acknowledgement. She was back.

She was.

Then loud came the cry, the echoing call that reached across the many islands of the Pelago, tied together by the efforts of the many Pokemon gathered in this place. The voice of Nebby, Lunala, Legendary Emissary of the Moon. Raising her head, blinking through tears, Moon looked up into the clear sky above, sunlight streaming down upon her, blocked for a moment by a shadow soaring overhead.

Then Nebby descended, a sharp dive that sent wind washing out over those below, the Moone Pokemon pulling short its flight just moments before the ground. Moments before Moon.

Moon stood, feeling the Bond she shared with the Pokemon before her surging with affection, hearing the soft croon of Nebby's voice in her ears. Lowering its head down to her, Nebby met Moon's forehead as well. A greeting. It was back.

Welcome home.

She'd wanted... for it to be the three of them. For she, Lillie, and Nebby to be reunited again. But Lillie was... far away, right now, facing her own challenges she'd chosen to face. She'd come back. She'd promised Moon she would but... until then, they had to wait. Believe in Lillie as she struggled with her own journey she wished to undertake. Moon was sorry. She knew without question that Nebby wished to be with Lillie again. So did she.

Would it wait with her, until that day came?

A warmth pulsed within Nebby's forehead, coursing into Moon's as well. A sharing of the promise. That they'd both be there to welcome Lillie home. And... Moon felt it, a deep care from Nebby for her as well. Moon had joined with Lillie in giving it the light and love needed to bring it to this form. And Moon had risked everything to save it. There was no unhappiness in staying with Moon too. Moon it loved too.

When Moon returned to her home on Melemele Island, it was with six Pokeballs once more at her side. Naganadel and Nebby, both unwilling to go far from Moon now that she was on her feet again, with Decidueye, Sylveon, Milotic, and Volcarona alongside. Salamence had stayed at the Pelago for the moment, enjoying the presence of the many Pokemon of Moon, happy to wait until she returned again. She'd promised to be back soon. She was still required to visit the Aether Paradise daily, but could stay at her own home again now. Complete her rest and recovery there.

Close the days until it was time for her to appear again on the stage of the Alolan Pokemon League.
For the next fight to come.

...she struggled with it. With remembering what had happened there, the battle between Solgaleo and Necrozma, and how Moon had risked it all to save Nebby during. Even now the thought of fighting... it strained her. She admitted such to her mother, but before Jewellery could manage a word Moon insisted it was so important she return to the Pokemon League all the same. And the Pokemon with her... battle was a union of a Trainer and their Pokemon's hearts, joining with their opponents in a celebration of their strength. It was a joyous thing no matter how fierce. That was what a true Pokemon Battle was. And that was what Moon wanted to feel, she just... struggled, with the thoughts of the light and the sound and the sensation of combat.

Hoped she would recover soon enough.

The days passed. Moon visited Iki Town to celebrate with Hau, to admire his incredible efforts in his battle with Professor Kukui. It was that day that Moon finally met Solgaleo face to face, the Emissary of the Sun approaching her freely, sniffing at her face and nudging her with its giant nose – easily knocking Moon off of her feet. Nebby manifested from the Master Ball Moon carried to protest this, and all those around froze at the sight of these two Legendary Pokemon of Alolan lore. The Emissaries of the Sun and Moon together in one place.

Whatever conversation took place between them, Nebby – the far younger of the two – slunk back into its Master Ball shortly after. The Sunne Pokemon emitted a low huffing sound that may very well have been a laugh.

Moon spoke with Hau. And Hala. Kukui. And Kahili. Pitaya. And Molayne. Olivia. And Hapu too. Ilima and Mina. Each of the Captains further. In the days to pass, one by one, Moon sought from them advice, help in finding her feet once more. Those curious others, waiting for the League's next match – interested in Moon's intent and knowing this battle had to happen, for Ryuki Oda had already threatened to walk away should it not – chased after Moon, but were furiously beaten back by those close to her when catching any giving her too long a glance.

Lana, in the end, found the way. Met Moon at the Poke Pelago, Moon rejoining her Pokemon in full, and brought her to the battlefield Moon had trained on almost three weeks ago. And did as a Trainer should.

Met Moon's eyes and brought forth a Pokemon to meet her own.

Was it a dangerous choice? A risk that Lana may push Moon in the wrong way, by challenging her to a Pokemon Battle at this time? Some may say so, but Lana would argue it was not. She knew, for she and Moon were so similar in the end. Battling against Moon had been a pure thing, and washed away the stains holding onto Lana's heart. Now she would return that favour.

Now she would see Moon able to go on.

It was no elegant battle, no clean exchange. Lana made her way through Moon's team relentlessly, Moon's pace recovering only in the final moments. First when Salamence swept in to battle in her name, neither Mega Evolved nor using Z-Move. And then, in the wake of that, when Naganadel joined the battle at last. The first time the Poison Pin Pokemon had ever been able to express this new strength under Moon's command.

The revelation of the power it held.

“Zzt, analysis complete!” Rotom-dex chimed loud, watching over Naganadel's fight, the Ultra Beast warring with Lana's Gyarados across the field. “Naganadel, Poison Pin Pokemon, type signatures:
Poison and Dragon!"

Dragon...

Moon looked to the huge purple Pokemon, delightedly brawling with the Atrocious Pokemon of Lana. Then...

Dragon Pulse.

A surge of purple rings emitted from Nagandel's open mouth washed over the Pokemon before it. Lana whooped, impressed with the strength of the Pokemon by Moon's side. That was good.

Ryuki would be delighted to fight it for sure.

Five more days. Moon returned home that day renewed, the battle with Lana something awkward and stilted at first, but then flowing into that sense, that need to compete, that helped Moon find her peace once more. Now she was ready. Now she could go on. Five days, Kukui helped her settle on, taking charge of bringing the news to those waiting. Five more days.

Ryuki, waiting patiently, grinned wide to hear it. Just five days.

He'd need to be ready.

Returned to Poni Island to see if that Totem Dragon fancied a round two.

Moon trained. Her Pokemon trained. Sought to refine and discover their strength. Naganadel. And Lunala. Both, Moon asked, would they fight by her side? Both agreed, of course. For this great battle, something that meant so much to Moon, both wished to be by her side. They would be there. Bisharp, watching over those in training, found itself pleased to know those of great strength would replace it in this fight. But one last struggle still lay ahead.

The necessity to choose one more to stay behind.

Each of Moon's team beyond Naganadel and Nebby gave it their all. Showed the fullness of their strength, and shone with the Bonds connecting them to their beloved partner. Moon considered the Pokemon of Ryuki, discussed such with each Pokemon before her, and outlined who would best be able to battle whom.

Salamence... Moon wished she could have it battle with Kannonade – Ryuki's Kommo-o – as they had when a Shelgon and Hakamo-o before. But the power of Ultra Salamence would be necessary too. With Nebby, Naganadel, and Ultra Salamence, Moon felt she could compete with the raw power Ryuki possessed. He was a monstrously talented battler, so even with some stronger Pokemon, Moon would still be facing a deep struggle. She would need to do all that she could.

Sylveon must join her, of course, for the Fairy-type evolution of Eevee was a necessity. Milotic as well, with its Ice-type abilities honed by Lana's training. And the Icium-Z Lana had given Moon as well. But of those two to remain...

In the end, it was understandable and accepted. Decidueye could express far more of its power than Volcarona, even if the Sun Pokemon held greater potential in strength. That strength had yet to be truly honed. It would take much longer for such a powerful being to reach its full force.

Could it accept this? Would it understand? Moon placed her hands alongside Volcarona's face, the fiery moth Pokemon floating gently before her. It was still her partner. She would still look to its strength. But for this fight, for this battle with Ryuki... it met her forehead with its own, the gesture of
affection so many of Moon's Pokemon used. It would understand. For this battle, go on with the others. They would have many more yet in the future ahead.

Yes, Moon agreed, they would.

“Back here again, huh?’

They were.

Compared to the last time, Ryuki's stance, the two meeting again in the League staging grounds, held less... something. Moon couldn't tell what. Just that there was something different about the Dragon Tamer before her. Was he okay? She knew he must want to do nothing less than battle all out. Ryuki grinned. Read so clearly. She'd gotten to know him well.

Sweet kid.

“There is something I gotta apologise for, yeah, better get that outta the way now so we don't have anything holding us back.” Ryuki spoke quick, to try and work through the words he'd been struggling with in the time since. “That Necrozma, I gotta admit, when it transformed I was happy. It... there was some history, with my family and it, and seeing it here was a big shock. Pretty quick after I remembered you got caught up, and wanted to get you out but... the first thing I thought was just that I was happy it was here. Even if it did what it did to you. Sorry, about that. You're not- it wasn't more important to me than you being safe. I shouldn't have thought that. Sorry.”

She'd heard him. Ryuki looked up, surprised by Moon's words. She'd heard him. And seen him. Him and Sina. They'd called out and reached her. Helped her wake up and break free. Because of them... she was thankful. She hadn't gotten to see Sina yet, but at least she got to say that to Ryuki here.

Thank you for helping save her life.

Ryuki stared, unable to work through how he felt being told such. This kid, so small and quiet voiced, really spoke in a way that went right to the heart. She really was something else.

But now, Moon smiled, and this smile was a proper Ryuki Oda classic, something she must have taken from him, they had a fight. A full on six against six holding nothing back. She'd said it before, and now she'd say it again.

She was going to win.

The light and energy of Ryuki as he always was returned to his eyes. A grin of his own revealed the glint of teeth. Alright then.

“Let's get to it.”

The energy about them cascaded, washing down the pathway to the League stage, mixing with the excitement of the crowd stoking higher and higher by the moment. The battle between Hau and Kukui had been incredible. And this, this would be-

None could express any more than the goosebumps rising across their skin.

“And so we have returned.” Once again Pitaya's voice crossed the stadium, the Guildmaster returning to commentate over this coming match. Anna and Alexa extolled the events that had
brought them to this place, filled with excitement themselves for what was to come. Pitaya was excited too, perhaps more than she had ever been before, but she controlled it well. Spoke clearly all the same.

She would not look away for a second of the coming match.

“Guildmaster Pitaya, can you give us your predictions?”

“In comparison to when she stood here last, Moon has added two incredibly powerful Pokemon to her team: the Ultra Beast Naganadel, and the Legendary Pokemon Lunala.” This information was known, Moon's competing team registered in the days before this match. Saying it still drew in a breath of the crowd. “Combined with Ultra Salamence, in raw power Moon likely surpasses Ryuki himself. But Ryuki is a master Trainer of the highest level, a man of impossibly sharp skill. Moon has incredible experience, and ability, for her age but those aspects still pale to Ryuki's own. This battle will be determined by her ability to properly express the strength of her partners, while facing Ryuki who will unquestionably be giving his all. I cannot guarantee her victory. Neither can I guarantee his. It is to my great delight that I say these things. These competitors are both beyond prediction. This battle... will be one of legend. That is what I foresee.”

To hear such words only deepened the feeling in all witness that day. Set their hearts beating harder, blood pumping faster. A battle beyond belief. That was the sight promised.

That was the sight they would see.

And then the moment came. Emerging from the League staging ground, Ryuki Oda took the western path. Strode to the Trainer's circle at that battlefield end. Took his place, ready to go.

Ready for what came next.

Next was Moon.

The cheers magnified, the sight so much the same as the one before. The sight of Moon walking along the path, bound for the eastern ring, focus cast about her form. And the sight of the Legendary Moone Pokemon Lunala floating overhead. The Master Ball at Moon's waist having activated as she entered the stadium grounds, her partner keen to announce itself to the stage. But as Moon entered the ring she would stand within for the coming fight, she raised that Master Ball and called Nebby back all the same. She needed it to return.

So that with it she could begin.

For the sight of that action, for the understanding of what that meant, all cheered louder and wilder to see Ryuki match Moon's intent by raising his own strongest's Pokeball: the black and gold Luxury Ball that carried the ancient Hydreigon that had partnered to his strength. If Moon would begin with that legend, Ryuki would bring out his own. Here's to them.

Nerves alight within their body, but professionalism allowing them to go on, the judge for this match took their position and raised their arms. Made their call. The time to begin.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Moon clutched the Master Ball holding Nebby.

Ryuki the Luxury Ball holding Hydreigon.

And all witness their breath.
Now, the time had finally come.

Now it was time for the fight.

“Begin!”

Neither touched the ground. Neither held for even a second. The burst of wind, explosion of movement, washed over the barrier walls, each going beyond sight. Their intent, their partners' intent, roaring like fire. The two Trainers Moon and Ryuki alight with focus. Yes, this was how it should be. This was how it had always been destined to be.

This was their fight.

Lunala crested beneath the barrier roof, a glow of starlight from its body bursting into rays scattering over the battlefield below, Hydreigon weaving between them with ease, roars of draconic force breaking the light beams apart. The two circled, power coursing between them, the great beams of light Lunala formed meeting against the surge of blue flames its Brutal opponent unleashed. In moments it was clear, the power these two held making this one of the most fearsome matches to take place on this stage. Ultra Salamence and Tapu Koko? In the end it had been intense play for the deity, but play alone. Solgaleo and Necrozma? No, not that, their fight something violent yet exhausted. Ultra Necrozma itself? That had been a sight of horror. This power did not compare to that but... the elegance, the will, the wish of all here...

What seized the hearts of all present was something far greater than just terror and fear.

A true battle fought at the peak.

“Dragon Rush!”

Loud was the impact, Hydreigon's body slamming into Lunala's own, the two greats locked together, all mouths of the former biting down upon the latter. But even with the Dark-type power Hydreigon exerted, still she could not force through the energy that pulsed from Lunala's form, pushing her back all the same.

Nebby's shine flared brighter, a radiant moon hanging in the sky overhead as the black dragon was pushed away, attacking into the light but unable to break through. The air was quaking, wavering, the twin energies of Psychic and Ghost the Moone Pokemon commanded shaping all around it into form. Dark-type attacks, the best possible counter to it, broke and ground against that power, forcing it back, a sign of the strength and difference in these Pokemon all the same. Their power holding
equal. A legend of high form clashing with an ancient of the distant past.

This battle all she had ever wanted it to be.

This was the first time. The first time Ryuki had ever called upon her before all others. Had reached for her and asked for her aid without trying to separate himself from her strength. Always, always he'd treated her as something different. A power too far beyond his grasp, something to be used sparingly and only as last resort. To be considered such, to be considered too strong to reach out to, the consistency of it had left its mark. She'd answered him as he'd believed she should for so long. For so long it had been that way.

But no longer would it be.

They were partners. Equals. He had taken up the mantle of her last, and exerted the fullness of his will. Shown her someone who would not bow or break, the same as the ancestor she had smelled in his blood when first he'd crossed her path. Centuries had passed but again she'd been united with one who would treat her with no deference or fear, no meagreness unbefitting of the partner she had chosen. This was home.

She would always fight to defend her home.

Nebby was young. A Cosmog discovered by the Aether Foundation, in the wake of the accident that had taken the husband of Lusamine, and father of Gladion and Lillie, away. For years studied by the Foundation, turned to the use of opening ways into Ultra Space. No form of growth in that time. Nothing but sealed silence.

Then Lillie had taken it away from that place. Given it her love, shone the light within her heart upon the tiny Pokemon that had known none before. Too young and too weak to connect to her in the way others did, too young to reach out for a Bond. Its first evolution, the transformation into Cosmoem, left it sleeping. Waiting for the moment its final evolution would come. Alone, perhaps that would have taken years. Decades. Centuries even. But it was not alone. Two reached out to it and called, giving all their hearts held. Hearts linked together.

Hearts strong enough to lift up its own.

Lunala is the final form of the Cosmog line, a Pokemon that could become either the Legendary Emissary of the Sun or Moon. Solgaleo, the Sunne Pokemon come from beyond the Ultra Wormhole, partnered to Hau out of its own interest alone, was older, much older, than Nebby. Its strength more honed, its understanding of itself far greater. Its power far greater. Lunala could in no way knock down the Pokemon of Kukui as easily as Solgaleo had.

But what Moon and Lunala had was a Bond connected on the deepest of levels. A link between their hearts built out of love, for both one another and the third connected to them too. Even now, each was sure, they could hear Lillie's cheers. Would not move to let her down.

Moon's limitlessness, stronger even than the devouring hole in Necrozma's core, gave everything Nebby could desire. Everything the girl connected to it could give. They were one, in totality in a way only the greatest of Trainers and their partners could be. To be so completely connected, Trainers would strive all their lives to form such a Bond with one partner alone. But the depth of the power in Moon's soul, and the depth of love in her heart, closed that distance. More than one infinity part of her being to give.

Strength and love enough to go further still.
Nebby burst high, aglow with brilliant light, points of power burning across its form. Its wings linked together, forming a perfect circle in the sky above, that power flowed into one centre, forming a single sphere between the crescent points of its head, pink third eye glowing with an intense light.

Moongeist Beam.

“Dark Pulse!”

The roar of Hydreigon was loud, waves of energy radiating from her opened mouths, forming a barrier of attacking force to stop the radiant light descending from on high. Lunala was so fast, and attacked so unstoppably. This was it, Ryuki grinned so wide as to seem to split his face, this was a true Legendary Pokemon. Even further beyond the Tapu he'd watched so closely before. He was battling a true legend. A power beyond powers, linked to Moon before him. Moon, that kid he'd crossed paths with by fate. That kid he’d felt a spark in that set all his senses aflame. That kid he'd known, he'd known would go beyond all understanding. And now here they were. And now this was their fight.

No happiness greater in his heart. The sight of Ultra Necrozma, the Black Then Gold Dragon of legend, ultimate partner of Oda Nobunaga, meant nothing compared to this. This was what he'd truly come here for. This was what everything had been leading up to. He understood at last. Chasing legends of the past, that had nothing to do with the pride he carried in his family name. It was striding forward with his own head held high into the future he defined that truly made him who he was. He'd come this far looking back, making sure the shine of his light drew eyes. But stars didn't look back. They just rose higher, and cast their light freely. That was what they did.

That was what they would do.

“Draco Meteor!”

The loudest roar yet, air splitting as masses of purple and red energy manifested under Hydreigon's will, the fullness of her strength concentrated together into this form. A rain of meteors flung through the sky.

Lunala cried loud, air rippling around it, the meteors beginning to explode as they neared its form. But not all of them. And not fast enough. Some still made it through.

Some still reached.

“Behind!”

“He is truly in top form.” Pitaya's commentary came as Hydreigon whipped around, tracking the point Lunala teleported to, the Moone Pokemon vanishing as the meteors reached its form. “His instincts honed, and his understanding of the strength he faces perfect. There will be no mistakes to use against him. He is too far beyond that now.”

But...

Brilliant, Lunala seared, light coursing from its body to wash over Hydreigon's own. They weren't done yet.

The attacks continued, the power Nebby held dragged out more and more by this fight. One by one those watching, those who sat in the competitors' stands, realised the truth. That any one of their Pokemon would be beaten by now. Those youngest the first to accept, but eventually even the strongest as well. No, there was no way. Moon and Lunala, Ryuki and Hydreigon, those two could defeat any single Trainer and Pokemon pair in this League. Hau, Hau with Solgaleo alone, could
stand against them. But no other. No other Trainer able to come to that height.

This the sight Kukui had always wished to see.

Shadow Ball. Ghost-type. Air Slash. Flying-type. Night Daze. Dark-type. Confusion. Psychic-type. One by one Nebby unleashed its attacks, even those of Psychic-type – unable to affect the part Dark-type Hydreigon herself – still able to turn aside her non-Dark attacks. Moon and Nebby both, they did not know the full extent of the powers the Moone Pokemon possessed. Were discovering them in this fight. But their senses linked together were keen. They knew what they neared each time. Nebby teleported again, Ryuki and Hydreigon tracking it to high above.

This time...

Moonblast!

_Dangerous_, Ryuki's eyes widened, seeing the power swirling before Lunala's form. That was Fairy-type energy, the worst possible attack for Hydreigon to face. From a Legendary Pokemon, if it struck her it would...

_Dive_. Hydreigon obeyed, falling from the sky as the blast of energy chased after, her roar building in volume by the second. Already the battlefield below was cracking, fraying, rocks shifting aside and a crater dug under her force. At the last second... Ryuki gritted his teeth.

Now!

“Dragon Rush!”

To use that attack, Hydreigon's body wreathed in Dragon-type energy, to pull away took much. To surge over the earth, the slightest distance above its surface, the barest angle of the dive meant using that power to change her flight hurt so much. But the Moonblast that had pursued, it had slammed into the ground after. Detonated into a great blast, the battlefield ravaged by the manifold attacks cast out by the two in this fight. Lunala was preparing another. But Ryuki could see it, the intent Moon and that Pokemon held as Hydreigon pulled back up into the sky. They were going to try it far closer this time.

He wouldn't be stopped here.

“Crunch!”

Wreathed in darkness the Brutal Dragon lashed out, the teleportation of Lunala caught by the Dark-type attack. How had Ryuki seen it, the exact place and moment Lunala would appear? Neither he nor Moon questioned it. This fight was far beyond such things. Biting down hard, her three mouths surging with Dark-type energy, Hydreigon gave all she had to pin Lunala in her grasp, her power stopping the Legendary Pokemon from manifesting its own. This time Nebby couldn't break free, Hydreigon seeming to grow in strength with each moment passing in their fight. She and Ryuki, they were giving their absolute all here. Their everything. Because that was what this deserved. That was what this was meant to be.

Moon did the same.

Activated the Z-Crystal set within her Z-Power Ring.

Ring of black stone, that drew Z-Power into it with each Z-Move's use. A cast off shell of a great beast, transformed by the return to its true hunting grounds. There was great power deep within it still, power needed to unleash the greatest of techniques. The misshapen Z-Crystal that had formed,
the deep purple-blue Lunalium-Z, existed only in response to the Legendary Pokemon's will. Wished for by Nebby, and taking form in return. That was how such a thing came to be.

Moon performed its Z-Pose.

“A Z-Move with the Legendary Lunala!”

This challenge... Ryuki understood it. Moon believed this power could overcome his and Hydreigon's own. If Hydreigon released her bite, tried to retreat... no, that was not the way. They'd push through! Overwhelming with force was their way! Put all the more strength in and stop Lunala here and now! That was what they'd do!

The Ghost-type Z-Pose. Acerola yelled loudly to see it, to see Moon raise her arms while swaying in that eerie way. Then the Z-Power came. Then Moon shone, and Lunala shone. And there were two lunar beings alight on the stadium stage. Hydreigon pushed further. More strength. More power. More that joined Ryuki's will, her partner with her on this journey in life. Go beyond. Further and further still. They could go further still. Could go to the absolute highest of highs and not stop even then. Rise like stars into the night sky. That was what they would do.

But stars paled under the light of the moon.

Lunala burst with light, radiance pouring out to fill the battlefield stage, forcing all to turn away, to look from that surging light. The six orbs, each a match for a solitary Moongeist Beam, took shape, stars burning through the air. Ryuki gave his command, roaring into the light. Lunala swung its wings together, and drew the beams unleashed into one. A power unmatched upon the stage.

This was the second time. Once against Necrozma this attack had been used, casting the beast into the void, only for it to return and seize Lunala for itself. But for Hydreigon, it could not be the same. Moon and Nebby both understood. This would be different. Just slightly so.

Their Z-Move: Menacing Moonraze Maelstrom unleashed.

Deep were the cries of those who watched, the battlefield below sundered by a light that exceeded all others this day. A power that pierced deeply through the stage, stretching into the earth below. A true Legendary Pokemon's absolute. The only thing Moon and Nebby could meet Ryuki and Hydreigon with. Anything less an insult. Nothing but their all.

What each in this battle asked the other to use.

Silence followed, the fading light of the Z-Move revealing a twisted and shattered battlefield, so warped that it proved hard to see anything within. But soon enough the sight was made. The shifting of a Pokemon, slumped against the earth. Cast down from the battle in the sky.

Hydreigon the first to touch the ground.

“It grazed her.” Pitaya said it. Ryuki knew it. Moon and Nebby intended it. That full Z-Move, it was simply too much. Its power necessary to drive Hydreigon back, but the totality of it, even with the resistance Hydreigon's Dark and Dragon-type body would have, was not something to be used. So Moon and Nebby angled it. Hydreigon had been moving to dodge, following Ryuki's command. But the light fell far too fast for that. Followed Moon and Nebby's intent.

Brushed against Hydreigon but did not consume her. Pierced into the earth instead. Left its mark, sign of the Legendary Pokemon's strength.

And dragged Hydreigon down from the undefeated height she had lived at to this day.
She couldn't lift into the sky again.

Light danced around Lunala's form, the Pokemon so easily resembling the moon. That energy, that pulse, Hydreigon snarled at it from the earth, a being of darkness opposing the light overhead. But the distance between them, it was now heaven and earth. She couldn't rise again.

The lesser two of her three heads already unable to lift from the ground.

Her third following as her anger failed to maintain her intent.

“Hydreigon is unable to battle!”

And then came the roar, the voice of the crowd here, the voice of the crowd across Alola, the voice of the crowd across the world all bursting into life. A battle of powers fought with honour and pride, dignity and respect. A true Pokemon Battle, the truest Pokemon Battle there could be. The peak that every Trainer strove for, the sensation they wished to feel. This was what it was. This was what it could be.

This first match between Moon and Ryuki everything anyone could wish to see.

“You did great.” No disappointment on the face of Ryuki Oda. A calm smile, one rare to see, as he called this partner back to him. She'd given it her all, and mixed up with the greatest of the greats. No regrets. She'd done everything he could have ever asked of her. He was so proud, and so thankful, that she'd fought alongside him here. Now and forever, they'd face the challenges of the world again and again. He promised.

Even unconscious, he felt her response. Good. That was good. Choosing another Pokeball, this time a blue and yellow Quick Ball, Ryuki unleashed his next partner upon the field with his wilder grin returning. No stopping yet.

This was only just the beginning.

“Let's keep it rolling, Lilith!”

The Garchomp Ryuki sent out roared her readiness to join the fight, the rainbow Key Stone the Dragon Tamer raised matching the Garchompite set in a band around the Mach Pokemon's arm. No holding back. Not even for a second.

They still had so much further to go.

“As Ryuki Mega Evolves his partner Garchomp, Moon calls Lunala back! The act of that battle with Hydreigon and use of a Z-Move clearly enough to affect even a Legendary Pokemon! And now- she has chosen Salamence! And is grasping her own Key Stone! Now she will-”

Oh no! Not yet! In speed Lilith blitzed forward, weighed down by the power of her Mega Evolved form but still able to reach Salamence before it could take on its own transfigured state. The roar of the Dragon Pokemon was loud, laced with strength and focus, but did nothing to sway the Mach Pokemon scything one of her bladed arms towards her turquoise-scaled foe. If Moon wanted to Mega Evolve, if she wanted to Ultra Evolve, she had to rip those opportunities from Ryuki's own hands. Nothing less than giving this his all! Striking at every weakness Moon showed expecting her to do the same to him! That was the way it should be!

This, this was the battle he'd been dreaming about since his own youthful days, since the day the Gible he would name Lilith and raise into the Garchomp before him was given to him as a member of the Oda line. She was his oldest partner, and strongest after Hydreigon herself. Face this, Moon.
Face this and overcome!

Head meeting head was loud, the impact of both dragons' skulls upon one another causing many in the crowd to flinch back. Salamence's Mega Evolution had been prevented, the transformative act too dangerous to use with Garchomp in so close. So instead!

Flight. Salamence was not nearly so weak as to be unable to meet Garchomp's attacks and take off into the air, but the Mach Pokemon was still Mega Evolved, and unrelenting in her strength. Took off into the sky in pursuit, keeping close to Salamence still, the two clashing together as the second mid-air match of this Pokemon Battle began. But...

“It is bad for Moon.” Pitaya's commentary was stark, the same as Hala's for Hau before. “Salamence is not stronger than that Garchomp; even if it Mega Evolved it would not be so. The only way Moon will be able to break through is with Ultra Evolution, and Ryuki is not giving her that chance. If Moon cannot find a way, she will not be able to keep up. This is the power of Ryuki Oda. He is truly astounding.”

His five, if Pitaya met them... well Olivia had already shown that. The strongest of Alola were able to match that man on equal grounds. For Pitaya, Olivia, Hala, and Kukui – the four traditionally strongest Trainers of Alola in this League – a battle with Ryuki would be a roughly even thing. Besides that Hydreigon. She was the differing measure.

In truth Pitaya still deeply desired to meet that ancient dragon in battle herself.

Once in the air Salamence was at its fastest, able to match, and even exceed the speed of Garchomp herself. Or rather the precision: tighter turns and sharper movements allowing the Dragon Pokemon to maintain evasion in this fight. But the raw power Lilith exerted, the endless stamina she held in this Mega Evolved form, was so obvious a statement. It would take only one great strike to end this. The longer this battle of evasion went on, the worse things would become for Moon and her partner. She couldn't maintain things this way. And the time until her next switch, it was still so far away. She had to do this now. Go beyond Ryuki’s challenge now!

Moon, a child of twelve years with a gift singular in the world, a love for Pokemon that matched the greatest with ease, and a sharp and keen mind for Pokemon Battling, was still matched against a master. To outwit Ryuki Oda, to control his actions so that Moon might rise above, the task was... perhaps impossible. Perhaps beyond her. None would blame her were it so. This was a challenge even the greatest of masters would struggle under. But Moon, in her impossibility and youth, held a nature that gave her an edge no other understood. A vision of victory uniquely her own. The path for her different to anyone else.

Her understanding of Z-Power, and sense for it, magnified all the more by the connection she and Necrozma had forged.

...there was still so much of it left in Lunala's wake.

“Salamence dives into the hole dug by Lunala's Z-Move before! This tight space is extremely dangerous for that Pokemon, especially with Ryuki's Garchomp able to dig easily through the earth! What is Moon's pla- she's raising her Key Stone! Moon is attempting Mega Evolution!”

Ryuki called her bluff. Sent Garchomp diving in after Salamence still. Oh Moon had a plan. She had a method to win. He was sure she wasn't lashing out wildly without thought. But if Ryuki stopped here Moon would go beyond him with ease. He couldn't step back for even a second. Had to keep running just as fast as she did. So with Lilith keeping close, even beyond his sight, Ryuki understood his partner's attack. The draconic energy swirling around her as she dived. Salamence could not
move for the moment it had to transform. Once Lilith hit... that would be it. Even if it Mega Evolved, the attack would still take so much of Salamence's strength. Unless Moon could stop it.

Oh but wait she could!

Neither could see it. Nor could the crowd. But Ryuki was sure. His focus on Salamence, the viciously attacking dragon, had forgotten its roots. The former evolution Shelgon, a Pokemon with a decisively defensive streak. Those abilities didn't disappear on evolution. No, Ryuki was sure, Moon hadn't started the Mega Evolution yet. Salamence had blocked the Dragon Rush first by using Shelgon's Protect, cutting off the most dangerous of Lilith's attacks.

But did Moon really think, now that Lilith was in close with that Salamence, she had the freedom to continue on? She'd reached the end of her plan then.

Outrage. Bring it down.

This was as far as it went.

Moon held her Key Stone aloft, the crystal glowing with rainbow light. Within that hole dug by the Z-Move of Lunala Salamence roared, red light wrapping its body as it transformed, even as Lilith slammed against it again and again. But the blue dragon bore it. Took this assault still. Transformed as power pulsed around it. The air itself seemingly sucked in to this new form.

And the Z-Power left behind as well.

The roar had been heard only thrice before. Once, at the end of the battle with Ilima. Once, at the beginning of the battle with Tapu Koko. And one last time, as Salamence took its strongest form in the battle with Lana as well. The announcement of its transformation. The voice that could only come from that transfigured dragon of gold. Ryuki's eyes shot wide, the crowd's own breath sucked in, as surging with golden radiant light a serpentine dragon rose from the earth, spiralling into the sky above, the Mega Garchomp grasped in its mouth.

Then shattered into light.

Moon was already performing the Normal-type Z-Pose.

“The Z-Power...” Pitaya had not understood Moon's intent. No-one had, for the sense Moon had for Z-Power was another thing hers and hers alone. And Ryuki especially – Z-Moves were not his way. He didn't know anything about it.

Didn't understand what had been left behind.

“The Z-Power from Lunala combined with Salamence's Mega Evolution. For a second it could act as Ultra Salamence with that power alone. That is... astounding.”

Perhaps something that could only be achieved with the power a Legendary Pokemon's Z-Move left behind, combined with a Pokemon that had performed Ultra Evolution before, but still... a feat truly incredible all the same.

An opportunity forged in a way none could have foreseen.

“Even if it was for only a second, the power of Ultra Salamence was enough to stun Ryuki's Garchomp, allowing Moon to complete the actual Z-Move needed to fully transform Salamence into this form!”
It was true. As quickly as it had disappeared the golden dragon had returned, an echo of the last to appear here as well. Ultra Necrozma, Ultra Salamence, both dragons of golden light, both tied so deeply to Moon. Her fate so strong a thing as to draw such powers towards her.

And now she and her partner were ready for this fight.

Loud came another sound, the laughter of a single person alone. Hand pressed to his forehead, mouth wide with mirth, Ryuki Oda roared in amusement. Moon had yet again gone beyond all sense! So many times in this League so far, but still she had more to pull out against him too! Fun! He liked that! Alright then!

“Let's do this!”

Whipping his hand down Ryuki's smile was a feral snarl of joy, eyes burning with passion for this fight. Lilith roared too, opposing the far larger golden dragon coiling before her, its great wings sending waves of wind racing through the air. So Moon had made it after all. Awesome. Ryuki's heart raced faster, a drumbeat within his own chest. This was what he'd wanted all the same. He'd wanted to face this power. To face everything Moon could do. But it wouldn't mean anything if he didn't do everything he could to stop her. To fight Moon down and make her push him aside so she could unleash her full strength. That was his heart's desire.

So let their next set go on!

Far smaller than the golden dragon she may now be, but Lilith still hesitated in no way at all, surging into movement, her spiralling flight carving through the air. Ryuki had watched closely every time. Ultra Salamence could move quickly and chaotically – its entire body extremely flexible – and was incredibly fast for sure but... not impossibly so. It wasn't beyond his and Lilith's reach. The power in its body was amazing. The force it exerted was incredible. Really everything about Ultra Salamence's strength dwarfed his partner's own. But not absolutely. The gap between them wasn't insurmountable, and the skills Ryuki had were not unable to close it. Lana had proved it: damage done before and during the transformation had added up. She'd taken that dragon down. Ryuki didn't have a super-effective Z-Move to do it, but he did have a very strong Mega Evolved Dragon-type Pokemon still.

Moon was horribly mistaken if she thought just coming this far would be good enough.

Once more the mid-air fight went on. Garchomp's flight, her direct lines of attack, were of the fastest form, while Ultra Salamence's coiling shape made the partner of Moon difficult to catch. But difficult too was Lilith to reach, the blue flames Ultra Salamence breathed out torching the barrier and ground but unable to catch the Mach Pokemon herself. This wasn't a challenge of stamina though, not a battle Ryuki was slowly gaining ground within to win. This was all part of the plan.

His was a battling mind as well, after all.

“Sandstorm!”

As Lilith raced over the ground trails of earth rose up to follow her, a plume of dust rising with the dragon's flight, spreading rapidly through the air. Moon always made use of disappearing acts to her advantage, she and Hau both, but Ultra Salamence was... the end of the line for that one. Ryuki was a betting man, and he knew for sure there wasn't anything more Moon could do with her Pokemon obscured.

Not that it was, actually, Ryuki whistling low to see the golden shine of Ultra Salamence's form still painting it clearly within the storm. Oh that was a bonus. Lilith's horns, sensors for detecting prey,
allowed her to easily track her opponents even without sight, but that didn't make this something to
turn a nose up at. Within the storm Ryuki's partner struck, now unable to be tracked by the great
golden dragon it opposed, and continued the act of bringing it down.

Ryuki had been thinking about the ways to fight it for so long, after all.

But so had Moon regarding Ryuki's own team.

Again Ultra Salamence dived, able to find the hole carved into the earth by Lunala's Z-Move even
while the sandstorm raged, the lingering Z-Power drawing it back to that place. This time Ryuki was
cautious, knowing diving right at the dragon, especially if it could predict Lilith coming in, would be
bad. But Lilith was more than just a danger in the air and on land. Beneath the land too.

Easily the Mega Evolved Mach Pokemon dived into the earth.

Moon called Flamethrower and a storm of red fire spun out of the hole Ultra Salamence had retreated
into.

Ryuki's command to dig and approach had been silent. And the sandstorm was raging on. Moon
definitely had reason to believe things had gone the way Ryuki thought she would. That Lilith would
pursue the same as before, and Ultra Salamence would attack at it incoming. But... why fire? That
was one of the weakest things Ultra Salamence could do. That was wrong.

Unless that wasn't what she was doing at all.

Oh crap oh crap oh crap!

The speed of Lilith betrayed her. Ryuki's command was quick, his reaction sharp, but not enough to
stop his partner surging through the earth. Reaching Ultra Salamence. Bursting through the rock
walls of the tunnel dug by Z-Power before.

Becoming wrapped by the molten sludge now coating the tunnel wall.

Once again Lilith left this tunnel the loser, this time a powerful snap of Ultra Salamence's coiling tail
sending the Mach Pokemon flying upwards. The molten earth, it was heavy, weighing her down,
and preventing the movement she needed to fight back. When Ultra Salamence launched upwards,
this time its head collected the Mach Pokemon and slammed her into the ceiling overhead. That...
was a good one. Moon had matched up. She was stunning. Really and truly.

But neither she nor Ryuki would ever believe it could end so easily here.

“Sand Tomb!”

The sandstorm still raged around them. So much loose material lashing about. Lilith, Mega Evolved,
remained clutching onto Ultra Salamence's head. Her scythe-bladed arms and clawed legs grasping
tight as the gold dragon pushed her harder and harder against the barrier roof. The power she
exerted, the summoning of earth, came quick. Pulled the raging sandstorm towards her, wrapping it
around her, binding it to the molten earth that covered her form, dripping down across the larger
dragon's head. Bonding to it. Obscuring over it.

The entire sandstorm sucked together around this singular point.

Lilith and Salamence's head both covered and sealed in densely binding earth.

“Dragon Rush.”
Most Dragon-type attacks that used the body required movement to get going. Dragon Claw and Outrage really required you to swing your body around. And Dragon Rush took a charge to do so. Most of the time. But instead of charging to build up that power, instead by burning her own body brightly to do it, Lilith could unleash such even while standing still. Pointless to do most of the time, the attack damaging her too, and requiring such strange conditions to perform, but this specific situation, it had led to it. This was right.

This was the path to victory.

Locked onto Ultra Salamence's head, a single point of the shining creature's entire form, Lilith surged with the power only a Mega Evolved Dragon could wield. The thrashing, twisting, muffled roaring of Ultra Salamence as it could not attack back spoke clearly of just how much strength its opponent had unleashed. Enough to cross the distance, to reach over the gap between her and these supreme powers of Moon.

Enough to break through.

The prison of earth shattered, Dragon-type energy pushing away even the molten earth covering from before. But that was where it came to an end. Lilith fell, her Mega Evolved form vanishing into light. She'd let all her power free, to strike against this great foe and take it down. And so, she had. Ultra Salamence fell too.

The crash of both dragons against the ground sent up a swell of dust in time to the crowd's roar, this second battle between the great powers of Moon and Ryuki somehow as amazing as the first. Raising Lilith's Quick Ball, Ryuki called his partner back. She'd given her all too. Two of those with him, both shining the brightest they ever had. The strength of his own love for them immeasurable. Easily a match for Moon's feelings towards her own. They were two Trainers at the peak. It only made sense it would be this way.

Now then, for Moon to retreat too-

Ultra Salamence moved.

First the twitch, its lengthy golden form shifting amongst the broken earth. Then the slight bend of its neck, head attempting to rise. Ryuki sucked in a breath, seeing the dragon struggling but still going. Really? Really really? He genuinely hadn't believed it could go that far. So that was Ultra Evolution, huh, the power of Mega Evolution and Z-Move combined as one. Really something. Really just... something else. Wow.

So... now what?

The golden light of the dragon's form faded away.

“The power behind Ultra Salamence disperses, leaving the Mega Evolved form of Salamence in its place! We saw the same with Moon's battle against Lana before, the defeat of Ultra Salamence not victory over Salamence itself! But looking at it, clearly Salamence is still massively exhausted! It can't have the strength for much more!”

It didn't. Moon knew that. Her partner was barely hanging on too. Could go a little further, was still a Mega Evolved Pokemon, but how much could it truly-

“Go say hi, Kannonade!”

The unleashing of Kannonade, the Kommo-o partner of Ryuki, raised goosebumps on Moon's skin.
She could feel it, the growl in Salamence's throat, the Dragon Pokemon considering the last time it had met this one in a fight. Deeply, it wished for this rematch. Deeply it wanted to settle this here and now. Even having spent so much. Yes, Salamence was ready to face this foe again. To burn the rest of its strength in this fight. Its desire so obvious to Ryuki indeed.

Moon raised Salamence's Pokeball and called the Pokemon back.

“Moon exchanges Salamence for Sylveon! The Fairy-type evolution of Eevee has a decided advantage in typing against the Kommo-o of Ryuki, and you mentioned before that Pokemon was a recent addition to his team, correct Guildmaster?”

“Correct. Ryuki raised a Jangmo-o into a Kommo-o in the span of a year. An incredible feat without question. But of all his Pokemon... I will not make false claims in calling it the weakest. All of his Pokemon are too strong to be described as such. But Moon's advantaged typing may just have meaning here. We will see in the fight.”

Ryuki's grin showed teeth. He'd really been banking on Moon giving in to that dragon's will. To agree to let this battle play out, even knowing letting Mega Salamence return and rest, even for just a few minutes, would be the far wiser choice. But she'd made that sharp decision. Denied that rematch for strategy's sake. So chill yet searing hot all the same, her passion and drive. His respect couldn't be greater. His desire to fight couldn't be stronger.

Their battle not even close to being done!

“Flash Cannon!”

The Steel-type attack, a beam of energy emitted from Kommo-o's rattling scales, crossed the battlefield in a blaze, evaded by a quick dash from the Intertwining Pokemon it targeted. Of course Kannonade, its scales still shaking from that attack unleashed, wasn't done yet. The rattling mixed with another energy the Scaly Pokemon manifested, and quickly projected a second attack on the heels of the first. That was right, that was the signature ability of Ryuki's partner Kommo-o, the ability to perform the techniques Flash Cannon and Focus Blast in rapid succession. The aftermath of that being that the dragon then needed a moment to catch its breath.

Moon, who'd seen Ryuki use that combo twice before – first against Olivia, then again facing Plumeria – had expected it. Sylveon's quick dodge of the Flash Cannon – the far more dangerous technique – had not stopped the Intertwining Pokemon from charging up a Fairy-type technique in response. And once unleashed, the Moonblast easily overwhelmed the incoming Fighting-type attack, the typing of the first so strong against the second.

And even if the Moonblast was mitigated even the slightest bit, all it had to do was cross the field to where Kannonade was momentarily standing still and...

Wait something was wrong.

The slight shimmer to Kannonade's body told the story, even as the Scaly Pokemon took the Moonblast Sylveon released. So effective. So brutally effective. But Kommo-o was still standing. Scales still rattling, arms still crossed, faint metallic sheen still pulsing around its form. Was that-

It was hard for any to predict Ryuki's motivation in this choice. By choosing to have Kannonade lure out such a powerful attack, and take it while under the effect of the Bide technique, its body now surged with a frighteningly powerful energy. But there was still a gap of time before that energy could be unleashed. If Moon attacked again, especially with Kannonade standing so still... was it a dare? A lure meant to frighten Moon? To convince her that perhaps, somehow, Kannonade could
take another? And if it did it would crush Sylveon with absolute strength? Was that what this was? It
couldn't be.

After all, Moon attacked immediately again.

Ryuki's grin didn't change. Moon had called another Moonblast, choosing to avoid using a Z-Move,
even with Kannonade holding still. Maybe she understood the timing well enough to know
Kannonade could use its bided energy to attack into a Z-Move. Maybe she understood the strength
of her opponent well enough to be confident that a second Moonblast, unmitigated this time, would
seal the deal. Her instincts were sharpened to a knife's edge here. If she'd paused out of concern for
even a second, Kannonade would've brought the pain. But no, Moon knew immediately what she
had to do.

Somewhere along the way, Ryuki wondered whether putting Moon through these paces at such a
young age would mean that once she was an adult there'd be no-one who could stop her at all.

That was fun to think about.

Anyway it wasn't Bide to begin with. Blocking an attack while shimmering with faint energy, that
was just a distraction meant to bring an assumption into place. The glow around Kannonade had
been its body consuming weight, reducing the Pokemon's own mass in exchange for speed. Kahili
had done the same with her Skarmory in the first round – using the Steel-type technique Autotomize.
Making it look like Bide, really Ryuki had been hoping to spook Moon for even a second. But even
if she did attack right away, it wouldn't have mattered.

At blitzing speed Kommo-o dodged past the second Moonblast and closed the distance on its foe.

“Oh that is-” Pitaya found herself momentarily lost for words. A brilliant feint, so absolute it had
cought even her off-guard. To make one ability resemble the other so much, to willingly take so
much damage to give Kommo-o so much time to strengthen itself, that was... the battlelust around
her quickly became palpable, Anna and Alexa both glancing at her in surprise.

She really, really wanted to fight Ryuki Oda all out.

“Having increased its speed to an incredible amount, Ryuki's partner Kommo-o is moving too fast
for Sylveon to keep up! Despite the damage it has taken, it is clearly now poised to win!”

It was... bad. Sylveon was able to use Quick Attack for movement – so many Pokemon were – but
couldn't do it nearly repetitively enough to keep up. And that Kommo-o... it was continuing to slam
Sylveon with its fists, hammering the Intertwining Pokemon across the field. Kannonade couldn't
stand still, couldn't use any of its long-range attacks, because it was so clearly at the edge of its
strength. One more proper attack from Moon and Sylveon would bring that dragon down. But could
they even land such? Even just using Normal-type physical attacks, Kannonade was beating Sylveon
down with ease. How to fight back? How to stop it? How to take back the pace?

Moon considered the Normalium-Z still set in her Z-Power Ring.

It had been in a conversation with Ilima, over the last few days, the Captain of Melemele keen to
advise Moon for her upcoming match. Moon's wild use of Z-Moves had so much wider-ranging
potential than any other's, and Ilima was keen to pass on his understanding of the techniques for
Moon's own abilities to grow. It was true, Z-Moves were best used in attacking, the power given by
internalising that energy instead never lasting long. But that did not mean – as Ilima and Moon had
both shown – that Z-Moves that were not attacks couldn't have use. Ilima pointed out some of the
techniques Moon's Pokemon would know, and the known results of using those as Z-Moves for
strength. Things to think about. More ideas to fill her head.

One came to the forefront in this moment of the fight.

Moon moved to a Z-Pose immediately.

For Ryuki, it was an instant decision. Attack or defense? Was Moon using an attack? Kannonade at this speed, especially seeing the attack coming, could dodge it with ease. But Moon knew that. She had to know that, and Ryuki knew Moon was better than this. No, what she was doing, it had purpose. He had to stop her. And that meant Kommo-o needed to attack. One more time. Stand still for a moment and hit that Sylveon hard!

“Flash Cannon!”

The beam of Steel-type energy hit its Fairy-type foe full-on.

The voices of the crowd were roaring. The announcers speaking as fast as they could go. Those watching in the stands either so tensely locked on their seats they could not move, or leaping to their feet in amazement. The sight of Sylveon swaying, the Steel-type attack joining the hammering it had taken bringing it down. But the Z-Pose completed in that same moment. It had achieved that one thing. Not an attack. Not a rush forward – a Breakneck Blitz. A different Normal-type technique transformed. And a different power from it gained.

Moon smiled as Sylveon, for a moment defeated, shone and stomped down a foot, regaining its balance, recovered to full in a flash of Z-Power. Then disappeared in a speedy blitz of its own.

The final technique the Intertwining Pokemon naturally learned, the Normal-type ability Psych-Up – a technique that copied the powers its opponent strengthened itself with – once enhanced by Z-Power recovered Sylveon's health as well. Left the Intertwining Pokemon restored to full, and armed with that same speed Kommo-o had gained itself.

Now to take back the pace!

Z-Moves... every time a Z-Move turned the tide. And no-one in the world could use them the way Moon did, meaning no records of Alola's strongest Trainers battling abroad – records Ryuki had specifically watched – could prepare him for such. Honestly, this was...

A singular, unique experience no other in the world could have.

Words couldn't describe his delight.

“Kannonade!”

Each was too fast. Too fast to stop, too fast to hold still. They had to keep moving, keep attacking, because if they did not they would be caught and thrown down. Sylveon was so much the healthier, but Kannonade had its speed and determination too. It wasn't like this battle ended here and now. But Ryuki could feel the pressure clearly all the same. This was the best. The absolute best.

No stopping not even for a second!

The battle stretched out further between the two.

And then...

“Ryuki calls back Kommo-o and sends out Drampa! When a Pokemon is retreated to a Pokeball they
lose the powers they build while out on the field, meaning all of the speed Kommo-o gained is now gone! Is Ryuki confident that Drampa can match Sylveon's own great speed? Or will Moon make a change as well?"

Moon did not.

She'd seen that Drampa fight. It wasn't the fastest, but could fly freely and unleash wide-ranging attacks. Howling cries, electric and psychic force, it would be difficult to reach even with great speed. But Sylveon was still doing well in strength, still armed with this great aura of speed, and still advantaged in its type. Yes, confidently Moon continued the fight.

And at last the difference between Ryuki and her was made clear.

Lunala, though young still a Legendary Pokemon of incredible strength, matched the ancient Hydreigon in a fight. Salamence, transfigured into its Ultra Evolved form, kept up with the Garchomp Lilith of Ryuki, even with that Pokemon herself Mega Evolved. And Kommo-o, the youngest of Ryuki's team, matched but did not exceed one of Moon's own, especially with Sylveon using a Z-Move. To this point, Moon had drawn equal.

Now things changed.

The strength of Dazzle, partner Drampa of Ryuki Oda, was more than Sylveon. The years the Placid Pokemon had lived, and the strength it had gained at Ryuki's side, surpassed Moon's more normal team members with ease. With confidence yet caution, a sense for the strength of her foe, Moon commanded Sylveon to attack, to move quickly through Drampa's own and launch what it could while moving – the weaker Fairy-type technique Fairy Wind for example – to wear that dragon down. Fine enough commands. The best she could do for a situation such as this.

Then Drampa roared and the force it released blew out the earth around it and flattened Sylveon against the ground.

“And there it is.” Pitaya had known this moment would come. The point at which the incredible power at Moon's side would be worn down, and what she had left would pale to Ryuki's own. Moon still had Naganadel, though that Ultra Beast was far more an unknown than Lunala and Ultra Salamence, but the rest of her team... each would struggle greatly to wear their opponents down even a little.

Here was the beginning of Ryuki Oda's counter-attack.

The great speed Sylveon had copied from Kannonade helped. Allowed the Intertwining Pokemon to successfully land attacks, to strike the Drampa foe it faced. But in no way did Sylveon's power surpass Drampa's own. And even being so much slower, Drampa's wide-ranging storms of ice, crackling surges of lightning, and booming roars of sound, still caught the Intertwining Pokemon up. Moment by moment Sylveon began to lose its grip.

Moon looked for a moment to retreat, and bring another Pokemon forth, considering what Sylveon could still do to the other members of Ryuki's team. The more Pokemon she kept, the more she'd be able to go through at the end. But if she didn't drain Ryuki's team well enough, whatever was left of his would brush hers aside with ease. With Lunala and Mega Salamence still able to fight – potentially, Moon not knowing their exact conditions or remaining strength – she had a chance still. But needed to make the right choice every time to even stand a chance of coming close.

Should she retreat Sylveon now? For who? Moon had wanted to save Naganadel for Ryuki's Dragonite, that Pokemon the next member of the Dragon Tamer's team that Moon feared the most.
Decidueye would be in great danger here. Milotic too. But it wasn't like Sylveon could take this Pokemon down. And there was no chance of landing a direct Moonblast using a sacrificial approach. Ryuki was too strong for that.

What was best was...

“Sylveon begins releasing Misty Terrain, the pink fog combining with its speed to make it impossible to track! But the power of Drampa is enough to push that fog back, meaning that even when it can't see Sylveon directly, it can be confident in attacking in the direction of Moon's Pokemon all the same!”

That was fine. The angle was right, and Drampa's attacks were pushing the fog back towards Moon. Gathering it before her. Giving her a screen. Would Ryuki know? Of course he would. Could he guess which was Moon's choice? Maybe so. Moon still did it. Called Sylveon back.

From the mist burst Mega Salamence at full speed.

Ryuki's whistle was a sign that Moon had escaped his bet. Going back to Salamence, that was the riskiest choice Moon could make. But what better place to go all in? Ryuki respected that.

Commanded Dazzle to step up its attack.

Even if Salamence was still Mega Evolved, with the damage it had taken, a proper Dragon Pulse would put this to rest.

Salamence roared loud and breathed out the pink mist it had inhaled upon release, the Fairy-type power that so intensely inhibited draconic techniques. Burst through Dazzle's incoming Dragon Pulse with the attack weakened so much.

And completed its flight by crashing headlong into the Placid Pokemon's form.

Dragon-type attacks were out. Having inhaled that much of the mist Sylveon released, Salamence couldn't summon the power to use a one. Drampa held no such problems, not touched by the mist pooling before Moon in the same way, but that didn't matter. Salamence was in close now. And filled with the vigour of being on the edge.

It was time to give everything it had.

The attacks came rapid, Salamence a far better close-range attacker than Drampa could be. Unable to beat the dragon that caught hold of it back, Dazzle struggled, even as it roared and its body shone with berserk energy, the damage it was taking driving its power to greater heights. Surely enough to defeat Salamence, even Mega Evolved, yes? At any other range for sure.

But the savaging of Salamence, unleashing the absolute fullness of its strength to finish its role in this fight, was unrelenting, the flavour of its attacks changing from second to second as claws and fangs crackled and seared, glowing with energies of all different Types. As many in as rapid succession as it could give, Salamence unleashed its all in this mad rush. That thing Moon and Hau's Pokemon could both do, when facing opponents so much stronger than they. Pushing their absolute limits to give far more than any could believe. A sign of the strength of the Bond between those Trainers and their partners in these fights. It was a beautiful thing. An admirable thing. An incredible thing.

Something so great indeed.

Salamence still hit the ground first, its Mega Evolved form fading away.

“Salamence is unable to battle!”
This was the first of Moon's Pokemon pronounced such – an incredible feat for the length of this fight so far. Two of Ryuki's were already declared defeated, and Drampa now... it was so clear the Placid Pokemon itself was barely hanging on. Ryuki grasped its own Luxury Ball and waited to see Moon's choice. If it was Milotic he'd use Serena. If it was Decidueye he'd bring out Trixie. If it was that Sylveon again... Trixie too. Naganadel? Serena. Lunala?

Oh that'd be bad.

Moon chose Naganadel.

“There it is! The Pokemon that left Necrozma's body alongside Moon! Details provided by the Aether Foundation indicate it to be the evolved form of the Ultra Beast Poipole, a Pokemon seen with Moon before! This is Naganadel, a never before seen Poison and Dragon-type Pokemon!”

Oh word? Ryuki’s grin kicked up a notch. So Moon went and got herself another Dragon-type? Nice! Nice nice nice! He liked that! Okay! This'll be good!

“Get in there Serena and show ‘em who we are!”

Even for as tall as the orange-bodied Dragon Pokemon Dragonite was, Naganadel was still so much the larger, the floating purple-bodied Ultra Beast well over a meter taller than Dragonite from end-to-end. But even facing down this unknown creature – its massive body of light and dark purple lines ending in hot pink colouration from which lengthy silver stingers stretched – in no way were Ryuki or his partner shaken in the least. Serena’s evolution had taken a long time: the Dratini-turned-Dragonair he’d brought to Alola finally finding the power to evolve in a battle with the three Captains of Akala. But from that lengthy evolution had come confidence and force of will. Serena was strong. She and Ryuki both knew that.

Time to put that strength to work.

Naganadel blitzed into speed even faster than Kannonade and Sylveon before.

“Oh!”

Only a handful had known this would be so. Moon, of course. Lana, the first to witness Naganadel's strength. And a few of the other Captains who had lent Moon their aid too. Ryuki had expected it to be fast – having seen the speed that Ultra Beast moved at before – but comparing it then to now... it was clearly fresh and ready to go. Honed even. In just a little time Moon had brought out a lot of that one's strength.

He'd have been disappointed if she hadn't.

When the needle of Naganadel pierced Serena, poison flowing along its length, the Dragon Pokemon seized hold of the Poison Pin Pokemon in turn and electrified, pulsing energy surrounding its form. Breaking from the exchange both Pokemon were left weakened – Serena poisoned and Naganadel paralysed. But the effect of the electricity lingering in Naganadel's body was so much more the dangerous, sapping at the immense speed the Ultra Beast had used for only the barest moments of time. Even just one direct attack had turned against it. Moon held Naganadel back after that, focusing on longer range attacks – Air Slash and Dragon Pulse – but found her partner unable to reach Ryuki's with them, Dragonite avoiding and countering each. Even as the poison wracking her body began to add up. These attacks exchanged between the two as the match went on... their powers were surprisingly equal in this fight.

Impressively so.
“That Dragonite is extremely strong.” Pitaya said it directly, having a keen understanding of all Dragon-type Pokemon herself. Bar those unknown. “And that is why Naganadel matching it as it is is so genuinely impressive to me. I have seen and battled Ultra Beasts, and I feel as though this Pokemon of Moon's matches their strength well. Which is testament to the strength of that Dragonite once again. I will enjoy... the chance to learn more about Moon's newest partner when this is done.”

Were Moon to have any faculties free to listen to the announcements going on during this fight, she'd immediately find herself nervous about just how intently Pitaya wished to put this partner of hers through its paces.

Dragonite, able to catch hold of the electricity-stricken Naganadel, closed the distance and landed a mighty Dragon-type blow, sending the Poison Pin Pokemon reeling back. Enough damage to send Naganadel spiralling down, stinger pointing upwards as Dragonite charged after. That was true, after the initial Poison Jab, all the rest of Naganadel's attacks had come from its upper body instead.

So the Venoshock that burst out from Naganadel's main stinger into Dragonite's path should be quite the surprise.

Plumeria, watching, narrowed her eyes. Still slightly disappointed she'd been unable to catch Poipole way back when.

Of course such a thing as this was not going to catch Ryuki Oda out. Chasing after an opponent, of course it would attack into their path. Serena curved easily around the poison wave, expecting it, and pulled back a hand to continue her Outrage. Ah, don't forget the poison is going to fall afterwards. Gravity and all.

The bright chittering of Naganadel's voice as Serena closed in to strike reached even she. Such an amusing cry. Charming. Serena still struck in full. Naganadel, taking the blow, held on for just a little longer. Grasped Serena's arm with its own two. Ryuki called louder.

“Hey Serena! Gravity!”

She should be able to break free. She was stronger in body, and— the poison wracking Serena gave her pause, just as the paralysis Naganadel suffered affected it too. But Naganadel's grip was tight. And its weight enough. They held. This one Pokemon of Moon's something Ryuki struggled to predict, the battle swaying back and forth between it and Serena too chaotically to measure. Naganadel chittered again, holding the Dragonite in place.

And the Venoshock fired upwards rained down upon them both.

For neither did this end it, even as both fell to the ground below. Serena, mustering more power, struck Naganadel again, continuing her Outrage, the poison clouding her clear thoughts. What was in that poison, Ryuki found himself wondering, that drove Pokemon inflicted with it into such a rage? Serena should have broken away and dodged the falling poison, but instead just kept on attacking. And was still attacking now, even as the poison in her system worked its way through. That Pokemon of Moon's... he really couldn't make sense of it. Dangerous. Way too dangerous.

He was glad the judge called it defeated once Serena was done.

Not so much to see her fall to the poison too.

“Both Trainer's Pokemon are unable to battle! Retrieve them and prepare another!”

For Naganadel's first official fight, Moon couldn't be more thankful for what it did. Brought down the most fearsome of Ryuki's remaining Pokemon to her eyes. With Nebby she'd stopped Hydreigon.
With Salamence Garchomp. And with Naganadel now Dragonite. Kommo-o and Drampa had both taken a beating too. Only Turtonator still remained fresh. And Moon had Sylveon – tired but able – and Decidueye and Milotic – fresh themselves – to go on. And Nebby, if need be. The odds were in her favour, thanks to the incredible efforts her partners had shown. But it wasn’t over yet. It wasn’t over until this was done. And Ryuki still had that presence of power. He was in the highlight moment of his life right now. He wouldn’t stop for anything.

There was every chance he might still win.

“Go go Dazzle!”

Milotic... huh?

Moon frowned. Ryuki had done the same as she had with Salamence before, choosing the more exhausted Pokemon to escape prediction. That Drampa... it was breathing heavy true, having taken so much damage from Salamence, but Moon wouldn’t relax for a second while it was still moving. It had some really powerful Electric-type attacks. And she’d just sent Milotic out. Milotic who had Ice-type specialising, thanks to Lana’s training, but even still was a Water-type Pokemon itself. This could be rough.

Moon set the Icium-Z into her Z-Ring and commanded her partner to move.

“Milotic dives towards the hole still left from Lunala’s Z-Move before! A dangerously restrictive place, yet a good chokepoint as well! How she uses this to fight back will define how this battle will go!”

Ryuki was already pretty confident he knew. Milotic had gone fast enough to dodge Dazzle’s initial Thunder attack, and there was no good way for Dazzle to arc another down into that hole. Which meant either get close and attack in, or deal with Milotic popping its head up and shooting off Ice Beams. Or Moon starting a Z-Move with it, which would be terrible too. Not that – given how worn down Dazzle was – Moon shouldn’t be saving Z-Moves for both Milotic and Decidueye to try and stop Trixie, but holding anything back was a key way to lose a fight like this. If Moon used a Z-Move now, Ryuki wouldn’t accuse her of making the wrong choice.

Maybe it was just that even with her great strength, Moon still had no true right choice to stopping him here.

Well he’d not think those thoughts until this battle was done.

Mouth dripping with liquid flame, Dazzle took off into the air, circling the hole pierced through the League battlefield. Burning breath sending surges of fire down, the Drampa began to torch its edges, repeating what Ultra Salamence had done before. And that intense fire, it would definitely stop any Ice-type techniques Milotic tried to unleash. So it could stay in that hole and have molten earth rain down upon it, or try and pop up and attack. If Moon thought her partner could stand up to Dazzle’s strength.

Risky bet to take though.

It wasn’t like Dazzle had the greatest amount of strength left. The damage from Salamence mattered, a lot. So while the Drampa could still in regular power be a great danger to Moon’s own Pokemon, as soon as Moon went beyond it was pretty cut and dry.

So when Moon performed the Ice-type Z-Pose, jagged movements of her arms building upwards, before swinging them out and then forwards, Ryuki didn't even spend a second thinking about
defense. While that Milotic was using its attack, he'd just have Dazzle strike it with as much power as they could. A big ol' Thunder right down on the Tender Pokemon trying to take them down. Would that make this a draw? Probably not, with that Z-Aura wrapping around Milotic as it rose from the hole, a pillar of ice driving it higher and higher into the air, but it'd still hurt. And Trixie could pick up the slack.

Moon now had only one Z-Move with Decidueye left. And if she thought Decidueye would get the proper chance to use it facing Trixie... oh she'd better not.

The Ice-type Z-Move Subzero Slammer struck true. Flew as a great beam through the air, striking Dazzle and exploding into a truly gigantic bloom of ice. As the encasement fell to the ground it shattered, releasing the unconscious dragon from within, this the fourth of Ryuki's partners defeated in the fight. But oh yes, the attacks of Dazzle had reached too. When Milotic dropped from the fading ice pillar, coiling over the ground, no water shield was wrapped around it, and clear were the burns of electrical force. Dazzle's last attack had struck well.

Ryuki held not a second's concern in sending Trixie, his partner Turtonator and last fresh Pokemon in his team, out to play.

Coming up on the final set.

Ice and Water were effective types for Moon to use here, but only just that. Effective. To strike a truly powerful blow against that Turtonator, to start pushing it to an edge Sylveon and, if necessary, Decidueye could send it over, Moon needed to hit hard. But Milotic had both used a Z-Move, and taken a powerful electric attack. It hadn't seemed to paralyse Milotic at least, one faint miracle, but the situation was still... rough. Moon did not know what strength Nebby still had left after the battle with Hydreigon before. She needed to believe that with the rest of her team besides she could do this.

She had to go beyond here and now!

Dragon Pulse met Dragon Pulse – the technique something Turtonator naturally learned, and Milotic had been taught thanks to Pitaya's hand. If a Pokemon could learn a Dragon-type technique, Pitaya knew and knew how best to teach it. She was a true master Trainer of her chosen type. Trainer and teacher both. Moon knew full well the Guildmaster was a significant reason she'd made it this far.

Pitaya, watching from the commentator's seats, felt herself tense as this battle neared its final rounds.

She truly wanted Moon to win.

“Smog!”

The poison mist Trixie breathed from her snout quickly filled up the air before her, obscuring the Blast Turtle Pokemon from sight. Moon called Ice Beam in response, the hefty ray of frost piercing through the poison cloud, sweeping horizontally across where Trixie had been. But the Flamethrower the Turtonator met it with detonated the ice into a heavier steam, mixing with the poison and billowing out. A suddenly denser screen than before.

Moon knew what was coming next.

Ordered Milotic back to the giant hole it had hid within before.

It didn't make it before Trixie, in the wake of the Shell Smash amplifying her speed and power at the cost of defense, surged across the battlefield and caught hold of the Tender Pokemon's tail.

Tail glowing with Dragon-type energy, since Moon was expecting her opponent to do just that.
At so close a range the Turtonator did not hold back in the least: unleashing one more powerful Dragon Pulse, the wave of energy washing over Milotic's form. So powerful and bright that Moon actually hadn't been able to tell, and *Milotic* hadn't been able to tell, whether that Dragon Tail had even hit. Moon would just need to hope it had. That even a little had been done.

Called the defeated Milotic back and returned Sylveon to the field.

Psych Up, that was what this battle would be fought over next. If Sylveon could copy the aura of power wrapping Turtonator's form, it would enable the Intertwining Pokemon to do so much more. To turn the tide just a little more. *If* Sylveon could use that technique. But like so many, it wasn't something to use while in motion. Something that required a moment's stillness, a moment's focus, a moment's strength.

Using Quick Attack, Sylveon evaded as Trixie dashed in and swung her tail wreathed in Steel-type power overhead.

Ah.

That... the Turtonator partner of Ryuki was stronger than the normal trio of Moon's team. And that super-effective Iron Tail, from a Turtonator powered up by Shell Smash... no way, one hit and that was it. Just one hit. No way Psych Up could help here. No, something else, something better, pink mist falling from Sylveon's rapidly dodging form and swelling up around it. Misty Terrain would help the tiniest amount but- with each swing of her tail, the Turtonator partner of Ryuki blew the mist further back. Not for more than a single moment.

Sylveon dashed in as Trixie was dealing with the mist and wrapped its feelers tight around the Turtonator's swinging tail, the Fairy-type technique Draining Kiss – channelled through the ribbon-like feelers of the Intertwining Pokemon – an attack that drained energy from a foe into its wielder. And with Sylveon holding onto that tail, Trixie couldn't use it to properly attack either. Probably the best decision given the circumstances that could be made.

But there was a fine line between desperation and necessity, and that line was defined by the strength of the opponent you faced. Trixie did still lash her tail, not with Steel-type energy, simply upwards with great strength.

Still holding on to it, Sylveon found itself hurled towards the Turtonator's spike-shelled back.

Moon's call for Moonblast at the same time as the release of those feelers was the best choice once more. Nothing holding Sylveon in place, and the power of that attack enough to push the Intertwining Pokemon back. Sylveon itself, able to do both of those things in these split-seconds, showed truly impressive ability too. Something Eevee-users in watch around the world took note of. That was fast – really fast. Impressive indeed.

But Trixie's spines were already glowing bright and, even if Moonblast was by tradition a ranged attack, at this close range it was still enough to set that Shell Trap off. The explosion from the Turtonator's back was large as from the smoke and fire Sylveon flew. Again, hard to tell if the attack unleashed from Moon's partner had reached at all. Both Milotic and Sylveon had ended up this way. Beaten without even knowing for sure what they'd done.

The fourth of Moon now declared unable to go on.

The numbers of this battle drawn even at long last.

“There is not much left now.”
For Moon, Decidueye, her longest-held partner, a truly powerful final form of the Alolan Starter Pokemon Rowlet's line. And Lunala, strength and stamina remaining unknown. A Legendary Pokemon, a high Legendary Pokemon, yes. But still young. And still having spent so much battling Hydreigon before. Moon herself did not know what Nebby could still do. And the thought of putting it against the two of Ryuki's Pokemon to remain...

Trixie, the Turtonator partner of the Dragon Tamer before her, was still aglow. Had suffered some damage, but an unknown amount all the same. Moon couldn't predict that Blast Turtle Pokemon's strength. Kommo-o, the other remaining member of Ryuki's team, had been worn down well by Sylveon before, but was still something Moon was unsure about the remaining power of. Both of these... Moon had to beat both of these. Could she? Even after coming so far, it was still so close. Still so down to the wire. She could feel her heartbeat hammering, no echo of hunger but genuine intensity powering her this time.

Could she? That wasn't important. She wanted to.

She wanted to perhaps more than anything she'd ever done before in her life.

"Moon sends out Decidueye, the Grass and Ghost-type Pokemon at a severe disadvantage facing the Turtonator of Ryuki! Besides Decidueye, Lunala still remains, and may well have been the better choice!"

"Decidueye is still capable of performing a Z-Move," Pitaya tempered Alexa's commentary. "If Moon can successfully use one – likely by the Decidium-Z – she may be able to bring that Turtonator down. May. It is hard to tell how much that Pokemon has left with the determination of Ryuki giving her so much strength."

Moon actively set the Decidium-Z, the green Z-Crystal bound to the Ghost-type, into her Z-Power Ring. Ryuki saw that loud and clear. Alright then.

"Let's see what you've got!"

Decidueye was by no means the faster of these two, with the power of Shell Smash magnifying the Turtonator's speed. But the reactions and intent of the Arrow Quill Pokemon were quick, disappearing in a blitz of leaves as Trixie closed in on her, dodging a streaming spray of flame, before appearing overhead and firing a Spirit Shackle down.

The chaining arrow piercing into Trixie's shadow, binding the Blast Turtle in place, as with a flap of her wings Decidueye soared higher still.

"Overheat!"

The explosion of flame falling just short of her rapid ascent.

Trixie, wreathed in fire, moved freely, the arrow binding her incinerated in a single overwhelming display. Fire-type users, Kiawe in the crowd knowing well, knew that power couldn't be used repeatedly, especially not in so defensive a way, but with Decidueye's weakness to flame, the Turtonator could still push things further all the same.

Ryuki's eyes flicked up, following the column of fire Trixie breathed into the sky, watching Moon's partner dodge out of the way. She'd been hoping to use a Z-Move there, he was sure. But one little binding arrow wasn't nearly enough to stop him here. He was going to go further! Push higher! Shine brighter! If Moon wanted to surpass him, she had to surpass him! Do or die time!

Show him what she had!
No arrow of Decidueye, fired even as the Arrow Quill Pokemon soared through the sky, could reach the Turtonator Trixie, her streams of flame incinerating each with ease, threatening Decidueye in the air so closely each time, the feathers and leaf shroud of the partner of Moon already singed from how close the fire had come. Distance was failing Moon. But was there anything Decidueye could do when in close? No, one Overheat and that would be it. She couldn't dodge out of one of those in time. Too close and she'd be defeated without fail. Too far and her attacks couldn't reach. With great caution Moon's partner slowly approached the Turtonator, keeping a distance but reducing it all the same. Firing arrows and watching for the chance to strike.

Looking for any possible way still to win.

Moon didn't know this, but Trixie was not doing nearly as well as her excellent offence and defense implied. Both Milotic and Sylveon had successfully landed their final attacks, and attacks launched with the spirit of knowing this was the last thing you could do were far more powerful than any other a Pokemon could unleash. Fact of the matter was, Decidueye was winning the stamina battle right now. And Shell Smash consumed a lot of stamina to use as well. If Moon kept dodging, cracks would form in Trixie's assault soon enough. And then if a solid Z-Move followed, Decidueye would definitely knock the Turtonator out.

Knowing Lunala was still lurking about, that was the one thing Ryuki didn't want to let come to pass. He had to defeat Decidueye before Trixie's stamina ran out.

So Ryuki slowed his partner, just a touch, before she was slowed by her own weakening constitution. Enough for Decidueye to maybe try and do something, and for Ryuki to catch the Pokemon off-guard by having Trixie speed back up. It was a pretty simple feint, but this deep in a battle, simple was best. The mind got too worked up and worn out. Go back to reliable classics, this was the time for that.

Ryuki's focus remained as the gaps between Trixie's attacks widened, just a little bit.

Moon kept Decidueye back.

Oh, uh...

Side-hopping to dodge a Spirit Shackle wasn't hard with Trixie's speed, so it wasn't like Decidueye could pin the Blast Turtle down, but there was definitely enough room to try some more notable attacks- hey that glow was a healing technique, right?

Ah heck.

Having found the chance to use Synthesis between Turtonator's attacks, Decidueye shook herself in the air, the slight burns she had suffered from dodging the fire before all washed away by the light of the Grass-type healing technique. Moon had chosen to rely on what she did not know for sure. That the attacks of Milotic and Sylveon had done well, and that Trixie was far less well than she appeared. Given the sudden slowing of Ryuki's commands, seemed that was true.

But relying on a Z-Move here was too dangerous a choice to make. Rather, the further Decidueye could wear their opponent down, the better. Even if this was so much slower a fight. Moon kept her focus, despite the burning in her mind from the intensity of the battle so far. She wasn't done yet. The match wasn't over.

She hadn't. Yet. Won.

Ryuki struggled. Trixie was burning stamina faster than Moon's Pokemon, and didn't have a healing
technique of her own either. Swapping her for Kannonade wouldn't work – she'd lose Shell Smash if that happened and without that speed they were done. If he was really going to overcome this defensive play – the exact correct choice to make of all the many choices there could be – he'd need to really go all out. The two of them, Trixie and he, they hadn't finished working on this one yet. Her own special move. But if not now then when?

The greatest of risks for the greatest opportunity of them all!

“Let's go for it! Dragon Wheel!”

Pokemon techniques changed from species to species, even when grouped under the same name. Was the surge of raw heat from the body of a Turtonator the same as a Camerupt's release of fire from its back, even if both were under the name of Overheat? Was the Dragon Claw of Lilith, swept with the blades of her arms, the same as the active claws of a Druddigon? Trainers accepted common shapes for techniques, but the best Trainers sought to change them into things that were more. The linking of Kannonade's two attacks into one moment together was one such. The way Moon's Decidueye could dodge in a puff of leaves was another. The search for new ways to express power, the refinement of techniques that were theirs alone, that was a path for the master Trainers of the world. Ryuki had some amongst his team.

This one was a work in progress.

It required Shell Smash, reducing not only Trixie's armour but weight. And giving her even more speed and strength. Shifting to stand sideways facing Decidueye, the Blast Turtle Pokemon raised her head high, small puffs of fire emerging from her snout. The commentators were calling this as something coming. Of course something was coming. It was so obvious. Decidueye was already firing a Spirit Shackle to tie Trixie down. But too late. Way too late.

At Ryuki's command, the Blast Turtle Pokemon swung her head down and breathed out the most powerful storm of flames she could release. A jet so forceful it lifted her from the ground.

And so angled that it turned her body around.

The fire still pouring at that angle from which she faced. And so she spun.

And flew.

A disc of fiery Blast Turtle surging through the air.

“Pitaya... have you ever seen a Turtonator do that before?”

“No.”

Dragon Wheel, that was the name Ryuki had given this move. It put a lot, a lot of pressure on Trixie to do, and they still hadn't perfected her aim. But the speed and the flight, it was something no-one ever saw coming. So hey, Decidueye, coming at'cha.

Dodge this.

If you can.

She'd been firing an arrow as Turtonator launched herself into the air. The recovery period was small, Decidueye a speedy archer, but still there. And the Blast Turtle Pokemon was flying in so fast. So so fast. She'd be hit. Take the full weight and flames of the Turtonator and be slammed against the barrier wall. Defeated in one singular blow.
Were it not for the voice of Moon in her mind, the girl linked to her from the day they first met, telling her to watch closely all the same.

All they had to do was dodge. They'd dodged so many strong attacks so many times before. From this Turtonator and so many Pokemon prior. Moon still remembered her partner, as a Dartrix, beginning to form this technique in the Grand Trial with Kahuna Olivia. And the refinement of it in the training with Pitaya. They could do this. Just watch, and wait. Even if it was at the very last moment. Even if you could feel the flames reaching out to you.

All you had to do was dodge.

Decidueye calmed and watched with the focused eyes of an archer who could strike any target without fail.

And found the single second to move.

Perhaps, if Ryuki and Trixie had been able to refine their technique further before this fight, it would have been over here. If the attack Dragon Wheel had been completed, Decidueye could not have seen that one moment, the point at which Trixie veered and had to correct, in which she could dodge. But the truth was that much like Moon, Ryuki himself was still growing further as well. And the rougher parts of both Trainer's abilities were being dredged up in this fight, because those were now all they had left.

Pushed so far as to give everything they had, all that remained was desperation and intent.

As Decidueye, falling after dodging through the attack Turtonator unleashed, the leaves she released evaporated in flame, drew back an arrow, Moon moved for her Z-Pose. Ryuki couldn't get Trixie to stop with her locked in flight as she was.

The Decidueye-specific Z-Move, Sinister Arrow Raid, launched without any way to stop its flight.

Twenty points of Z-Power, exploding across Turtonator's form, juggled the Blast Turtle Pokemon through the air, this way and that, with each arrow following the last. The fullness of the strength of the first partner of Moon, and one she trusted with her whole heart to see her through, unleashed upon their foe.

A power that, Moon believed, would be enough.

Left to fall from the air, Trixie hit the ground upon her back.

And did not rise again.

It had been.

"Turtonator is unable to battle!"

At this level... Ryuki couldn't tell. Whether he'd made mistake, been outplayed, or simply outmatched. He'd watch this battle again, look for what he could have done differently, but here and now he was just surprised. Battling him like this, Moon had really gone beyond. From the day he'd first met her he'd wanted to see her shine. Here she was, so bright indeed. How much of her light had he been responsible for? Leading her to the Bagon that would become Salamence? Teaching her a little, inspiring her a lot – he'd like to think at least. And this fight here, he was sure that Moon had grown so much more in it alone. Amazing.

So amazing.
So much so he couldn't even blink.

Sent Kannonade out for the final curtain call.

If there were to be encores, he'd save them for another day.

Though Ryuki Oda would never complain about another chance to match Moon in a Pokemon Battle again.

“Even using Synthesis to heal it before, Decidueye has still spent significant stamina in this fight! And used a Z-Move! But we can't discount the damage Kommo-o took either! Using Autotomize means that Pokemon's weight will still be reduced, even if it doesn't have the same aura that gave it great speed! It will still be fast! Tired, but fast! This battle... is still either's to win!”

Anna's excitement kept the crowd going, even with this long battle having worn more than just the competitors down. Not that it was faulted, not that any of this could be anything but celebrated, but more than just Moon and Ryuki felt the intensity of this fight overwhelming their minds.

A true battle at the peak could be a hard thing to handle indeed.

Decidueye and Kannonade moved. The second faster than the first, but the first still shifting to evade the silvery beam of energy the Scaly Pokemon unleashed. Ryuki called Kannonade to continue a Focus Blast, just because the Scaly Pokemon was more comfortable using the two attacks together. But knew the Fighting-type move wouldn't touch Decidueye at all. Moon's Pokemon took it while standing still, drawing back another Spirit Shackle to bind Kommo-o down. The arrow successfully hit but, rattling its scales Kannonade unleashed a Dragon-type burst of force and blew that arrow away too. It wouldn't be stopped here. Ran forward once more, still so much faster than the Scaly Pokemon usually moved.

Moon called Decidueye's dodge but her partner's movements were too slow.

Kannonade rammed the Arrow Quill Pokemon all the way into the barrier wall.

It took the Dragon-type move Outrage to do it, Decidueye's Ghost-type slippery to catch, and meant Kannonade was locked into the attacks for a little more. But could Decidueye break away and escape, when she was so exhausted from everything so far? Ryuki was again a betting man.

He'd overcome this here and now!

Bursting with an intense Flying-type aura, Decidueye bore the next of Kannonade's furious strikes, the fist of the Scaly Pokemon repelled by the super-effective attack. Ah yeah, Decidueye had done this one before. Used Brave Bird without moving in the battle with Ilima, taking the damage harder because she wasn't attacking directly, but becoming hard to hit as well. Kinda the same as what Lilith had done against Ultra Salamence earlier in the fight too. Ryuki considered that as, directly before him, Decidueye launched herself into Kannonade's next attack.

And the explosion of each meeting the other erupted with light and smoke enveloping them both.

The crowd's voice, silent. Anna, Alexa, and Pitaya all waiting. Ryuki staring into the smoke, Moon from far across the field doing the same. The judge for this match moving closer to see what the result would be. From an attack like that... for sure one would be bested now. One or...

The smoke, rising away; the form of Decidueye, lying beaten on the ground.

And Kommo-o too.
Neither Pokemon left with any strength to rise.

“Both Trainer's Pokemon are unable to battle!”

The silence hung for a moment more, as Ryuki's eyes raised to meet Moon's own. In her hand, the purple Master Ball. Moon activated it once again.

Rising high into the air within the battlefield's span, the Moone Pokemon Lunala gave a loud cry. One more of Moon's Pokemon still able to go on.

Not one of Ryuki's left to rise against it.

“Ryuki's six Pokemon have been defeated! The winner is: Moon!”

And then came the noise. Then came the cheers. Then came the voices of so many, here, across Alola, and across the world. Hau, Moon was sure she could hear him yelling from the stands. But the pounding in her head was blocking almost all sound out. She'd... done it. From Nebby, last of her team with any strength left to give, she felt happiness. And perhaps, through a distant and quiet link, Lillie's too.

Perhaps.

“Haha.” A moment's surprised laughter, from the one standing on the other side of the stage. Then a roaring gale, Ryuki letting loose with absolute mirth in this moment. She'd done it! She'd really done it! Moon had given her all and so had he and she’d been the one to win! She'd really really done it! His own voice capable of reaching such volumes, Ryuki added his to the crowd's cheering for Moon, delighted beyond measure to have shone in such a place. No shine could have been greater. No battle more fulfilling. Win or lose, it didn't matter, not for what they just did.

This was right.

This was good.

This was the way it should be. He didn't have a single complaint to make. Just appreciation and thankfulness for this stage he'd been able to shine upon.

Ah, Ryuki paused, the chant of Moon's name through the crowd pulsing again and again, so there it was, amongst the cheers. He'd heard about it so many times, imitated it through his own sense for the world, but it was only here in this moment that it truly reached him too. So this was its sound.

The sound of the song of Alola calling Moon's name.

The First Alolan Pokemon League - Finals
Before we begin, I want to give a shoutout to Fallout by Mewr11, a new Pokemon fic inspired by Eldritch. The phenomenon of Trainer's Bonds that I described, as well as other aspects like the timings of growth, and Type Biases, I'm both incredibly proud and
humbled to see other people taking up for their own works. It truly means a lot to me. Thank you very much.

And now to the chapter. With this, the Semifinals are complete. I am, truly, stunned by the magnitude of my own arrogance in thinking I could write these two fights as a single chapter, especially with the need to give Hau and Moon both their full fights. The sheer volume of words behind Eldritch has thrown me every which way in my writing of it, and it seems even being in the final chapters I can't escape that. But it's okay. There are, unquestionably, only two chapters left now. Each will be what it needs to be.

We head now to the grand finale.

To my readers, as always, thank you so much for joining me on this journey. To those leaving comments, know that every message means a lot to me, and I'll often go back and read comments on older chapters to enjoy your thoughts on each. Never shy from leaving any thoughts that come to you. And finally, for those able, please consider sharing Eldritch using either of the following links, or creating your own posts for other people to see. It would mean the world to me to have even one more reader find this story as we go into its final moments.

twitter: https://twitter.com/TaurusWrites/status/1117187195503124480
umblr: https://taurusversant.tumblr.com/post/177933301628

That is it for now. Thank you for reading this chapter, and please look forward to the next, and penultimate, chapter of Eldritch. Chapter 61:

A Setting Sun
“Solgaleo and Lunala don't want to fight.”

Those were the words, spoken by Hau with Moon alongside, that marked the opening of their first appearance for interview – the discussion overseen by Kahuna Hala and Professor Kukui, but the two ceding the speaking to Hau and Moon alone. They were the finalists of the first Alolan Pokemon League. Children they may be, but they were also the two standing now at Alola's peak. With that came responsibility. Not as much as what the victors of the next would carry – those who'd rise to the top of the open League taking place in two years' time – but even still... for now...

They'd been prepared. Once recovered from the surprise of his defeat at his own grandson's hands, Hala had told Hau what would come, should the boy find it in him to surpass Kukui as well. It was a longshot, the Kahuna knew, but not something he would claim impossible anymore. Not with the effort and drive that had brought Hau to this point.

The appearance of Solgaleo, and subsequent bonding of the Emissary of the Sun to his grandson, only confirmed for Hala he had been right to prepare the young boy so.

It truly felt as if Alola itself was calling him to this peak.

Him and one other.

Jewellery had been the first to tell Moon. Not that she herself had reached any similar height – a competitor in the Kantonian League, but eliminated in the first major round – but she knew her way around interviews and reporters all the same. For her daughter who was so much shyer, so much more reclusive and less able to deal with mass attention, Moon would have difficulty. But she'd chosen to go this far. To reach for this height so many would see her from.

As much as Jewellery wanted her daughter to live a life free of troubling things, Moon had chosen to go to this place. Her name, already carved into the world, had been etched even deeper now that she had come this far. She must be ready for what that entailed.

As children, Moon and Hau both still had so much further to grow. The people they were only just beginning to truly take shape. But the power of their Bonds, the intensity each carried within their hearts, and the strength of their love for their Pokemon and their Pokemon's love for them had brought about this result. They were known. They would always be known. Now they must learn to stand being so.

So young, but they must learn, so that they might be able to go on.

A request for clarification. Hau took the lead, more confident before a crowd than Moon.

“They wanted to fight beside us. But they don't want to fight each other. So we're not going to make
It was hard to measure the air of disappointment, the sting of such starting in the crowd before these two children and spreading out across the world. To see Alola’s greatest Legendary Pokemon, to see them expressing their strength on that stage, it had been a true delight. Another unexpected sight in an endless stream of such born of this League. For the finale to not be a clash of such powers? Only the technical crew, learning they would not have to try and maintain the League defense systems while those two battled it out, breathed out relief.

Hala and Kukui had known. Hau had told the first soon after Moon’s victory was claimed, a conversation with Solgaleo had in which the young boy felt that wish. That desire to do no battle with Lunala. Moon, on the same day, visited Iki to tell Hala and Hau the same was true for Lunala itself. For Nebby. Those two Pokemon, they truly wished to do no harm to one another, even if it were in play alone. That was the one thing that they would not do.

Hau’s Bond with Solgaleo vanished soon after that truth was made known.

He didn’t regret it. The connection with Solgaleo, it had taught Hau so much, even if it would take him years to understand every lesson that had come into his heart in the short time they’d been together. It would stay, Hau spoke of the Legendary Pokemon, knowing its will, until his battle with Moon was done. Then the Emissary of the Sun would move on again. It was not a Pokemon to be kept in one place, to one partner, but one that was meant to roam freely and connect with those in need when the time came.

With that Bond gone, Hau retrieved Talonflame to his side once more, finding to his delight the weight of its Bond so much easier to bear. These six Pokemon... to the finals of Alola’s first Pokemon League they would go.

For Moon it was different. Nebby held no desire to fight Solgaleo either, but neither did the Emissary of the Moon wish to leave Moon’s side. It was waiting, for Lillie to return. For Moon, Lillie, and itself to be together again. Lunala was young, so much younger than Solgaleo. Perhaps the Moone Pokemon would spend all of Moon and Lillie’s lives by their side, only moving on in the far distant future when both were gone. Perhaps.

For Moon, with Solgaleo not her opponent, she found in herself no interest in bringing Nebby to the finals either. It was... the battle between her and Hau, it wasn't about such powers. And Nebby was connected as deeply to Lillie as it was to Moon. Moon wouldn't ask Lillie to fight alongside her against Hau. She was meant to support both of them there. The battle itself... it was for just the two of them. They and those with them. Only them. So instead with Volcarona rejoining her team, with those six partners at her side, Moon would meet Hau's own. A proper team for their final battle. That was how it should be.

Even now she questioned herself. The power she carried that made her different: her Z-Moves without limit, her Mega Evolution for Salamence, and Ultra Evolution one step further still. And now Naganadel as well. That Pokemon, that Ultra Beast, was strong. The difference in power... Moon struggled to voice it in a way that was not insulting to the one she would fight. But it concerned her all the same.

Hau had looked at her, once the two had expressed that the Legendary Pokemon partnered to them did not wish to fight, and spoke those words again. That reminder of what she had to do. The promise they'd made.

“No holding back.”
If Moon gave any less than her all, if she restrained herself even a little, it would be a far more painful thing than anything else. And besides, Hau had smiled, if you were to hold back, Moon, I'd beat you because I won't be at all. Got that?

...she did.

The reporters questioned this, Moon's difference from all others. She'd used her unique ability to overcome opponents that were in strength and experience far beyond her. But for Hau...

If she did not fight to the fullest of her ability, Moon answered clearly, repeating what Hau had told her in Iki Town that day, she would lose without fail. If she thought about using a Z-Move, then decided not to, in that moment of indecision Hau would surpass her. The core of her style was in bringing those powers out. If she didn't, she'd be battling not only without them, but without all the work she and her team had put into their battles so far.

It was all or nothing.

And that, Hau added to her voice, was exactly how they wanted it to be.

The interview continued. Then was repeated on television that night, circled around the world. The understanding that Solgaleo and Lunala's appearance in the Alolan Pokemon League was done, and the finale would be of Trainers and raised partners alone.

Perhaps, some said, that was how it should be. Perhaps.

Lillie called to Moon. This was the first time, her face on the screen of the tablet Moon held, that she and Nebby had seen one another since back then. The joyous sound of the Moone Pokemon, the way it pushed its face against the screen so quickly as to knock it from Moon's hands, only caught from hitting the ground by the Legendary Pokemon's own psychic powers, made Lillie laugh so.

"Nebby," she said, "I'm so glad to see you safe." And by the warmth of Lillie's voice both Moon and Nebby felt their hearts glow.

They spoke together, those three, Lillie recounting her own adventures so far to Moone and Moon. Smaller things, expeditions with the researchers, time spent teaching Sunny with other Trainers starting their journeys from Pallet. It was a peaceful moment, a reunion of three and celebration of Moon's feat. To reach the finale...

"Moon, I will be watching you both."

And cheering for them both?

"Haha, of course."

Four more days. Five in total, from the day Moon and Ryuki's battle completed. It was the right of the victors, the finalists, to decide the time and date. This was the date. As for the time? That was set too.

The evening of that final day. A time shared by not only the sun and moon, but the best for the world and Lillie too. That was the one thing Moon and Hau wanted most. For the time they battled to be one that did not force Lillie to rise so early in the day. This was something to share with her too.
Four more days.

“Hey Moon?”

?

“We really did it, huh?”

...they did.

As the sun passed overhead on the second to last day, the one after this for resting, and then the finale beyond, Moon and Hau sat upon a small island within the Poke Pelago, Lunala and Solgaleo alongside. Other Pokemon were gathered around too, but it was these two and two enjoying the sea breeze as one. They wouldn't see one another tomorrow, preparing for their match as they'd be. And anywhere else, seeing these two together in one place would bring attention. But here was Moon's one place, separate from everywhere else, where she could be alone and at peace. Just her and her Pokemon. Mohn present, of course, but the older gentleman – Hau completely failing to pick up on family resemblances in a continuing fashion – giving Moon her free space.

The invitation to Hau to come with her here, he appreciated it deeply. Understood just how important this place was at a glance. The many Pokemon here – so this was what Acerola had meant – all flocking to Moon, but appreciating him too. Hey there, Hau had said to those he'd met before, good to see you again.

Moon smiled to see him so well received.

“Did you think we would?”

She... didn't know. She'd never thought far enough ahead. Only to what was next, at first, because she wanted to keep going. So she and Hau could keep going and chasing and pushing each other.

“Until we pushed too far.”

Until they did. She still regretted that.

“I think... that's okay, that it happened and you regret it. The Island Challenge is about learning and growing, right? So we learned. And we grew. That means it's okay. Everyone makes mistakes after all, right?”

...right. Even still, for how hard she'd pushed herself, and Hau, and Hau had pushed himself too, for them to make it here in so short a time, faster than anyone ever before...

“We had a lot of help! All the Captains. And Kahuna. Our Pokemon. Solgaleo and Nebby too!”

Both Legendary Pokemon made pleased noises to be so acknowledged.

Even so...

“Hey Moon... did anyone ever tell you you think too much?”

Lillie told her she didn't think enough.

“Hahaha that's true too!”
She understood though. They'd come this far. That was what mattered most. That they were here. All that mattered was what would come next. She really was going to give it her all. Every Z-Move she could manage, Naganadel, Ultra Evolution too. Because that was what it meant to not hold back.

“That's good, or all my hard work training to beat you would go to waste!”

Oho? Moon's smile took a Ryuki-esque quality. She'd like to see that. Hau met her with his own grin that took more elements from his grandfather, Acerola, and a little of Ilima too.

“You will!”

The Pokemon gathered around them, keeping the slightest distance, shifted now, the playful intensity between the two Trainers raising their own attention too. Hau's Pokemon, manifested and spread amongst Moon's own, made quick exclamations of their partner's strength, answered with incredulity from many but respect from Moon's team alone. They understood.

The feeling in their Trainers' hearts was too strong a thing to feel anything but.

Solgaleo shifted, swinging its head to the side, surprising Type: Null – the Synthetic Pokemon having worked up its nerve to approach the Sunne Pokemon. The staredown between the two was brief, before the Pokemon created by the Aether Foundation shifted closer. Within its body was the power to fight Ultra Beasts, and the energy of the Ultra Wormhole through which Solgaleo could travel still lingered about its metallic form. But so too was a greater dignity and rightness of the Sunne Pokemon's existence. The metal-bound Type: Null found itself unsure what to do about this being come to the land it watched over.

Solgaleo spent not a moment's thought before opening its jaws wide and closing them around the Synthetic Pokemon's head.

The sound of metal breaking was what made Moon and Hau turn around, each jumping to their feet at the sight of the solar deity with its mouth latched around Type: Null's head. But then there was a flash of white light, and Solgaleo relaxed its grip to pull back, leaving in its wake bronze metal in pieces falling to the ground, and a very stunned Silvally standing stock-still in place.

Moon rushed to her Pokemon, throwing her arms around its neck and putting her entire focus into making sure that it could feel her reassurances. Honestly, in place of fear or concern, she could only receive shock from the released Synthetic Pokemon.

It wasn't... entirely sure... what just happened...

Hau tried, and failed, to lecture the Sunne Pokemon, with the great lion yawning wide before settling back into resting under the sun's rays.

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The day came. In the morning, Moon and Hau travelled back to Mount Lanakila, Jewellery and Kahili escorting the first, Hala the second. The crowd was gathering, filling the partially reconstructed eateries and shopping centres, waiting as the hours trickled by. Every seat would be packed, and every room to stand filled. Screens across Alola all erected and ready to play. Viewers across the world ready for the moment to come.

The hours ticked down. Pitaya visited Moon's room, hearing her student's thoughts and ensuring her focus and calm were well. Moon's heart was passionate, and if she ran wild could lead her into dangerous places. As it had so many times before. But Moon was calm. Within her, more powerful
than anything else, was a joy. A joy for what was to come.

The Guildmaster smiled. That was good.

Acerola, checking in on Hau, found similar. She smiled at that. The semi-finals, seeing Solgaleo and Lunala going wild had been something else, and Moon and Hau had fought two of the strongest here. Maybe the two strongest. But this battle for them, this battle they'd have, it'd be something unique all of its own. Something unlike anything else.

“The last time was back in Malie,” Hau told her, “before Moon first tried the fifth Trial. We’ve... come a long way.”

It was hard for Acerola not to laugh and playfully punch Hau's shoulder for that. No kidding they had!

The hours turned to minutes. The world's eyes settled on their screens. In Pallet Town of the Kanto Region the Oak Institute was rowdy, all those gathered there, Professor Oak delighted amongst them, awaiting the battle to come. It was a beautiful thing, that reminded him quite clearly of another pair of amazing young Trainers who had fought to their own peak.

He hoped they were watching as well.

But amongst that crowd Lillie was not to be found. Elsewhere, in a hospital in another city of the Kanto Region, the young girl was visiting one still in recovery. Her mother, she'd told Moon, had recovered slowly but surely over the months since she, Moon, and Nebby had rescued Lusamine from Ultra Space. But the damage of having the bound Nihilego forcibly ripped from her body had been so horrifyingly significant all the same. For as much as Lusamine showed frustration at remaining bedlocked, she still could not rise from it on her own. Still there was longer to go.

Yet despite Lusamine's constant complaints about her slow recovery, all that awaited her on the other side was the justice she must face for the choices she had so willingly made. The former president of the Aether Foundation the source of the Ultra Beast disaster, and all the damages that had come with it. She would be required to take full responsibility as soon as she was hale.

That Lusamine freely and consistently expressed the wish to be back on her feet, so she might leave this place behind, strongly implied her understanding of what awaited her ahead. And her own need to face it.

She would not run from the crimes of her own hand.

Today her daughter was visiting her. Lillie had, over the months, many times done such. A confusing thing, Lusamine thought, for Lillie had been given the chance to cut her clean away. It was what she deserved for her actions. And yet Lillie still returned. Still spoke to her fairly, even showing her the Pokemon Lillie was raising, and speaking of her life. Even when it was time for her to face justice, would her daughter still seek her out, Lusamine wondered? So strong. So so strange. Who could have taught her daughter such kindness and love, for surely she had not.

Lillie did not speak of herself that day. The television was on, with daughter seated beside the hospital bed bearing her mother. She wanted to see this with her, Lillie had told Lusamine. Far more than she deserved, the older woman knew. But she would not deny Lillie her wish. Never again.

Then the time came. The roar of the crowd, broadcast through the tv, rose with the entrance of the competitors to the field. Lillie’s voice too. So loud, cheering so intensely at the sight of Moon and Hau, that it shocked Lusamine to hear. She'd never, ever heard such from her daughter before. She
really didn't understand at all. Was unable to match her daughter's voice. Perhaps she never had been.

Left shaken by Lillie's passion, Lusamine watched with silent thought.

And wondered what darkness led her to try smother so beautiful a light.

The sun hung low, orange-purple light streaked across Alola, flavouring the clouds into a deep blanket of colour settled overhead. Beneath the glass ceiling of the League Stadium voices rose intensely, celebration of the sight seen. Of two Trainers and two Pokemon emerging from the League staging ground, each prepared to take their final place. For the final match to begin.

Moon and Hau, exiting equally, raised an arm each – Moon's left and Hau's right – to meet the other's forearm with their own, a symbol of their closeness and intent. Then they broke apart, Moon with Nebby above her striding to the eastern ring, Hau with Solgaleo at his side to the west. Each took their stance, Lunala settling behind Moon, Solgaleo curling around Hau as it had done before. With him for this finale, to watch over this one that had caught its attention so. The Emissary of the Sunne had found a wonderful partner for this brief time, and would enjoy seeing him at this height before it was time to move on.

It was pleased with this path they had shared.

In the commentator's seats above, Anna and Alexa were giving their all, consumed with their own passion for this sight. For the path that had led to this point, and this meeting of these two youths, two friends, who had surpassed all belief. Kukui had joined them, he the founder of this League, and the Trainer best capable of observing both young ones on the field. They'd grown so fast already.

He was sure that in this battle they'd both grow further still.

Tense remained those in the seating. Jewellery in the family seats watching as her daughter and daughter's best friend made history, and more importantly a sacred moment for the two. Each Captain in the competitors' stands setting their focus sharp, each with their own wish for the winner, but all the same wish for how this was to go. For Moon and Hau to give it their all. To hold nothing back.

No holding back.

The Kahuna too. Hala, Olivia, and Hapu all here, Nanu having arrived to sit with them with only minimal faux complaint. Those others involved in the training of these two – Mina, Asuka, Pitaya, and Grimsley – all sharply keen as well. All understanding just what this fight was to be. Something more, maybe not in power, but in beauty and import for sure. Something pure. Just the feeling of seeing those two standing down there was enough. But it would not be all. There would be far more.

Ryuki was in a state of goosebumps, staring at the field. What he and Moon had done, that had been something but this... well what they had was more of a student surpassing the teacher. This was two rivals meeting all out. This was more important.

He'd enjoy this more than words could say.

All those others here too. Jackson, thinking of the little time he'd met each in Brooklet Hill. Kahili, of the path she'd followed following them, and the ways she'd grown because of it. Sabrina, admiring the two in a way no other could, her senses able to see something few could gaze upon. There was a
power between them, forged from friendship and rivalry, greater than any other. This battle that would play out... somehow she couldn't stop her smile.

Sina and Dexio watched with bated breath. Moon had sought Sina out, to thank her for calling to her alongside Ryuki back then. It was maybe a little forward for Sina to hug the young girl, but after everything that had happened, and how stressful it had been and resolved, to be told that just proved too much. Dexio had pried Sina off of the slightly shocked Moon – thankfully less upset so much as simply surprised. Giving her that Salamencite, when Moon said that the two both snapped to attention, aware of their place in so much of how things had gone, thank you.

They relaxed at long las-

You really shouldn't give those things out to people as young as her.

Were Kahili to overhear that conversation, her laughter would have crossed the globe all the way to Viola's ears.

Molayne watched, thinking of when Kukui first called him, enraptured by Moon and Hau's pace. He'd kept the lid on what Moon's deal was for a little longer, which frankly surprised Molayne given how much a blabbermouth his best friend tended to be. Then again maybe that was just so the secrets he really needed to keep safe stayed silent. When Kukui told Molayne just what the League's plan had been, even being his best friend hadn't prepared Molayne to hear such.

Sometimes hard to tell whether he wanted to hug Kukui or punch him for the amount that man insisted on taking everything onto himself.

Jace of the Aether Foundation watched. In Moon and Hau he'd seen a little of himself and Ilima. Another pair of youths who'd charged across Alola, challenging each other and going beyond all sense. The journey of these two had flowed a little smoother though. He wouldn't say it had been easier for them to find where they wanted to be, not at all, just that it came for them faster. For Jace, he'd needed to accept Ilima's need to leave, and then accept his best friend's return without any of the self-blame his nature seemed determined to concoct. Ilima's lecturing of Jace's attempts to take the blame had finally broken through though.

He smiled to see this sight of two friends and rivals meeting all out, and hoped one day it would be him and Ilima meeting on that stage too.

Benga, invited from Unova, watched. In his life he'd orbited around those who partnered with the strongest of legends, challenging and matching them at times, but never quite ascending in the same way. But still he'd grown and grown strong. His gramps was proud of him and he was too. But there was still further to go.

These neighbours in Alola who could go so far, he'd take all he could from watching them, so he could go back to Unova and go even further and bring all his friends further too. They wouldn't be outpaced.

He'd carry this sight back home.

Riley watched. The constant look of displeasure she wore, a screen to hold in the anger that had boiled within her for so many years, was gone. Now what she held was a look of fascination, of perhaps shock at this sight. At this feeling. Just like Plumeria was to her, as a member of Alola she was the older sister to these two, even if she'd done them both wrong before. Was it weird, to feel so proud at the sight?
It would take her far longer than this day to work through the feelings she was discovering after Plumeria's victory over Tapu Bulu helped the younger girl begin letting go of her rage.

And Plumeria watched. Both Moon and Hau she'd threatened on their journeys, but neither had she ever truly fought. She found herself without any great desire to. This was better. This was what it should be. This celebration of these two here, and of everyone that took part in making this League what it was. All those people around her, they were as much down there on that stage as they were right here. Threads linking them all together, for this moment they shared. The weave of Alola connecting them all as one, just like she'd been taught.

She hoped from above her mother was watching this too.

In silence, seated upon the four pillars that remained framing the stadium in full, the four Tapu observed. They had been promised the greatest of battles there could be. A promise so far kept. But this... they felt it too. The purity. The intent.

This was the pinnacle at last shown to them.

The true peak of Alola one which these two stood upon.

“Trainers at the ready!”

Ever so professional, the judge for this match raised their arms. They'd won an intense series of rock-paper-scissors battles with their fellows for the right to oversee this particular match: the judges of this League all intent to be the one to be right there beside these two. But it was them. They were the one to do this.

They'd give everything they had, so these two and their twelve Pokemon could do the same.

Moon and Hau each raised a Pokeball. The judge raised their arms. The crowd's voice fell to silence. The world's vision narrowed down to this moment.

At last.

At long last.

It was time.

“Begin!”
In two flashes of red it began, two Pokemon appearing on the stage. Before Moon the Intertwining Pokemon Sylveon, Fairy-type evolution of Eevee, evolved during their first days training with the Dragon Tamers of Alola, born of both Moon's affection and the need to beat down the Dragon-type Pokemon opposing them each day. A Pokemon delighted to appear, its white pelt of pink and blue highlights shimmering in the evening light, four ribbon feelers trailing through the air. Sky blue eyes staring down its opponent opposite.

The Pokemon of Hau.

Evolved in those same days, through the training Hau took in Malie City, the Psychic-type evolution of Eevee, the Sun Pokemon Espeon, shone too, its lavender fur deepened by the light, red gem within its forehead glowing bright. Anna and Alexa were quick on the draw, noting Moon and Hau's partners as both evolutions of the Evolution Pokemon itself. Neither had led with these partners in any of their battles before, but this was a battle different to any other as well. Who could know what those two's intent was? Only them.

Only those four down there on that stage.

“Go!”

Oh how their powers wrapped around them, oh how the pale and deep pinks of Fairy and Psychic-type energy flowed, both Pokemon immediately showing their full strength. In a blitz of speed both vanished, both carrying the Quick Attack from their youths, and in a blitz of speed they and their powers crashed upon one another.

The sound of head meeting head echoing as the energy between them roared loud.

_They'd first met in Iki Town, eleven months ago. Moon from the Kanto Region, moved to Alola, to be given a Pokemon to begin her Pokemon Journey here. Hau, grandson of Kahuna Hala, an Alolan to the deepest there could be, beginning the same. He'd known another would be starting with him, but neither her name or face. Moon had not considered any she'd be meeting herself._

_They'd first met that night._

“Sylveon and Espeon immediately enter an intense battle of power, mixing the energy they control and attempting to push it against the other, all while attacking physically as well! With the amount of power they're pushing out, their attacks are purely physical, but the speed they're going at is incredible!”

“While the two Pokemon focus on their powers, they react solely to their partners' directions. Neither would actually be able to think fast enough to fight physically with that much energy in the air, they're trusting Moon and Hau absolutely. This is... a perfect battle.”

Kukui had never found those words to say before. But Pokemon so focused on the battle of power between them, trusting so deeply in their partners as to follow their every thought without question, it was a beauty that could only be born of a fight such as this. Two equal rivals that desired nothing more than to give each their all, intensified by a stage such as this at the peak of the world. How many times had such battles occurred across the globe? The Leagues of every Region that ended with so perfect a match? Each was legendary. Recorded and regaled. And this would be too.

These two rising to the height all aspired to reach.

_The night they met, Moon had already met Lillie. Saved Nebby without thinking, even risking her own life in the process. Maybe that had begun her habit of doing such, Tapu Koko's quick rescue of_
her instilling a belief that things would always work out. Hau had known Lillie before then, the girl introduced to Kahuna Hala a few months prior by Professor Kukui, and thus him by proxy. It was funny, that they'd known each other longer, but it was only with Moon in the mix that those two found themselves becoming good friends too.

Each of them really had been so important to help the others go so much further too.

“Espeon's psychic powers are giving it an edge in controlling the raw mass of power in the air, and Hau's commands are matching Moon's in the physical fight of the two Pokemon as well! But Sylveon is building barriers across the field, and starting to break Espeon's control by dragging the power they're fighting over through them!”

“I shouldn't even find myself surprised that Moon's already copying the concept of what I did with Ninetales against Hau. She's extremely fast to attempt anything she sees.”

The two Pokemon breaking apart, the power each held onto pulled taut, their sky blue and deep purple eyes matched well, the red gem in the centre of Espeon's forehead pulsing rapidly. To say each was giving their all would be a disservice – neither had ever expressed their power so keenly as in this moment, the hearts of their Trainers so strong they could not help but answer the same. This battle, this perfect battle for them in this time, it was theirs.

They wouldn't hold anything back.

Moon chose Rowlet. Hau chose Popplio. And the two young Trainers, on their first day of partnership, Bonds just barely beginning with their chosen Pokemon beside them, did battle. An awkward, inelegant thing, neither quite able to command as keenly as they'd thought they could – having watched so many Pokemon Battles before this day – it ended with Moon's victory. But it was close.

**It was always so so close.**

Swift stars of energy pierced through the warring mass of power the two Eevee evolutions fought over, shifting its flow, a great worm lashing this way and that between them, a power that should either claim would surely be their battle's end. But the advantage lay with Moon, for the Fairium-Z was set within her Z-Power Ring. A Z-Move could still oppose this. Nothing could stop a Z-Move but another Z-Move. Such was known.

Hau knew that well.

“The struggle breaks! Sylveon and Espeon tear apart the power they have been fighting over, each taking half! What they do with it next will decide what the path is to victory!”

Sylveon shaped it all into a barrier. A great wall that would resist even its other half. And so protected, the Intertwining Pokemon tensed its body as Moon began her Z-Pose. She'd promised. She'd use the way she and her Pokemon fought, creating openings for Z-Moves, without holding back. That was how this should be.

She wouldn't hold anything back.

Espeon crushed as much of the power through its psychic control as it could, and flung it forward through time.

“That's Future Sight again,” Kukui called it. “Hau's achieved incredible results with that technique, yeah, but usually by Espeon taking big hits to distract from it. Definitely if Sylveon's tired after its Z-Move that'll hit hard, but Moon has to see that coming. She's been watching Hau's fights too.”
The Fairy-type Z-Move, Twinkle Tackle. A charge forward at incredible speed, wreathed in incredible force. Born of the Fairium-Z, given by Mina to Moon during that Captain's Trial. The seventh Trial, so long spent within it. Training, sharpening, learning. Becoming capable of reaching this height. Mina had been right. Even one moment less and Moon would not have made it here. But here she was.

Here they were.

Through the barrier it had formed – left untouched by Espeon's moment to attack – Sylveon surged, closing in upon its Sun Pokemon foe. Espeon moved with Quick Attack, but the speed of that could in no way outpace a Z-Move. Sylveon pursued, its wrapping of Fairy-type power shining around it as it chased down its foe. Yes, this attack would hit.

And then from the past the psychic power arrived, cast forward in time, and took hold of the target foreseen. Not Sylveon, not a Pokemon so covered in Z-Power it could not be stopped, but the free Espeon itself. At the last second a wave of incredible power pushing the Sun Pokemon out of the way. Dragging it from Sylveon's path.

The Z-Move the Intertwining Pokemon was using slammed against the barrier wall, dispelling in a great wave of force across it as Espeon, accepting the damage of the attack it had sent forward to strike itself, still suffered far less than it would have through Sylveon's own. Glowing bright with a surge of more psychic force, Espeon amplified Sylveon's push and slammed the Intertwining Pokemon even harder against the barrier than before.

**Hau and Moon**'s second fight came the day after their first. They'd both progressed so fast already, the battle between Popplio and Rowlet so much smoother than their last. They were such good equal rivals, many said. But that one moment, Moon's showing of a second Pokeball, sat at odds in so many's minds. Had she...? No, right? Hau though... not of any sense for Bonds, but maybe a sense for the world itself, knew right away.

As soon as his bond with Popplio settled he went out and caught Pichu to keep up.

“Amazing! Hau foresees Moon's use of a Z-Move and executes an incredible dodge! Espeon took a strong hit from its psychic powers, but Sylveon's impact with the wall was far rougher still! Both Pokemon have taken damage, but the battle remains even! And- Moon and Hau are both retreating their Pokemon! The judge is ruling... that Moon was the first to act, so Hau may respond to her! So for their choices...”

The flash of red and roar of turquoise announced the Dragon Pokemon Salamence, drawing in the breath of the crowd. So soon. Moon was going for it so soon. So of Hau's team...

His choice, from a Pokeball in hand, was questioned by the least able and understood by the most. Despite its Fairy-typing, Primarina would not have the speed necessary to face such a foe. And the yellow Z-Crystal in Hau's Z-Power Ring said it all. The Alolan form of the Mouse Pokemon Raichu, Electric and Psychic-type, was the right answer here. The best of Hau's team able to stop this before it began.

The second match about to be even more intense than the first.

*The next time they fought was in Wai'oli, that stretching township along Melemele's northern shore. Both having come from their first Trials, both having completed them and claimed the Normalium-Z, Moon and Hau had taken their first major step on the paths of their Island Challenges. And so they fought to see their strength.*
Moon would call that battle Hau's win. Hau would call it Moon's. Two of Moon's Pokemon defeated by two of Hau's. Hau had only two. In a fair match it was his win, Moon claimed. Hau didn't accept that at all.

Was it different here, in this match of six against six? Or had Hau's insistence then, for Moon to use a third, been more a belief he should not beat Moon while she held more Pokemon at her side? Here they had an equal number. And so this was an equal fight to the best of their abilities. That without the ruling and limitations on Pokemon numbers, Moon could bring more than enough to win with guarantee, did that mean anything to Hau given his earlier insistence? He honestly hadn't thought about it. Back then... there had been more Moon could do, so she should do it, were his thoughts. Here... they both had all they could do. So they would both do it. The same way again. Those were the words he said back then, and the words that flowed with him and Moon, through the Captains of Alola, and out to every other Trainer they oversaw, and indeed across Alola itself. Hau's desire to become a Kahuna, he had already touched the soul of Alola before even leaving Melemele's grasp.

No holding back.

Neither of them would.

"Raichu immediately closes the distance, attacking with a rapid electric burst, forcing Salamence to move! It's clear Hau intends to cut off both Mega and Ultra Evolution, much like Ryuki attempted in the semi-finals match before!"

"Moon also doesn't have an environment like what Lunala's Z-Move created – credit to the field tech for their repairs to the stage in the days since by the way – meaning she can't rely on any surprise tricks. She'll need to force the way open, because it's clear that if she tries to start Mega or Ultra Evolution while Raichu can attack, Hau's going to use his Z-Move to put a stop to that!"

They were fast. Even faster than Sylveon and Espeon before, Salamence and Raichu raced through the air, streams of blue and red fire from the mouth of the dragon evaded and punished by the rapid movements and surging electricity of the mouse. That was how the foolish would see those two Trainers, as dragon and mouse: Moon drawing the world's eyes to her; Hau's appearance and showings amazing for his age, but of a regular form of amazing compared to the strongest of this League. And yet here they were in the finale, drawn so even in their fight. The ability Hau carried appearing in response to the strength of his foes every time, rather than on obvious display. Always avoiding the Dark-type infused jaws of Salamence, the most dangerous to it attack the Dragon Pokemon possessed, Hau's partner maintained its own assault.

The Pichu it once was caught nine days sooner than the Bagon partner of Moon, the intensity both Trainers had given them over the months to follow now drew the two equal in this fight. A display of just how strong each Pokemon, and their Trainers, could be.

Salamence the raw strongest member of Moon's team, besides perhaps the unknown Naganadel, and Raichu benefiting from the second-longest partnership with Hau as well as his Psychic-type bias: both Pokemon gave it their all.

And their battle in the air continued on.

For Hau, Raichu was the driving force amongst his team. Popplio, now Primarina, had always been supportive of him, believing in what Hau believed and working with him to achieve his goals, but Raichu, once a Pichu encountered in the fields south of Iki Town, had intent. This Pokemon wanted to go forward, and would drive Hau and those with him to go with it along the way. Likely... of all of Hau's team it was now the strongest. The first to evolve, becoming a Pikachu in the days after Hau's first Grand Trial – his first victory in any capacity over his grandfather – and then again to
Raichu on the way to rescue Lillie from the Aether Foundation. That time... Hau's choice had been made because he felt Pikachu's confidence in him. And in every battle since then that Raichu ascended through, that choice had been rewarded well.

They'd keep rising higher still!

Salamence roared flames of all colours, Dragon and Fire-type techniques mixing together and flaring into a rainbow display. But Hau's focus was sharpened to the absolute, and Raichu took from that all it needed to continue its attacks. Both Pokemon were attacking and dodging equally, circling in the air, neither able to slow for even a moment lest they be struck. And Moon knew... if she began Mega Evolution, Hau would immediately move for a Z-Move in response. The time Salamence would spend transforming... it could be attacked within. Was she not able to Mega Evolve at all? She'd promised to go all out, but was Hau doing the same so strong Moon couldn't even unleash that full strength? If neither Ultra nor even Mega Salamence could appear...

The sharpening of Salamence's movements showed Moon's resolve. If this battle played out equally for much longer, even just to the one minute mark before switching, the amount of strength Salamence spent would cost it greatly even if it did manage to transform further still. And if Hau landed a successful Z-Move... he could likely cut off the full power of Ultra Evolution sharper than even Lana and Ryuki had before. Holding back the transformation by never relenting the attack like Ryuki, but holding a Z-Move to strike in the moment of transformation as Lana had, Hau could do what those two had each held only half the key to.

If Moon gave even an inch Hau really could defeat Ultra Salamence outright.

“Salamence and Raichu increase their speed! Still neither has stopped from near constant attacks, Raichu cutting off Salamence's chances to Mega Evolve, but Salamence itself refusing to give Raichu the chance to further itself as well! We saw in the battle with you, Professor Kukui, that Raichu has Rain Dance – if it uses that, surely that will bring even more trouble to Moon's team!”

“Definitely – more accurate Thunders, as well as strength for Hau's Golisopod and Primarina – Rain Dance can be weaponised in a lot of ways. But this constant attacking has to be wearing both Pokemon down, there's going to be a breaking point soon if they keep this up!”

Moon could feel it, the intensity of her partner in flight. A proud Bagon she'd once encountered on the shores of Kala'e Bay, guided there by Ryuki Oda's hand. A stubborn Shelgon evolved under the care of Pitaya and the Dragon Tamers, Moon's progress amazing, Pitaya focusing ever more on teaching the young girl how to continue on. A Salamence evolved in the most desperate of times, unleashing its full power to stop Lusamine's assault. Mega Evolution and Z-Move combined, moments after it took that form. But not once did the Pokemon ever begrudge Moon her demands of it. Only ever rose to meet her will. Together they could ascend to the highest of heights. All dragons dreamed of flight, after all.

They couldn't stop here!

“Salamence accelerates! The waves of wind surrounding it, have we seen it use that technique before?”

“The known techniques a Pokemon can learn by growth are recorded – but the truth is there's a bunch more that can be developed through pressure and focus! Moon and Salamence combining their wills here, both wanting so much to speed things up, it's not a surprise they could bring out a Tailwind on a stage like this, woo!”

Faster. Don't slow down. Raichu was accelerating too, enhancing itself with more psychic force. Of
course Hau could go faster: anything Moon did, Hau met head on. He was incredible like that. But so was she. So they'd both push even more into it, their Pokemon pushing at their limits, moving so fast and attacking so freely they couldn't hold back and... faster... than they could see...

The shine of the Key Stone at Moon's neck went missed by she and Hau both, their eyes locked on their partners moving so quickly through the air it was almost impossible to follow their flight. But neither missed the sudden red light that flared around Salamence again, the drop in its attacks as it dove, from barrier ceiling to battlefield floor below, wreathed in transfigurative force. Mega Evolution, though not a slow thing, had been stopped by Raichu's constant attacks before. But this time, this time it came so fast there wasn't even a chance to stop it at all. The pulsing force inside of the Dragon Pokemon's body built so explosively high that it responded to the wish in an instant.

No time for a Z-Move in response, but one cast Thunderbolt did still catch the Dragon as it announced its new form.

Mega Salamence... using a Z-Move against Lusamine. Fighting the Totem Kommo-o, and Kahuna Hapu too. Then failing to overcome Ilima's Eevee in the first round of this League. Requiring another form further still. That same form to challenge Tapu Koko. Using and losing that power against Lana, struggling on as itself. Fighting to take its Ultra Evolved form against Ryuki, and again wielding its Mega Evolved self after it was done.

There was far more yet to the future of Moon and her partner in this state. Pitaya had told her clearly, expressed such in the first battle she and Moon had after Salamence's evolution. Moon would not be able to truly control the power of Mega Evolution without years of practise still. No-one could. And, the Guildmaster had said, speaking to Moon after the discovery of Ultra Evolution in this League, that truth remained still. The power of Ultra Salamence may be born of Z-Move and Mega Evolution, but your gift only extends to mastery of one of these two things. The ability to Mega Evolve a Pokemon, and to understand and direct the power of a Mega Evolved Pokemon, are two different things. You must learn, practise, and grow. Moon understood that.

Understood this battle was not even close to being done!

"Moon has successfully Mega Evolved Salamence, but neither Raichu nor Salamence are retreating for breath! But even if Moon forsakes Ultra Evolution and the risk that carries to fight with Mega Evolution alone, given how evenly Raichu and Salamence fought before, this is a rough situation for Hau still!"

Maybe, but... there was a difference.

Moon, always looking for a chance to use a Z-Move, aware of the power of Ultra Evolution and the intent Hau had to stop that, had made a mistake. Tied those two acts together – her Z-Move and Hau's. Hau would not use one until she attempted to, and so as long as Moon did not, Hau would neither. Moon's great battles in this League, the Z-Moves she had faced were responsive things: Ilima answering Mega Salamence with his, Lana Ultra Salamence with her own. Z-Moves were counters to stop her strength, that was something Moon had internalised.

Hau did not see it that way at all.

And so as the lightning bolt struck Salamence from above, and the Mega Evolved Dragon whipped upwards and breathed out a torrent of flames, into that fire did Raichu dive, Hau beginning his pose in that moment too. Moon had known she could not simply use a Z-Move while having Salamence bear Raichu's attacks. She had been unprepared to stop Hau from doing the same.

The pace of the battle seized in his hand.
“Hau begins a Z-Pose! Is that the Electric-type Z-Move?”

“But not quite.” Kukui knew. Hau had asked him about it, Z-Moves his Pokemon might be able to use besides those they already had. Seafolk Village was where the Professor pointed the young boy, knowing the people there tended to find strange Z-Crystals beneath the waves. And this one, into Hau's hands it flowed.

The Aloraichium-Z a Z-Crystal for the Alolan form of Raichu alone.

Moon was surprised. This action catching her off guard. That did not imply she was slow to respond, or that Hau had the freedom to attack without reprisal. Salamence launched itself quickly, soaring up into the skies, even as Raichu burst with electric Z-Power, the Mouse Pokemon becoming wreathed in force. Moon had the Normalium-Z in her Z-Ring, she could perform this transformation as soon as Raichu was stunned from using its own Z-Move. Seeing that Z-Move coming, even if the power was already flowing around Raichu preparing to launch, Moon could still react!

Salamence, flying at its full speed through the air, would be far harder to catch than Espeon running from Sylveon's Twinkle Tackle – before the Sun Pokemon had made use of its power to escape that at least.

If Hau and Espeon could dodge a Z-Move, then Moon and Salamence could too!

*It was in Paniola Town that their Z-Moves first crossed. A battle of Bagon and Dartrix for Moon, and Popplio evolving into Brionne alongside Pikachu for Hau. In the end the fight was a draw, two Z-Moves meeting enough to blow both Pokemon back. They'd each grown in such different ways, learned to think of those techniques as such different strengths.*

*Now wielded them against each other in such different forms.*

The exclusive Z-Move of the Alolan form of Raichu was named Stoked Sparksurfer, a technique where Z-Power infused electricity surrounded the Mouse Pokemon as an almighty aura, allowing it to fly through the air at thunderbolt speed, and unleash its full power upon impact with a foe. Moon knew nothing of this Z-Move, and had prepared for Gigavolt Havoc – the Electrium-Z's Z-Move – as best she could. The sight of Raichu vanishing, the sense of this attack going beyond speed, was just enough warning that things were different to do only one thing. Salamence roared and the air before it hardened, that barrier technique inherited from its Shelgon days. That force that could block so many attacks.

It shattered as Raichu burst through it and struck the Mega Evolved Dragon head on.

Kukui knew, as both Salamence and Raichu fell back from the impact, dropping from the air, that the defensive technique had been effective. The full power of the Z-Move had been reduced by it, and while Salamence had taken damage, it had not been the full strength of that Z-Move. But Stoked Sparksurfer was special in its own way, in that the electricity it struck a foe with remained in their system even after contact. Protect may have slowed the impact, reducing that damage, but it did not disperse the electricity Raichu had delivered in any way.

And that electricity now remained, cutting away at Salamence's speed.

The ability for its Ultra Evolved Form to appear still an unknown in this fight.

Moon could not perform a Z-Move now. Not with Salamence crashed against the ground, electricity coursing through its body, locking up muscles and joints. If the Dragon Pokemon could right itself and stand tall she could do such, but unless Salamence was receptive to the Z-Power, the
transformation could not take place. And though it had fallen from the impact too, Raichu was rising up so soon, the moment it was stunned by its Z-Move already lost. Hau had taken the advantage in their fight in so huge a way.

By the sight of the smile on Moon's face, you wouldn't think so at all. But then it was the same smile as Hau wore too. The Captains in the stands all turned to look at Ilima, who tried and failed to defend himself for his effects. Ryuki quietly attempted to draw no attention at all.

“Moon retreats Salamence as well! The Mega Evolution will last, meaning the chance of Ultra Evolution still exists, but it is unquestionable the battle is going in Hau's favour right now! But now Moon follows with Naganadel! This is the evolved Ultra Beast that achieved a double knockout with Ryuki's partner Dragonite in their semi-finals match! Does Hau have anything to stand up to this foe?”

Bad timing. Espeon and Raichu were the best two to battle Naganadel, both Psychic-type Pokemon, while Primarina was the worst – weak to Poison-type techniques. But Espeon going in against Naganadel as it was now was a bad idea. Hau needed to weaken that Pokemon as best he could without losing any team members, since Moon hadn't either and he couldn't let her pull ahead. Of the remaining three of his Pokemon...

“Hau follows Moon's switch, exchanging Raichu for Talonflame! Now that Hau has used his Z-Move, he no longer has an answer to Moon's Pokemon's own greatest strengths, but it can't be denied he made use of the one he did have well!”

“Talonflame are fast, yeah, and won't have any significant weakness to Naganadel's known attacks. It's the best choice Hau can make in this situation, given we still don't fully understand that Ultra Beast's strength.”

Talonflame... thinking about it, that was Hau's fourth partner. After Popplio, Pichu, and Eevee, the first two having evolved once already by Hau's second Trial, he’d gone out and caught a Fletchling on the slopes of Wela. Captain Kiawe had helped him do that, taught Hau to recognise which of the Pokemon was close to evolving. It took only a little while of bonding for Hau to help the Pokemon evolve, to become a Fletchinder that – with training – would help Hau pass his Grass Trial with flying colours.

But of course that wasn't how it went. Hau struggled to bear the weight of four Bonds at that time, and the plan changed when he chose to do Lana's Trial before Mallow's instead. With Hau and Moon both having only Mallow's Trial left, they were brought together to complete a special challenge the Captain of Lush Jungle orchestrated. But that challenge meant Hau could find no way to bring Fletchinder to the fight. And he still couldn't bear its weight.

So releasing it on the northern slopes of Wela, Hau bid that Pokemon farewell. Went on to continue his Island Challenge, struggling but pushing forward all the way. That was a point of regret though. Something tried and failed.

Funny to think that when he came back to find it again, the result of this attempt had in the end been a rousing success.

It was hard to measure the strength of Naganadel. Yes, the Poison Pin Pokemon achieved a double knockout with the Dragonite of Ryuki before, but the actions of that Dragonite in the fight led to the equality of the two being questioned. The way Dragonite had fought, as if consumed by unstoppable rage, spoke more of the poison that Naganadel had struck it with – a special mixture unique to the Ultra Beast. If the Dragon Pokemon of Ryuki had acted with focused calm, those Trainers capable of evaluating said, Moon's partner would not have matched it remotely in their fight. Yes Naganadel
was fast, and possessed powerful techniques, but it was not so significantly above the rest of Moon's team. The strength that led it to resemble other Ultra Beasts so well... ran quickly dry.

If you avoid the poison, and last long enough against it, those able to understand claimed – Pitaya amongst them in the wake of that fight – Naganadel could be defeated by normal means. It was strong, but no impossible force.

Even without that understanding himself, without the experience and analysis to help him prepare, on some level Hau still knew what he had to do.

Such were the instincts of those at the peak.

*The next time they fought... was in the Battle Royal. Moon, the Masked Royal, Hau, and Gladion. Dartrix, Torracat, Brionne, and Type: Null. The former three... on some level Hau knew, knew they were the original trio presented to him and Moon on the night they first met. And he knew too that the Incineroar Kukui had brought against him and Primarina in the semi-finals was from that original trio too. But still Hau had yet to think those two thoughts close enough together, to connect that if those two were the same, than their partners must be as well. The magic of the ring keeping him blind a little longer.*

*When the day came he tentatively asked Moon if those two were one and the same, the look of disbelief it took this long to ask from her would last with him for the rest of his life.*

*Gladion... from him Hau and Moon had both learned. There was something in his drive, his intent to more than grow but gain the strength to protect as well, that began to set their own desires for who they wanted to be. To that point, their journey had been to have the journey. To go to new places, battle people and Pokemon, and grow with their partners alongside. But Gladion wanted for something. He wanted to achieve something, wanted it so incredibly strongly it affected them as well. Slowly, the concept lingering in their thoughts, both Moon and Hau began to think of what the strength they were honing was for.*

**And who it was that they wanted to protect.**

“Talonflame bursts into speed, avoiding Naganadel's quick attacks! The intense speed of the Ultra Beast is the same as before, but Hau and Talonflame appear able to respond, even if just barely, and keep on dodging!”

“But if Hau can't attack back, Moon won't have any trouble using a Z-Move, and that'll be so much harder to dodge!”

“Professor Kukui, which Z-Move do you see coming next?”

Kukui thought. Moon had both the Poisonium-Z and Dragonium-Z, the first gifted by Plumeria – she'd told Kukui that herself – the second by Ryuki and then earned by standing up to the Totem Kommo-o. Given Naganadel's typing, either would be appropriate, though neither significantly so. He'd seen Naganadel use Flying-type techniques as well, so a Flying-type Z-Move could be used too. There were many ways Moon could attack. A part of what made her style so difficult to predict. But honestly, looking at Naganadel pursuing and preventing Talonflame from doing anything more than dodging away, it looked like Moon didn't even need a Z-Move at all.

Not that there was room in this fight to hold back, no no no, but if Moon had found another way to pull ahead, that would do her so much the better. There was, after all, still so much further to go.

It was a battle of stamina. A gamble, on both their parts, that Naganadel, that Talonflame, would be
the first to make a mistake and give their opponent the opportunity to strike. Neither Pokemon had a truly powerful attack to bring the other down, but given Naganadel's poison, one direct hit from it could still set the battle's pace. All the dodges of Talonflame so far, if it had been struck even once during that time the poison would have already brought it down to the ground. Hau's focus, keeping his partner dodging, drawing out the length of this fight, was unflinching. Moon's, her eyes following Naganadel as it zig-zagged through the air, equally so. The length of time that stretched out from this match hard for either to judge. Moments feeling like hours.

And then the opportunity struck!

The greatest counter to Poison was Steel, for the latter typing was immune to the former. Though no Pokemon of that type numbered amongst Hau's team – Solgaleo still resting behind him, watching the battle with its shining blue eyes – attacks of that type could still have momentary value. He'd been planning on Talonflame's Steel Wing in the exact right moment all along. As soon as Moon truly believed she could strike with a poison blow.

Naganadel, having pushed Talonflame against the ceiling overhead, roared out draconic force.

Did Moon know, or suspect? Had it been instinct alone that led her to avoid poison, even though the infliction of such would guarantee a win, while a Dragon-type attack would only be the first step? There wasn't any answer beyond believing that was the right choice to make. That was all she had in her mind. Naganadel, pushed down from the barrier ceiling by the force of its own attack, stared up at its red and grey-plumed opponent overhead.

Wreathed in fire caught by wind, Talonflame accelerated downwards, bursting out from a Flame Charge into Brave Bird. Watching Trainers linking techniques together had inspired Hau to do the same. And the most unknown and least trained of his partners had needed an ace in its plumage. The speed and force of the attack enough to allow the Scorching Pokemon to drive Naganadel all the way down into the battlefield below.

“Amazing! Even after taking a heavy attack from Naganadel, Talonflame responds with its own strong enough to push the Ultra Beast into the ground! This partner of Hau's has great strength too!”

True, Kukui observed, but not quite as well. That attack, the strength and stamina spent to land it, Talonflame falling back from Naganadel to perch upon the ground, it had a cost. That was the style Hau and Moon used to fight opponents above them, risking self for greater gains. Well, Hau had used that way of fighting twice today already, to avoid one Z-Move and land another. That was... probably the difference. Hau was treating Moon the same as he'd done Kukui, or Hala, as someone incredible to overcome. For Moon... for as much as she thought well of Hau, she thought of him as the same as her, not above her. Which gave Hau the ability to strike in ways she wouldn't expect.

When it came to their rivalry, the way they expressed it needed to be equal too. If they couldn't find that way to see one another with the same eyes, they'd never have the battle both were striving to create. They were so close. And yet...

Honestly, if Moon didn't adapt quick, Hau really would be the one to win.

*The last time they'd fought, before this day, was in Malie. Hau had gone into it with the intent to be defeated, for Moon to overcome him handily and realise the way they had gone could not continue. He couldn't keep up, not with the wall he had come to, and the open path Moon always walked. He didn't want her to be held back by his need to slow down. She didn't want to accept him trying to let her go.*

*They'd begun that battle with both their Eevee as well.*
It had been so equal, even with Moon's superior numbers to Hau's own. He hadn't understood, not until Pitaya had appeared with the intent to tempt Moon away, referencing their equal speed of growth. The Guildmaster of the Dragon Tamers... her ravenous desire for students to raise was well known, and honestly it was the fault of Kukui for not expecting her to approach Moon as soon as the girl set foot on Ula'ula's soil. But Pitaya's way of speaking was harsh, her normal approach to acquiring students by promising – and delivering – training to help them grow stronger rejected by Moon. Moon didn't want to accept anything more than what she had right now, travelling with Hau and Lillie.

When Hau tried to tell Moon he couldn't go any further then either, she took it the worst she possibly could.

“Talonflame is still quick to dodge, even while using Roost to recover strength, but with Naganadel in the air again it's clear the advantage is even further in Moon's hands! The pools of poison spread about the battlefield are already giving Talonflame less room to move: this situation's going to become untenable in just a moment!”

That was fine. Talonflame had given an incredible amount of strength, and pushed as far as it could. The battle had lasted long enough, and Naganadel had spent enough stamina in this fight for things to be far more even than before. When the Scorching Pokemon launched itself up into flight, the energy of a Bug-type technique wrapping around it – thank you again for your help, Principal Asuka – Hau already had his plan in motion.

Of course Naganadel was ready to attack down upon the upwards rising Talonflame. So Moon should expect Talonflame to be ready to dodge that. And then to have Naganadel dodge Talonflame's own attack. And then for Talonflame to dodge around Naganadel's counter. And then for the two Pokemon to corkscrew up into the sky, each trying to be the one to catch the other out.

But what she hadn't expected was for Talonflame to arc, pulling away from Naganadel, and vanishing back into the raised Fast Ball Hau held.

“Using U-Turn Hau retreats Talonflame from the middle of an attack, pulling away safely from Naganadel! Whatever Pokemon he sends out Moon can move in counter to if she needs to, and- Hau has returned Raichu to the field! It's been only a short while since the Mouse Pokemon retreated before, is that enough to recover from its long battle with Salamence, damage suffered, and Z-Move used? If it is, Raichu's Psychic-type attacks will be especially dangerous to Naganadel, so will Moon move to switch them with another of her team?”

Not Salamence again. Even if it was Mega Evolved, Raichu was just too fast for it to be safe. Moon would use Salamence against something slower, that she could bring about Ultra Evolution against. And not Decidueye either. As long as Hau was not showing Primarina, Moon wouldn't use Decidueye. That battle before, between Primarina and Incineroar... Moon had felt that. She knew that was what Hau wanted too. What Primarina and Decidueye wanted.

She wanted it as well.

Sylveon was too grounded, Milotic too threatened by electricity, so it was just Volcarona left to switch. If Moon wanted to.

But despite the damage it had taken before, Naganadel was still faster, and against a foe like Raichu... Moon set another Z-Crystal into her Z-Power Ring.

All she had to do was open the way.
“Moon opts to keep Naganadel in combat! A bold choice, but will it work out?”

The first time Moon met Poipole, it was in the Hau'oli Cemetery, the Poison Pin Pokemon from another world causing ruckus amongst quiet graves. Moon and Rowlet had challenged it, and been immediately and swiftly defeated. The second time Moon did not know it, Poipole approaching her in Heahea moments before an Ultra Wormhole opened overhead, the hungering gaze of Necrozma searching for light terrifying the Ultra Beast into fleeing away.

The third was in Akala's cemetery, the stretching expanse of Memorial Hill, where the Team Skull Admin Plumeria had sought to capture the Ultra Beast for herself. As a Poison-type expert, no doubt with Poipole at her side she could have gone even further beyond. But Poipole had no interest in capture, and significant interest in Moon when she appeared. That was the time Plumeria and Moon almost came to battle, Moon finding herself fearful of the intensity around the older woman. Tapu Lele intervened in that, however.

Sent Poipole flying into the horizon in a singular blow.

The fourth time they forged a Bond, Poipole racing down from the sky during Moon's fifth Trial, immediately aiding her against the Totem Minior. And that was that. They'd be together from then on, each was sure.

Each was sure.

Soon after Hau met Poipole for his first. Somehow it really didn't faze him, that Moon had gone and partnered with an Ultra Beast. It just felt like a natural extension of her, and all the amazing things she could do. Hau didn't feel jealousy, or upset; simply that this was right. Something that should happen. That was what he felt then.

He'd faced those darker feelings earlier, as he and Moon both struggled with the walls and limits splitting them apart.

Naganadel moved slower. Not so much so that it was not still amazingly quick – so much more than a Pokemon of three and a half meter height should be – simply just a little bit slower. Enough to better pace out the stamina the Pokemon still had. Moon understood that Naganadel's full speed wore it down, and unfortunately hadn't proven able to best Talonflame. Which said a lot for how impressive that Pokemon Hau had partnered with was. The fact it had been close to evolution when Hau first met it did not even begin to justify the speed at which it evolved from a Fletchinder to Talonflame without him.

So many truly powerful youths of Alola crossing paths over the last year's journey of growth.

Still, when it came down to it, Raichu had taken more damage from Salamence's flames than Naganadel from Talonflame's own. And used a Z-Move as well. The advantage in this match-up was decidedly Moon's, especially with Naganadel able to use a Z-Move itself.

But with Raichu's Psychic typing, if Moon simply went for a Z-Move, a dangerously punishing attack would follow for sure. She'd seen Hau's Pokemon use their psychic powers to stop Pokemon from moving before as well. Not safe, not safe at all. But she had confidence in Naganadel's power, that with her partner they'd open the way to strike in full.

Just as they'd promised.

Just as they'd do.

Poipole followed Moon closely, over the days since they formed their Bond. To southern Ula'ula,
through Tapu Village and to the Ruins of Abundance as well, where Moon struck Tapu Bulu for attempting to threaten the partner she kept. To Po Town, then fighting alongside her others against Kahuna Nanu, and the Aether Foundation itself.

And then...

“Naganadel and Raichu engage in an immediate aerial battle of all types! Naganadel's Poison and Flying-type techniques are both countered by Raichu's Psychic and Electric, but can Hau and Raichu respond to Naganadel's constant switching of attacks? In his interview after the battle with Moon, Ryuki described Naganadel as one of the most unpredictable Pokemon he'd ever fought! And yet!”

It wasn't something so active as how Hau knew what his grandfather's Pokemon would do. He hadn't spent that long with Moon in his life yet. Just that... he could hear it, in the song of Alola. The pulse and flow of the battle, each beat when Naganadel changed its attacks. Moon was using the same flow, allowing her Pokemon to move the fastest to her thoughts. But it could make them predictable as well. Her battles against Ryuki, Tapu Koko, Ilima, and Lana too, they had all been fought with a kind of wild desperation to pull ahead. This was the first battle Moon was fighting where she was able to focus on moving with the battle's flow, instead of struggling against her opponent's.

Yet the result of that was that her actions were easier than ever to read.

“In a fantastic display Raichu is overwhelming Naganadel, its attacks breaking through and striking the Ultra Beast! Whether this speaks to Hau's raw ability, or simply the difference between his time with Raichu and Moon's with Naganadel, is unknown, but when it comes down to it the advantage is decidedly his!”

Moon finally felt it. The pressure. The thought that she was falling behind. All this time, the thought of battling Hau, it hadn't been like this. Hadn't been anything but celebration. They'd both give their all and the feeling of that would be like nothing else. But was she giving her all right now? She was definitely trying her hardest, she was sure of that, but then why did it feel like Hau was trying harder still? And why did it feel like he was pulling ahead? Had Moon made a mistake? Was her thinking wrong?

Was she... not giving Hau enough respect?

“Naganadel bursts into speed, releasing a wide-ranging Dragon Pulse! Even after spending so long fighting both Talonflame and Raichu, somehow the Ultra Beast is still able to go at full force!”

Circle faster. Take more strength from her. If Hau was trying to go beyond Moon, Moon would run at full speed to catch back up. Every time he surpassed her, she'd surpass him. They'd keep this up forever if that's what it took.

That's what it really meant for the two of them to be here.

“Raichu accelerates as well! Both Pokemon have taken damage and battled extensively, yet still they are able to increase their speed! An incredible display from both Trainers!”

Faster... faster... Naganadel needed to use a Z-Move... Raichu needed to attack it when it tried... the air split and warped around the first, electricity mixed with psychic power flowing around the second. As two speeding masses coursing through the air they intercepted again and again, the superior size and weight of the first rebuffed by the advantaged typing of the second. Moon's belief that Naganadel would break through and stun Raichu, enabling a Z-Move. Hau's belief that Raichu would hold Naganadel down, and cut away its strength. Both Trainers moving to a honed search for
the moment, that one exposure of weakness within the other's guard.

The first to falter for even a second would be the one to fall.

“There!”

Hau knew it as soon as Naganadel struck. As soon as the Ultra Beast used an attack different to the ranged blasts or power-coated tackles it had employed, instead slamming one of its clawed hands down upon Raichu after the Pokemon's latest impact with its larger body. Of course the electricity lashing back hurt. But the attack stunned the Mouse Pokemon all the same.

Moon started the Dragonium-Z's Z-Pose.

Could Raichu recover fast enough? Strike back with enough psychic power to stop Naganadel from launching this attack? Or would Naganadel's Z-Move complete, and the Devastating Drake fall upon the Mouse Pokemon from on high? Yes, Raichu struck, foregoing the psychic power holding it in the air, slamming its fullness against Naganadel, wreaking havoc across the Poison Pin Pokemon's form. All of the strength the Mouse Pokemon had remaining pushed into that attack. So much strength.

But just not enough.

Moon completed her Z-Pose and from Naganadel's opened mouth surged Z-Power of draconic form. Upon Raichu from the heavens it fell.

Across Melemele Moon and Hau had spent their time together, just the two of them at times, with Lillie at others too. In and around Iki Town they played with their Pokemon. In Hau'oli City they met many people as they explored, Moon and Hau receiving their Ride Pokemon licenses side-by-side. Moon cheered for Hau as he set off to complete his first Trial. Hau cheered for Moon knowing she'd catch up to him in no time at all.

On their way back to Iki from the north, they'd raced upon Tauros-back. For every time Moon pulled ahead, Hau caught up then passed her by. Then she him again. Always. Every single time.

Raichu the first pronounced defeated but, as Naganadel sunk to the ground, conscious but unable to rise into the sky again, Moon found herself asked whether her Pokemon could continue on.

She almost said no.

But the look on Hau's face across from her reaffirmed it yet again. No holding back. Do everything they could do. As long as Naganadel could fight it was not done. Not one of their Pokemon here would accept anything but absolute defeat removing them from this fight. So no, Moon shook her head, Naganadel could go further still.

Hau chose Pangoro and Moon quickly returned Sylveon to the field.

They'd both spent so long thinking in the days leading up to this point. Knew who would respond to what, based on what Pokemon they had left. Moon still couldn't bring Salamence forth – not with the paralysis Raichu had inflicted – for Pangoro was armed with a powerful Rock-type attack. For similar reasons Volcarona would be at risk here. Milotic was a better choice than Sylveon, for Pangoro had shown a dangerous Steel-type Bullet Punch – that technique actually defeating Kukui's Ninetales in their battle before – but similarly was Sylveon so dangerous to Pangoro herself. And Moon would rather save Milotic to battle that Talonflame should it return, or Espeon as well. No, she'd acknowledge the threat of Pangoro's fastest attack.
And move to overcome it, Sylveon bursting into another dash of speed to evade the fist sinking into the earth where it had stood, Pangoro's Bullet Punch carrying her all the way across the field to slam down upon the stage. Now Fairy Wind, Moon called – Moonblast too slow for Bullet Punch's recovery time. Sylveon unleashed that wave of Fairy-type energy upon its foe.

Dragging her open palm through the earth, Pangoro turned and with a mighty roar sent a stream of flying rocks to shatter through the Fairy Wind and rain across the Intertwining Pokemon as well.

Then disappeared in another rapid blitz of speed.

“That... was fast.”

More than any other of his team, Pangoro was a symbol of Hau's surpassing his own self. In Malie City back then, he'd struggled so hard in the month Moon had been gone. Fought to bear the weight of his Bonds, the four with him – Brionne, Pikachu, Eevee, and Wimpod – so heavy as they grew. Hapu alongside him, Lillie encouraging them, the days passed so slowly, Hau feeling defeated each morning he rose so tired, each evening he collapsed exhausted. Yet slowly, so slowly, he grew to adapt. Pushed forward, just the slightest bit.

Made progress.

Then Pancham was placed before him, a nervous young Pokemon in the hands of an Aether Foundation member despaired that this little one would never truly be able to return to the wild.

To describe the struggle Hau faced, questioning whether this was the right choice, could not be done. But he made the choice. Reached forward to that Pokemon, and she reached out to him. A new Bond forged.

And Hau bore it.

And when Moon returned from Mount Hokulani, from her training under the Dragon Tamers, Hau met her with five Pokemon at his side, Eevee amongst them evolved. A total a youth of his age should simply not be able to bear.

But Hau continued on.

Everyone who heard, each Captain told, Kukui and Kahili overseeing, they all understood how significant this was. That Hau had reached the wall of growth, and in the span of a month not only grown to continue on, but evolved one Pokemon and taken on a fifth. That truly was astounding. The young boy a Trainer of absolute potential.

Only Hau, comparing himself constantly to Moon, failed to consider himself such.

But now...

Swinging her hand up from another dodged Bullet Punch, once again Pangoro drew forth empowered stones from the earth. Another Rock Slide. Bullet Punch into Rock Slide, countering Sylveon's attempts to counter and allowing Pangoro to charge the Intertwining Pokemon down with another Bullet Punch each time. A powerful attack combo.

Except...

“Yeah, that's... a really smooth combination.” The surprise in Kukui's voice was so clear as to state how significant a feat this was. “Attack combos, you'll see them around, but usually they take a lot of work to make go that well. Ryuki's Kommo-o before, it used Flash Cannon and Focus Blast again
and again, right? That's the same thing. Moon and Hau keep copying things strong Trainers do, but there's still a world of difference between trying to copy something like that and succeeding. I'm... honestly just really stunned by it.”

Hau was not surprised. Neither concerned. Despite the danger of Sylveon, he'd found himself no longer considering it at all. From Pangoro's very first attack, Hau's focus so intent upon her, everything else had... faded away. Now his thoughts were quiet, mind locked on his partner alone, and that partner acting in perfect response. The inner voice within Hau gone silent. This battle between him and Moon, now that Moon had pushed him so far, Hau had responded by surpassing himself once more. As he always did.

The battle before his eyes flowed on.

In the competitors' stands, Sabrina's eyes widened further still. A second of them. Seeing Plumeria do such before, rising to this state in the battle with Tapu Bulu, had been stunning enough. To witness the motivation that allowed that woman to surpass all of the feelings swirling within her, and enter a moment of such intense focus that there was nothing else, bringing her victory in that fight. For that moment she had been the peak.

But now Hau, a boy of not yet twelve, had done the same. Had struggled, stumbled, learned, and pushed forward, and found his way onto the path. That state of mind where there was nothing else but the moment, and his thoughts were unbound by any need to consider what they were. He and his Pokemon in perfect sync, neither considering their actions but simply doing as their focus willed it. Apotheosis.

The realm of the greatest of the world.

To see two such in this League was one thing. But if... if by chance Moon found the same...

This could be a sight greater than any seen before.

Moon did not. She was a step closer than before, as Pangoro continued to drive Sylveon back. She'd gone into this match with confident focus, knowing she had to be careful, knowing Hau was able to defeat her, but confident still. If she made the right choices, and responded the right way, she and Sylveon could win. That was what Moon had believed.

She no longer believed that.

Could she take damage and counter Pangoro in the same moment? Not with the damage and drain inflicted in the battle with Espeon before. As Sylveon dodged again, Moon didn't even call for a Fairy Wind this time, instead directing a second Quick Attack to further the distance even more. She did not have the luxury of free thought enough to consider how Hau was pushing her down, how she was feeling as she had when battling all those great Trainers before. All she could think of was the pressure she did feel, and how to answer it best.

Beating her arms against her chest, the Pangoro of Hau tensed and built further strength in her body as Sylveon before them stared her down. Left alone for just a moment, that Pokemon was already gaining great strength. If Sylveon wanted to copy that power with Psych Up, well that would be a dangerous thing to try and do indeed. Moon knew she couldn't do that. Knew she couldn't do much at all. How was she being so cornered? What mistakes had she made? Her mind full of thoughts, she found herself unable to respond to Hau's clear of them.

Approaching slowly but surely, Pangoro thrust a Steel-type infused fist forward and broke the
Moonblast Sylveon shot out, the Fairy-type technique unable to pass that empowered Steel-type counter.

“Hau's really pushing Moon into a corner, even with the type difference between those two. Moon's achieved great things with her Fairy-type partner before, but here she appears unable to keep up at all. Professor Kukui, what are your thoughts?”

“I-” Kukui paused to say it. The way Pangoro was moving and attacking, the smoothness of how she linked her attacks together – not just Bullet Punch into Rock Slide anymore, but adding Tackle and Comet Punch to keep moving and attacking as well – it was clear now to him what this was. A Pokemon couldn't do that, reliably link moves together again and again, without being in a state of focus that was absolute. The best Trainers of the world would describe it like that, when speaking of the greatest battles they had fought. The flow of being in the moment, responding with their absolute fullness of self, thinking of nothing but what was before them. Only that much intent could give a Pokemon what it needed to do this. Hau had crossed over into that supreme territory in this fight.

He'd claimed the necessary strength to win.

And become the stronger in this fight.

Sylveon blitzed forward in a surge of movement, pink mist racing from its form.

Not yet. Moon wasn't there yet. But if Ryuki could do it, and Hau could do it, then so could she. The techniques her Pokemon could use, the ways they used them, there were ways to wield them as one. Rather than pushing the Misty Terrain out from its body, all Sylveon had to do was form it and move fast enough to make it flow on its own. So with Quick Attack and Misty Terrain, the Intertwining Pokemon dashed about the stage and left an expanding field of mist in its wake. They'd start with this.

But they wouldn't stop here!

Pangoro's Rock Slide shot at such speed as to blow the mist apart.

Sylveon, dashing through one patch of it, glowed bright and released a Moonblast from within, its angle of attack disguised.

Another Bullet Punch blocked the Fairy-type technique.

Quick Attack accelerated Sylveon all the way to stand upon the Daunting Pokemon's fist, its ribbon feelers wrapping around and starting their Draining Kiss.

Pangoro's other fist shot over her raised arm, yet another rapid Bullet Punch.

Sylveon leaped, ribbons pulling taut, then dropped, swinging its body to wrap the ribbons around both fists as one.

Pangoro, hands bound tight and Sylveon hanging neatly beneath them, slammed both fists down upon the ground.

Fighting-type Pokemon fought with such violence. The recoil of the crowd at this powerful impact was understandable, but so was this action too. But Sylveon, grimly hanging on, continued to pull what energy it could take. Moon had spread about Misty Terrain, attacked from out of sight, and used Pangoro's confident response to close the distance and take hold. And Fairy-type techniques were still almighty against a Fighting and Dark-type foe. A draining attack like Draining Kiss, surely even against this Pokemon's great strength they could still... take enough... to...
Roaring, Pangoro raised her bound fists again, infused both with Steel-type energy to cut off Sylveon's drain, and slammed them down once more.

Moon felt the focus of her partner disappear. Unconscious.

The judge declared such after a moment more.

The battle now drawn equal at five and five, having gone longer than entire other matches so far. The voice of the crowd carrying energy but also stunned impress. These two... they really were going all out in a way all of their own. To see two children at such a level...

Alola's first appearance on the world stage was not one to be forgotten soon.

Moon chose Milotic and Pangoro swiftly cracked her knuckles, the limitation on her Fighting and Dark-type techniques undone. Now then...

The battle continued on.

On the way to Akala Island, after Hau and Moon's first Grand Trial, Moon changed her appearance to disappear. Her display of six Pokemon, of their evolved forms, and two Z-Moves used, had drawn the attention of the world upon her in no time at all. Somehow it didn't seem to rattle Hau at all.

He knew Moon was special. Different. Important. But it didn't make Moon any more or less to him than what Hau already expected of her to begin with. A kindness born from a lack of ways to be set within. Hau supported Moon then, attempting to maintain her love of the Island Challenge and excitement to see more ahead. Funny to think how often he was the driving force forward, in those early days together. How that changed and turned around, and by the time they came to Malie, it was Moon encouraging Hau to push on.

He didn't rise to meet her request. Not then.

But now...

“Using the leftover Misty Terrain from Sylveon, Milotic quickly expands it with Twister to push the mist around, Icy Mist to further it, and Rain Dance to start a storm now that Raichu isn't around to benefit! While it can't move in bursts as fast as Sylveon could, Milotic's base speed is higher, and its twisting movements within the water shell it uses allows it to dodge Pangoro's attacks!”

Hau's state of mind he had reached, it did not make his partners any stronger in raw power than they already were. Simply allowed them to wield their strength to the greatest of their ability without fail. Moon, her mind pulsing with that same overwhelming force that always pushed against her in the greatest of battles, matched Hau still, the difference between them simply the amount each felt the struggle they fought.

Hau was calm, and direct. Moon was frantic, and searching. The lessons on inner peace she'd been taught before, everything hammered into her over the past year, they were simply unable to stand up to this peak. Ever since the battle with Ilima, for all the calm she seemingly acted with, Moon's state of mind had still been one half-panicked all the same. She'd had to think so fast, and react constantly under pressure, to forge ahead every time. The excitement she'd had going into this battle with Hau, believing it would be different to all the others, had quickly collapsed as Moon found herself struggling to keep up yet again. It felt wrong and she blamed herself for it, for this should be the greatest of battles with her greatest of friends. Searching for the source of her mistakes, more loose thoughts jammed Moon's mind, slowing her down.

More opportunities for Hau to pull further ahead.
“Milotic's attacks are quick, using water to slick the battlefield and ice to lower manoeuvrability, all while evading Pangoro's attacks! With the damage Pangoro has taken, and Milotic being fresh, this is a chance for Moon to take the lead! But given Pangoro's time spent boosting her strength, Hau won't be switching her out in a hurry! One good hit from that Pokemon could still turn the tide!”

Being one mistake away from defeat was the razor's edge Moon had struggled upon all this time. But somewhere inside of her heart she knew that what she was feeling, as she fought her best and kept pace with Hau, was not how this should be. Something was very wrong with the way this battle had gone, and Moon did not yet understand what it was. She'd gone into this thinking of a celebration of her and Hau, both giving their all until one had won. But the pressure and intensity from Hau had dragged Moon from that thinking into the fear of defeat. That she would not measure up to the opponent she was giving her all to face.

Here and now, at this point where Hau had found in himself the strongest battling state of mind, Moon still struggled. It was not an unnatural thing, she was not at fault for being so, for she was twelve years old. To find the self-focus to maintain the state Hau now held, many would train for years and even decades to become so able. For the first time, here on this stage, Moon found herself the opposite to how things had been all along. Here and now it was Hau expressing an ability Moon could not match, and Moon struggling under what that made her feel.

If she'd had even the slightest amount of free thought to consider all of that, to think of the relationship between her gift and Hau's, a breakthrough might quickly come Moon's way. But she couldn't think of anything but watching the field, directing Milotic and preparing for any number of Hau's next moves. There was simply not the freedom to think and find the way.

Nebby, resting behind Moon, crooned softly but could offer her nothing in this fight. This was Moon and Hau's. They and the Pokemon they were battling alongside.

It was up to them to find the way.

Moon set the Waterium-Z into her Z-Power Ring, but kept the Icium-Z in hand as well. Both Z-Crystals had been given to her by Captain Lana, the first for passing Lana's Trial, the second for defeating the Captain on this stage. Both were differing attacks, and both had different openings to wield them through. Moon would have preferred not to but... Pangoro was simply proving too strong to pin down. She'd have to force a Z-Move to pull ahead here. But Hau of course was giving none of the freedom to do so. Fighting with all he had. As he should. Everything he was doing was right and Moon knew that in her heart of hearts. She was the one in the wrong right now. She was the one who'd made a mistake. She just couldn't find her way to what was right.

Asked her partner through their Bond but Milotic, busy dodging Pangoro's continued assault, didn't have time to think either.

No room for introspection upon a crowded peak.

Milotic fought using water and ice, the first a coating it surrounded itself with, granting speed and armor, the second a transformation of the first when in need, amplifying defense and adding offence alongside. But with Pangoro's enhanced strength right now, the Daunting Pokemon easily broke through every one of Milotic's attacks. Things that didn't touch it directly, like the way Milotic was creating ice across the ground, were the most effective at slowing Pangoro down, but even that was only just. Only just were Moon and her partner keeping ahead of the relentless attacks of Hau and his own.

“Milotic speeds up! Using the ice paths it has created, the partner of Moon can now travel even faster across the ground, giving it more ability to evade Pangoro's attacks! But the heavy stomps of
Pangoro still crack the ice, meaning the pathways Milotic creates don't last long! Having fought Sylveon already, Pangoro should definitely be down on stamina, but nothing seems to be stopping her attack!"

“Fighting-type Pokemon won't show a difference no matter how tired they are, that's a point of pride for them, yeah. With all the dodging and lighter attacks, maybe Milotic is pulling ahead, but we'll have no way to know until one of those two goes down.”

“If Moon can't predict Pangoro's strength, that makes using a Z-Move risky, right? If Pangoro is one regular attack away from defeat and Moon uses a Z-Move, that'll cost her a lot.”

“Yeah. It will.”

Decisive and absolute. Even if her heart was pounding, Moon would still fight all out the way she always had thus far. Even if something in her mind still screamed at her that she wasn't going about this right. She didn't care if she couldn't tell whether using a Z-Move was right or not, she'd use one when the moment came because that was her way forward. But the moment would be one she made, not Pangoro and Hau. If they tried to lure out a Z-Move, Moon would punish them with a different attack entirely. The falling rain, the chill in the air, the mist still coating the field, all of this was to Moon's advantage. Pangoro's raw strength wasn't keeping up. Moon still had- Hau called Pangoro back, the time between switching on Moon's side still a distance away.

And in her place Primarina appeared, surrounded by the ice and fairy mist, rain falling still across the field. Moon's heart thudded a rapid pulse, seeing the first partner of Hau appear. Now? When she couldn't respond with Decidueye? That was wrong. That was wrong!

...and it was her fault for seeing things that way.

What was she doing, thinking such pretty things as perfect battles between those they'd started alongside? Hau had told her, again and again: no holding back. She'd promised him, and herself, that so many times. And yet still Moon thought about holding Decidueye back, making sure her first partner got to meet with Hau's. Stupid! Stupid to do anything less than give her all going all out!

The acceleration of Milotic to even faster speeds showed clear the intensity burning within Moon, allowing her Pokemon to draw greater strength still.

The two Water-type Pokemon in the mist and falling rain began their clash.

It had rained so hard that day, when Moon and Hau were training together to take on Mallow's special Trial. They'd spent the day indoors, the Captains overseeing them, simply relaxing and having fun. Larvesta and Wimpod, the two newest members of their team at the time, still learning to get along, but getting along all the same. And soon enough the four of them, Moon and Larvesta, Hau and Wimpod, combined their strength and overcame an opponent so much stronger than they could ever best alone.

Hau spent often during the month in Malie remembering that fight and the ways he had, and hadn't, kept up with Moon's pace.

Now was different.

“This all out battle of Water, Ice, and Fairy-type techniques has quickly transformed the field! We've switched over to our infra-lenses to watch the fight within, but neither Moon nor Hau have that luxury! Each of them has to rely wholly upon their partner's Bond, and combine their thoughts with the Pokemon before them! An incredible test for these two incredible young Trainers!”
For a brief moment Alexa's words reminded the crowd, here and abroad, of just how young these two were. Only a few months of age apart, Hau almost twelve, Moon just past. It was so easy to forget every time they did anything: that these were not masters locked in a battle of training years of training had led them to.

Just two children of strength few believed any their age could ever bear.

The sight of Milotic, coiling around Primarina and squeezing tight, its watery coating chilling to ice to increase its grip strength, blew those thoughts from everyone's minds once again. Again this was a battle of masters.

How could it be anything else?

Milotic was losing. Moon knew this, even without being able to see her partner within the mist. She felt it, the sensation of the Tender Pokemon wrapped around Primarina, and the Soloist Pokemon's quick response. The bubbles Primarina had released before Milotic caught up with it, they'd been caught within the watery shell and formed pockets of air in the ice when it froze. Milotic couldn't apply any more strength, and Primarina was continuing to sing. Vocal attacks travelling more dangerously through water than air.

They had to pull back and get away!

Hau's focus slipped.

All it took was a second's awareness. To realise he was not thinking and begin thinking again, the state of mind where he and his partner were at their absolute fading away. Maintaining it even for the length of time he had was truly incredible – Sabrina in the stands still staring with unblinking eyes, Dexio and Sina taking note of the Psychic-type expert's rapt expression. But in truth, the reason for Hau's release from that state had nothing to do with the young boy's own thoughts.

And everything to do with Moon's.

The greatest of Trainers would know, simply looking at one another, their strength. Could tell the Bonds a person held with their Pokemon, and thus how strong those Pokemon could be. It was said the result of a battle could never be known until the battle was done, but the truth remained that the strongest could still conclude the strength of those they faced.

But that simple gaze, it was only the surface of the links and sight that could exist between two giving their all. To clash here at the peak of the world, witnessing the full power of their opponent's Bonds, more came to the heart and mind than just the strength of the one they faced. Those who fought at the absolute would speak of it, how they could almost hear the thoughts of the one across from them, almost feel the sensations in their heart. By the way the best and most equal fought, as if reading each other's minds in battle, it was hard to deny the words they spoke.

Hau, giving his all, had felt Moon's heart, and the sensations surging within. The chaotic, panicked, and stressed, yet determined, intense, and proud feelings she had brought to this fight. Those feelings had reached across to him.

And shaken him from the state he had reached for to think that Moon felt such in this fight felt so wrong as to defy all the words there could be.

Milotic, pulling back from Primarina in the moment the Soloist Pokemon's attacks slowed down, returned to the Net Ball Moon held. And from the Pokeball she raised next her first appeared in its place. Decidueye, final evolution of Rowlet, Grass and Ghost-type Starter Pokemon, kin to the
Soloist Primarina, Water and Fairy-type before it.

The falling rain slowed to droplets as the mist settled to sweep the stadium floor but rise no higher. The two Pokemon staring one another down.

And then their battle began.

Their lowest point together had been that morning in Malie, when Moon had asked Hau to come with her to Hokulani's peak, and Hau had known he could go no further than he had thus far. Moon took Hau holding back the worst she could, setting out to go alone and losing her next Trial completely, unable to give her partners the strength or heart they needed in their fight. To hear that had happened, so easily had Hau blamed himself. Lillie, more mature than them both, talked Hau down from such. The pace they'd both driven each other into had pushed them to a breaking point. She wouldn't have Hau try to take that blame alone. Moon had gone just as intently herself. The both of them... it wasn't wrong to make mistakes. They simply had to make sure they grew from them.

The next time Hau and Moon met, Hau lifted her up, thrilled at her return beyond words. Because he'd faced his lowest and made it past, and he was sure in her smile so had she. They could keep going on now, pushing themselves no longer, simply exploring and having fun. As they should have all along.

And they did. Into the rocklands of Ula'ula with Lillie they joined Samson Oak's team, getting to see all manner of Pokemon living out amongst the wild. It was peaceful, and fun. They'd have to do it again sometime.

After all, they had all of Alola to travel again and again and again and still never grow tired of its light.

“Decidueye and Primarina immediately go on the attack! The Icy Wind Primarina creates is a threat to Decidueye, and Hau's partner is proving able to avoid the arrows Decidueye fires at the distance it's keeping! Decidueye creates its own wind to blow the mist back, but Primarina seems able to control it better even still! It's proving difficult for Moon to attack at this range!”

...it still didn't feel right.

Even when Decidueye dove in, dodging a Moonblast in a swirl of leaves, scything a Grass-charged wing through the air as Primarina wavered, the mist it was controlling distorting its position, the two Pokemon dodging and attacking all across the field, it still felt wrong. Moon's heartbeat was so loud in her ears. Hau, struggling, couldn't find his way back to how things had been before. That feeling... he had to get back there again. It wasn't right that he wasn't. The two of their partners, feeling their strain, gave their best but found themselves unable to keep up with their own strength too. Primarina lost control of the mist. Decidueye failed to dodge an obvious attack. Primarina the quick reprisal. Less a dance, less an elegant clash, just... attacks.

“They must be... so tired.”

“The mental toll of a battle like this, especially with how long it's gone, is significant. There's a reason League Battles, especially full battles like this, have a rule for Trainers being unable to battle as well. At their age... I think we all understand Moon and Hau are incredible. But they may soon have to stop.”

Stop? Moon and Hau both heard the word. No. Not in the least. Each gripped a Pokeball, Moon's eyes on the timer counting down, Hau's on her. They wouldn't stop. Just because this didn't feel right... they just hadn't found it yet, that's all. It was still there, in the distance ahead of them. The true
peak they’d promised to reach.

They weren’t done yet!

“Moon calls back Decidueye the moment the timer runs out, but... yes, the judge is confirming that Hau activated Primarina's Pokeball first all the same! Hau must now choose his next Pokemon to go out! And there is Golisopod, the last of his team members to appear! In response... Moon chooses Salamence! Her partner is still in its Mega Evolved state: is it time for Ultra Evolution to appear at last?!”

Golisopod had been the one she was waiting for. Espeon's psychic powers, Pangoro's Rock Slide, Talonflame's speed and truly everything about Primarina, those four simply were not candidates Moon could perform Ultra Evolution against. Especially not with Salamence still suffering from the electricity Raichu had struck it with lingering behind. Golisopod was intensely dangerous, Moon had learned that well, from Guzma and watching Hau too. But this was the only opportunity she had for this all the same.

They had to push through here and now!

“First Impression!”

The speed Golisopod moved at, when wielding that fastest and most powerful of its techniques, truly did defy all limits. Moon had known it would come. Had commanded Salamence to be ready. And the Dragon Pokemon had prepared to manifest a barrier and cut it off, that defensive technique seeing more and more use against the strongest of foes.

But the lingering electricity flowed and Salamence tensed under it, held just a moment too slow. The heavy clawed fist of Golisopod crashed fully upon the dragon's head, not as powerful as it could be thanks to Salamence's Flying-typing, but still so strong all the same.

Roaring, the dragon swung its head away and back again, slamming it against the Hard Scale Pokemon and pushing it back. Moon had the Normalium-Z in her Z-Power Ring. Salamence lifted up into the air.

“Pin Missile!”

Target the wings, Hau knew, and thus Golisopod's bursting shots of Bug-type power exploded across the great red wings of their Dragon Pokemon foe, Salamence dipping from its flight, mouth opening to roar out red flame and try to push Golisopod back. But the water bursting from the Hard Scale Pokemon's armoured claws allowed it to brave the flames and push through, once more withstanding heat to strike a dragon upon the head.

Lagging in the air, Salamence struggled to respond as Golisopod reached its tail, grasped, and pulled the great dragon down to the ground once more.

“That's the thing about Golisopod – their nature of fleeing when in danger is offset by their explosive strength. And with the effects of Raichu's Z-Move, even Mega Evolved there's not so much that Salamence can do.”

“It looks like as long as Moon attempts to Ultra Evolve, Hau and Golisopod will keep cutting her and Salamence off.”

“It's a bad situation to be sure.”

But they still weren't stopping here!
Even with Golisopod dutifully holding Salamence down, still the dragon roared, flame exploding from its mouth to pour across the ground, an act reminiscent of the firestorm the Hydreigon partner of Ryuki had used against Sina before, seemingly so long ago. The pressure, the force, pushed the Dragon Pokemon upwards, wind beginning to wrap around its form. A storm of fire from the mouth, wind summoned around the body, those were two techniques that to bring so close together was... no easy thing. But the raw determination of Moon, a naturally impressive thing on its own, was clearly at its highest it had ever been. She wouldn't stop here. Not when she'd promised to give everything she had. Salamence, pulling higher, even as Golisopod hung onto its tail, roared again.

Moon raised her arms, left to her head, right to her chest. The core Z-Pose, the symbol of Z itself. The first she had ever seen, taught by Ilima on the docks of Hau'oli City. And now she was here. And now it was time.

Now the light of Ultra Evolution would shine out once again!

Grasping the tail, failing to pull Salamence down, Golisopod released its grip under Hau's command, as the flowing light extended down the dragon's body to begin its transformation into this further form. What they could still do... in the time of this transformation... the Hard Scale Pokemon raised its claws, scraping them upon one another. Hone its attack, prepare to strike harder still. This Ultra Evolved Dragon... it wouldn't stop them even now!

The promise to go beyond all limits not one Moon alone had made.

“Once again we see the form of Ultra Salamence! But... compared to previous appearances, even after Lana's Z-Move, it does not appear to be doing too well.”

“Oh, with the amount Salamence went through to reach this state? That’s no surprise.”

It didn’t matter. Moon still knew the power of her partner. Sure Salamence had taken a beating, but it had still reached this stage. Now to go even further beyond.

Now to unleash their full strength!

_Hau remembered clearly, back at the Aether Paradise. He, Gladion, and Moon, going in to oppose Team Skull, and the Aether Foundation too, to save Lillie and Nebby from the president's grip. It was then that Hau first truly let his feelings of falling behind go. For so long he’d measured himself against Moon as not being able to match up. But what he needed to do back then, it was to give it his all all the same. If he was going to compare himself to Moon, the way he should do it was in using her as inspiration to go further still._

_He had. He did._

_And now here they were._

As Salamence roared and a surge of blue fire cascaded across the field, Golisopod slashed with so much force as to shape the air and strike the Dragon Pokemon with a blade from the battlefield below. For a brief moment surprised by being reached, the Ultra Evolved Pokemon stopped.

_Hau called Drill Run and Golisopod tunneled into the earth._

“A quick strategic decision by Hau! Thanks to knowing the Drill Run technique, Golisopod can burrow into the ground, which brings it away from Ultra Salamence's range! Does Moon have a counter she can employ against that?”

Of course she did. She had spent as much time studying her Pokedex as any who carried one would.
Even if the Rotom-dex was watching from the stands, obsessively cataloguing the battle but unable to assist within itself. The final technique Salamence naturally learned, the Normal-type Double-Edge, was an attack that burned the health of the user to unleash the most powerful of strikes. Such was true for Salamence's regular state.

But in this Ultra Evolved form?

Let's find out.

It shook the stage. Many in the stadium seats would claim it shook them too. The speed, the impact, of the great coiling golden dragon in the sky above so suddenly slamming down upon the ground, sending a wave of wind blowing out around it, red-gold fire bursting through the cracks formed by the force it unleashed. The ground buckled and rose, from it bursting Golisopod, ejected from the earth it had burrowed beneath by the raw power Salamence cast through it.

The Ultra Evolved Dragon wasted no time in seizing the mid-air Golisopod within its golden jaws.

"With a display of overwhelming power Salamence catches Golisopod in its grip! Every time Moon has demonstrated that Ultra Evolution is a power of another level, and once again she's done such! Golisopod is in a bad situation now!"

Hold... Hau could see the timer opposite. Knew Golisopod wished to leave this situation now, with Salamence's power, the heat in its fangs, searing the Hard Scale Pokemon's body even through its heavily armoured plates. But not yet. They could hold out. Create more water through your plates, offset the heat, let the mist and liquid fill the dragon's mouth and make it have to stop...

When the moment came, and Salamence found itself with a mouth full of water affecting its breath, Golisopod struggled, pushed free, and slashed across the dragon's face. Dropped to the ground, steam rising from its form and burns across its body.

The sixty seconds up.

Golisopod, having held out against this Ultra Evolved foe, returned to Hau with haste.

Primarina returning to the field shortly after.

"Of all of Hau's Pokemon, Primarina is the best set to oppose Salamence, with its Fairy-typing insuring itself against Dragon-type attacks, its Water-type helping against Fire, and its Ice-type attacks super-effective against Salamence as well! Moon has the option to retreat Salamence, but unlike its Mega Evolved state, we don't know if Ultra Evolution will persist if she does! What will Moon do?"

Moon did know. Of course she knew. That was one of the first things she'd had to check. If Salamence returned, it would lose Ultra Evolution. There was no way to maintain that power while holding the Pokemon within its Pokeball. So here and now, they had to make it count. Not with Dragon or Fire-type attacks, but Salamence still had Normal-type attacks that could still hurt so much. They still had a way!

Again the electricity from Raichu coursed through the Dragon, and held it still as the first Moonblast struck its chest.

"A battle like this..." Kukui found the words slowly, almost entranced by the sight at the peak of his League, "it's because it's so equal that Moon and Hau can do what they do, swapping Pokemon so constantly, making little gains against one another every time. But even still, what Hau did to bring Ultra Salamence down to this state, it's something that both came from seeing that form so many
times before, but also his own natural skill. It really is... truly something.”

In the length of this battle so far, Hau's name, attached to Moon's so often, found a definition equal to her own. Moon and Hau. Hau and Moon. Both incredible young Trainers of Alola. Both with talent and skill far beyond their years. Both absolute powers.

Both making their names known across the world.

Moon and Hau were fighting with their all, struggling against one another and knowing the other was an opponent of incredible strength. Equal, yet seeing an overwhelming force opposite them all the same. In the length of this great battle so far, they had found their way to this state at last, the nature of true rivals going all out. Even as Ultra Salamence slammed down its power upon the field, Primarina evading and attacking with Ice and Fairy-type techniques, Moon found herself without the same distress as before. Something had clicked, and the feeling of this... it was beginning to flow.

She was beginning to find her way.

Hau, mind ablaze as he helped Primarina avoid every great attack of Ultra Salamence – the gold dragon still devastatingly stronger than any of Hau's Pokemon alone – knew he was still unable to return to the way he had been before. But if he could... if he could find his way back...

His thoughts too many to know that only without them could he reascend to that peak.

To Moon, Hau was her best friend. The one who'd welcomed her truly to Alola, not just the location but the heart and soul of this place as well. She considered herself part of Alola now, and she knew that was because Hau had helped her become so. She was here because he'd reached out to her, walked alongside her, and encouraged her all the way.

She'd do everything she could to make sure he felt that in this fight.

The song of Primarina, bubbles of water forming around the pink mist the Soloist Pokemon breathed out, rose high over the field as Salamence breathed flame into them and detonated the mist, spreading a haze between the two separated by land and sky. But the paralysis was still there, still slowing the dragon down. Not all the bubbles of Primarina disappeared.

Enough chained between them for the beam of ice the Soloist Pokemon shot next to flow over the many and grow in size with each it consumed on its way into the sky.

To Hau, Moon was his best friend. The one who'd joined him in his journey, challenged him, motivated him, shown him limitless intent and inspired him to find his own. His exuberance had always made him friends, but back home he'd always been the son of Kahuna Hala as well. Himself and that too. But Moon, from the very beginning and always, had only known Hau alone. Joked with him, teased at him, joined him in finding joy each day. He'd found both friend and rival. Someone whose passion for facing challenges had lit the fires in his own heart, and driven Hau to match Moon's pace and rise to the same peak as her.

This place they'd promised to make it to together, they were here. He'd make sure she knew that.

They'd made it here.

And this was what that meant.

The beam of ice from Primarina expanded as the Soloist Pokemon put even more of its heart into the attack. Salamence breathed flame to hold it back. The bubbles of air within, carrying that Fairy-type mist, exploded one by one and sent shards of ice laced with that empowered air flying across the
Many striking Salamence itself. That combination of attacks so precise as to bring the dragon lower to the ground.

It roared again.

The second Moonblast, right where the first had struck, drew a radiant explosion as all the light composing its golden form fled from Salamence's chest.

The Mega Evolved Dragon hit the ground, the regular Salamence raised its head, and then the thud of it falling again signalled the end. The second Pokemon of Moon, and third in this battle that had lasted longer now than all others, pronounced defeated in this fight.

The voice of the crowd pulsing with the song of Alola, the same pulsing in Moon and Hau's ears so loud they could hear nothing else, washed out across the world as so many found themselves unable to bear the intensity of this fight. Lillie, in that hospital room, her mother still so silent in awe, maintained her cheers at full volume even now. She wouldn't stop supporting them for even a second. She just wished they could hear her cries.

Through Nebby, connected to Moon, and the hearts Moon and Hau were sharing in this fight, perhaps, in some faint way, they could.

From the Pokeball Moon raised Decidueye returned to the field, finding in the pulse of her Trainer's heart, and the spirit about Primarina and Hau opposite, a far more fitting feeling to fight it out to.

She launched forward to meet her opponent all out once more.

The ice still scattered about was to Primarina's advantage, the Fairy-type mist each contained giving the Soloist Pokemon the ability to sing them to rise. Forced to dodge flying blades of frost, Decidueye weaved quickly about the field, drawing back and firing arrows the Soloist Pokemon dodged too. This was better, a better way for them to fight all out. When was the last time they'd pushed one another so? Back in Malie when Brionne had bested Dartrix with ice? How far they'd come since then.

How much further there was still to go.

Again, again Moon and Hau raised Pokeballs, again they called those two back. The fight was stronger now, their second wind Kukui called it, but there was still one thing holding them back. In Hau's heart he knew there was a higher place to which he could return, and in this fight Moon felt Hau's heart and thus knew there was one too. But how to make it there?

Informed it was once again her to retreat first, Moon sent Volcarona, the last member of her team to appear, out into the fight. She'd expected Hau's response of Talonflame, but Volcarona had trained hard at besting many Flying-types in speed at the Poke Pelago. And Moon still had a Z-Move she could use. The Flyinium-Z given to her by Kahili she set within her Z-Power Ring. She'd find the way.

She and Volcarona would go to the height calling their name!

Into speed Volcarona burst, scales drifting from its form exploding into flame propelling it faster still. Into speed Talonflame matched it, the accelerated flight of the Scorching Pokemon enough to equal its Sun opponent. Through the sky the two weaved, clashing in Fire and Flying-type techniques, the power of Volcarona forming far enough away from its body to prevent Talonflame from ever making the contact that would do such fierce damage to the partner of Moon. Moon watched, closely, for the chance to use a Z-Move, but found herself unable to draw the moment out. These
two, they were too fast, and after so long even with her determination her thoughts too slow. She loosed them, focusing instead on the moment itself. On watching Volcarona in flight, and giving it her all.

One by one her thoughts slipped away.

Sabrina rose to her feet, the others seated around her all looking at the Psychic-type expert in surprise.

Hau felt it too. The path Moon had found. The way, as her mind emptied of all thoughts but the moment. And he, focusing upon Talonflame too, did the same. Released his grip on all within. Nothing left but what was before him. Nothing left but this fiery dance in the sky.

A silence, so powerful and absolute, cloaked the two Trainers staring into the sky, and began to affect the hearts of the strongest and most able to see gathered around them in turn. This battle, so intense, built of such struggle, such skill, such absolute drive, was changing into something else. Something more. Everything was falling away now. Compressing down to this moment alone. Something pure, singular, shared between these two together. It was just they and their Pokemon and all others watching knew those were the only ones in the world.

Volcarona and Talonflame accelerated even faster still.

Twin surges of fire twisted through the sky, crashing again and again in explosions of force at each impact, the trails of red flame painting the sky as if winding dragons, jaws clashing as they sought to throw the other down. So much. So much.

More. Faster. Flying-type techniques spun about the two, blowing the flame around them into a greater shape, the Bug-type scales within Volcarona's giving it mass that let it push Talonflame back at each impact. Still the two weaved through the sky, long searing lengths of power, twisting around one another, clashing again and again. Flame bodies grinding against one another, one seeking to close in, the other to hold it back. Their two trails of flame so close together now to seem as if they were one.

And then they were.

Then they flew as one, Volcarona and Talonflame, each's chest to the other's, spiralling in one singular moment, the power wrapped around them so equal and so great that it affected neither so close together. So close they were almost touching. Moon and Hau, still silent, understood this flight, this state the two had reached. The spirals of flame around them, flowing at a strength neither could create alone. Benga, in the stands, rose to his feet too. It wasn't as if Moon's partner had done it alone, but still that was it. The ultimate technique of Volcarona, something only the best could bring about.

A perfect Fiery Dance.

Moon began the Flying-type Z-Pose.

It was done in silence, the true intensity of the battle known to no other. Of how from the moment Z-Power formed around it, Volcarona no longer held control over the flame, and Talonflame so close was attempting to crush the Sun Pokemon with the vast strength wrapped around them both. But the Z-Move completed, the Z-Aura expanded to encompass the two, and the partner of Moon took control over the flight. Arced high, to the very peak of the stadium field, then down again at speed to split the air.
At the final second Volcarona pulled away, bursting free of the great stream of wind and flame it had flown within.

Talonflame did not and hit the ground at full speed.

The power wrapping it was both sword and shield. The impact, so intense, drained everything from the Scorching Pokemon but did not harm its body nearly so much as one might fear. But the drain was still absolute. Talonflame had nothing left to give, no consciousness left to rise. Hau called the Pokemon back without delay.

Sent Pangoro back out without slipping from this state.

Moon exchanged Volcarona for Naganadel, the sixty seconds long passed in this struggle in the sky, and the battle continued on.

Neither able to feel anything but this moment they shared.

“Something's getting to me.”

“What's that, Alexa?”

“Hau used a Z-Move a while ago now, right? And they're super draining especially for people new to them, aren't they Professor?”

“That is the case, yeah.”

“So how's he still going? Especially after... all of this.”

“I... honestly do not know.”

Acerola did. She knew how Hau did such. And what he’d done to be able to.

Ever since their training together began – Hau had sought to hone his Pokemon's strength, to chase after the speed at which Moon's had grown. Not one to ever fail to get the answers she wanted, Acerola had spent a day up at the Dragon Tamers' temple, plying Pitaya for everything the Guildmaster would admit about what Moon went through while she was there.

It took time, Pitaya one of the most resistant of adults to Acerola's charms, but she still got her way.

Still reported to Hau what Moon had done.

Every day Moon used Z-Moves. With each of her partners. Exposed them to that power, helped them grow used to it. Helped them learn to recover from each use. Constant Z-Moves, constant experience of that strength. Something only Moon could truly do. But by that constant power experienced, her Pokemon had grown faster than they ever could without. That was what she'd done.

Unfortunately, Acerola had claimed with a huff, not really something we can do.

“I think we still can.” Hau said after a moment's thought.

So began the long months of training that boy undertook. Each morning he rose, and with a different Pokemon performed a Z-Move. Spent the day bearing the cost of such, learning to go on with it. Acerola tried to do the same. Tried to keep up. But she really couldn’t. The way her focus fractured and split, how tired she became in the hours after using a Z-Move every day and then keeping training from then on, it was exhausting! She was basically falling apart!
She didn’t know what Hau was doing to avoid that.

“No,” said Hau, “I feel that way all the time too.”

In the passage of those months, watching Hau bear that power again and again, reaching the ability to use it twice, by the end even three times in a single day, the speed at which he’d grown humbled Acerola in a way she never had been before. Not even by the battles against Hau and Moon in the Final Trials after all of that was done.

Hau, able to bear the effects of a Z-Move better than anyone bar Moon herself, was an incredible danger to every other Alolan Trainer because of that skill. He could use a Z-Move so quickly, and if an opponent moved to use their own, they would tire from battle far faster than he. Only Moon, who never felt strain at all, was the counter to such.

But that still didn’t stop Hau from matching her in this fight.

Pangoro split the air, another Bullet Punch. Her fastest technique, carrying her whole body, but not nearly her strongest, and draining great stamina to use all the same. But though she’d fought so hard already, still she wouldn’t back down. Not as long as she could fight.

And as long as Hau could she would too!

Naganadel dodged the first punch, launching a rapid strike of claws at the Daunting Pokemon in return. She turned in to them, one heavy hand grasping that of the Poison Pin Pokemon – the damage from the battle so far enough to keep the Ultra Beast at ground level – and her other punching it head on. Reeling back, Naganadel took from Moon focus. Moved as if she were with it. As if they were one.

Slammed its purple head down upon Pangoro’s white-furred own.

The ring of impact echoing out across the field.

The two, pressed together, held.

Then slumped, one against the other, and fell as one to the stadium floor.

“Both Pokemon are unable to battle!”

Milotic met Golisopod, both Moon and Hau picking a Pokemon unknowing of the other’s choice. Or maybe they did. Those two, they could feel the other across from them. Their heartbeats so fast, but not swaying their calm at all. They were here. And delighted. This was fun. They and their Pokemon were having fun.

And they still had so much more to go.

Ice froze around Golisopod’s claws as the Hard Scale Pokemon crossed the field in another blitz of First Impression, Milotic unable to manifest its watery-coating quick enough to stop its foe seeking to slow it down with that chill attack instead. Not that it stopped Golisopod from swinging at full force.

Just slowed it down enough for Milotic to dodge around.

The two too close together, with no opportunities to pull away, Moon discarded her thoughts of Z-Moves faster than she even realised she’d had them to begin. Milotic coiled around Golisopod and squeezed tight. Golisopod struggled and pushed its massive arms outward, trying to throw off its opponent, water flowing around them both as each attempted to take the power the other was
summoning up.

A spiralling Twister of Dragon-type power surrounded the two, coursing through the water covering them, creating a liquid pillar Milotic rose high within, ascending into the sky above.

Golisopod, on the ground below, drew all the water it could grasp into a Liquidation blade, and swung it up into the Hydro Pump Milotic blasted down from above. The full tower of water pulsed with pressure, tightening around the Hard Scale Pokemon below.

But when it broke, and Milotic dropped free, in the moments it fell the partner of Hau – neither bested nor even stunned – swung its blade and caught the Tender Pokemon on its way down to the ground.

Flung across the field Milotic hit the ground hard, raising up and blasting another Dragon Pulse as Golisopod charged through. Caught the tired Tender Pokemon without being wrapped and bound to prevent its attacks. Unleashed its own at full force.

Moon called her defeated partner back and sent Volcarona out to go on.

Quickly did the Sun Pokemon burst into flame, ascending high into the air faster than Golisopod could draw and unleash another Liquidation slice. A tornado of flame, spiralling around the Sun Pokemon, surrounded Golisopod too. The Hard Scale Pokemon too heavy to be lifted by it and find its way up to its opponent overhead. Caught by Fire and Flying-type energy both, Golisopod stood within the flames.

Drew forth a Liquidation sword. No, more a spear. Held it steady, taking aim, even as it burned. Hau's focus with it. It could see into the firestorm centre above.


As the attack of Volcarona drained the last strength of the Hard Scale Pokemon away, still it suffered heavy the final attack Golisopod had thrown.

Hau called his partner back as Moon's breathed heavy in the sky above.

It was stunning. Everyone could feel it now, enraptured in this moment these two had created. A fight that could only be born of equal rivals, those stronger pushing them too far down for their strength to blossom, those weaker unable to truly bring it out. No, only two perfect rivals could achieve such, where they and their Pokemon exhibited a strength and power solely their own. Already the things Moon and Hau, and the Pokemon with them, had done in this fight were unique. Combinations and attacks that had never truly existed before. And though in the days, weeks, and months after this fight, both would struggle to recover even a fraction of that strength, to find the way for their Pokemon to wield such again, both still knew that power lurked within. And they'd find their way back.

So they could battle at this peak again.

Espeon appeared, the first time since this battle began. How long had it been? Neither Moon nor Hau could tell. But surely the Sun Pokemon on Hau's side had rested well. So which would burn brighter?

Solgaleo, eyeing these two younglings, enjoyed their determined shine.

Quick Attack into Double Team, splitting the Psychic-type Sun Pokemon into a wave of doubles. Hurricane into Heat Wave, the Bug and Fire-type Sun Pokemon again unleashing that tornado of
flame. Confusion, Psybeam, Psychic, a rapid form of those powers shaping the air around Espeon and washing the fire away. Silver Wind, Fire Spin, Flame Wheel, a smaller tornado of denser fire forming within the first.

Future Sight.

Bug Buzz.

Espeon shone as it warped its power through time, one act cast beyond the now.

Volcarona hummed with sound, a cascade of Bug-type energy falling down from the firestorm's eye.

Espeon bore the attack, determination and drive what every Pokemon here held, and Moon called Volcarona to accelerate to escape whatever attack Hau had prepared it.

The psychic power, cast as a wide-ranging net, grasped at the empowered fire in the air, and as Volcarona accelerated away enclosed a great mass of it around the flying Sun Pokemon's form.

Always pushing its power away to cover others, never suffering it itself, Volcarona could not escape the engulfing of all the power it had released.

Fell from the sky in flames to hit the ground without relief.

One sun eclipsed by another.

Moon sent Decidueye to bring Espeon down.

The first arrow went dodged. The wind of Ghost-type energy that followed stunned the spent Sun Pokemon. The second arrow hit its shadow and bound it in place.

The third, even as Espeon railed its last remaining power against Decidueye, removed it from the fight.

Primarina.

The final two.

Jewellery, who had watched this entire battle with her whole heart, felt what so many did. The finale settling upon the stage. It was now coming to a close. There were no words for what she felt, seeing what her daughter had achieved, the depth of Moon's connection with not only her Pokemon, but her opponent across from her. Yes, Alola had been the right choice for them both. They'd both found new happiness here.

She and all those watching cheered louder still as the long battle played its final song.

Hala had seen them begin this journey side by side. To see it come to this, the feeling of pride within his chest was matched only by awe. His grandson. And Moon. Both shining stars of Alola. Beacons of light and true children of this land. They were a future brighter than any other.

The stoic Kahuna found his eyes watering at this sight.

Olivia had tested them on Akala. Passed each on their merits, but as she learned soon after, had not properly taken on the role she had sworn to keep. Both Moon and Hau should have spent longer with her. She regretted that, and had worked far harder for every Island Challenger since. But to see them now, like this, those knots of regret unwound themselves in her heart at last.
They'd come so far.

Nanu, always one to speak his mind but usually never the words people wanted to hear, considered the future those two had claimed. And found himself already thinking of ways to help them out with what they'd be going through over the days to follow.

For a man who'd only ever treated his role as a leader of this region begrudgingly, he sure was putting a lot of effort into caring about its youth, huh?

Hapu looked at two of her rivals, two fellow children she'd challenged herself to keep alongside, and wished for the chance to battle each again. Again and again. She wanted them to stay together. She wanted them to grow up together. She wanted to grow alongside them because she was sure no other in the world could better help her become the person she wanted to be. The Kahuna she wanted to be.

Next time... it would be her meeting them like this on that stage.

The Captains watched. Ilima, who'd set them their first challenge, and watched each pass it magnificently. Watched each grow faster than even he. Lana, who'd tested them both so hard, and seen them both rise to her challenge. She wanted the same as Hapu too. To be with them. This was the future she wished to see.

Kiawe, who taught both to hear the song, to see them singing it so loudly in the deeds of they and their Pokemon, it brought tears to his eyes too. This was it, this was the highest of highs there could be. And they'd made it there. This sight, he'd keep it in his heart.

Mallow, who'd brought them together for her test, and watched them work so well side-by-side. They were amazing. Sophocles, who'd faced each's struggle, and watched each surpass it. They were incredible. Acerola, who'd seen in Moon the spirit of Holei going on, and in Hau the drive to surpass any challenge. They were Alola. And Alola was bright on that stage.

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Remember it each time he rose in dance.

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Tristan and Mina, both Captains of Poni to each. Lending more to Moon's training, but not shying from understanding Hau's strength either. To see those two youths rise to such a height, their happiness was without equal. Mina felt her inspiration surge, the sketchbook she carried begging for her attention. Tristan just thought about all the ways he'd battle those two in the future too.

They all had a vision of a tomorrow brighter than could be believed.

Sabrina, feeling the truth the two had found. Apotheosis, the highest of highs. She'd tasted it before, but never like this. The path she chose had led her away, and she did not regret it but... she could not help but wonder if she'd stayed and fielded that Trainer's challenges more often, she too might have been pushed to a similar high.

Dexio and Sina, Asuka and Grimsley, all of those deeply experienced in battles felt it. The purity. The absoluteness of this fight. The fires inside them burned brighter than ever before, even for the ones claiming retirement. Maybe... one more League when the next one came.

Kahili, who'd found herself growing so much in this year keeping track of those two in addition to managing her own life, couldn't put words to the pride she felt. Viola would tease her about becoming something of a parent to them. But that was Alola, the great family connected together. Everyone here was proud of them.

Just she one most of all.
Pitaya, who too had taken a role of raising one at least, took the deepest of prides in Moon's growth, and deepest of thanks for Hau's own. Those two, together they were more than any could ever be. The sight of them, they gave her a deep faith in the future of this land. Any future with them in it would be bright indeed.

And she'd support them, the both of them, for as far as she could go.

Ryuki, staring in uncharacteristic silence, was inscribing the song he could hear loud and clear in his heart. This peak those two had found, he'd sing it from this day forth. He hoped they'd be the first to hear it when it was done.

He'd come to Alola to find a peak to shine from, but instead found two stars brighter than even he.

Not in the least did he mind.

Jackson and Molayne, orbital figures to their growth, two men with strong spirits and Pokemon, but focus less on battling and more Alola itself. Still they felt it, that unwavering pride and intent. Still they, along with everyone else here, everyone else in Alola, everyone else in this moment, became one in watching this clash.

In celebrating the greatest at the peak.

Benga, still on his feet from the moment Moon's Volcarona had shown the power that marked her again amongst the legends of the world, felt awe. Wondered if he took Pitaya's request to stay in Alola and train under her watch, he'd have the chance to meet those two in battle too.

Jace, who'd overcome a deep internal struggle motivated more than a little by the efforts of those two, felt thankfulness. Thankfulness that they got to have this moment together. It was something he and Ilima never had but... maybe just not yet. There was still time.

There was a whole bright future ahead to enjoy.

Riley, who'd never considered a bright future at all, found herself thinking of new dawns, even as the sun set over the horizon, the last of its light fading into the evening sky. She'd carried a burning anger inside for so long, and with its release after her big sister's victory, found only a void she did not know what could fill. But seeing the strength of the Bonds between Moon and Hau and their Pokemon, the depth of the connection giving them this strength, now at last she knew.

This was the way to be whole under Alola's light.

Plumeria, the only other of all who'd fought here to reach the state those two were in, knew theirs was far happier than hers could ever be. Even if she did such again, her first time – built upon the need to destroy Tapu Bulu as it was – would flavour every time going forth. It wasn't like this wound could fully heal, but instead with the heart of Alola she could go on all the same. And those two, they were Alola's heart in the greatest of ways. She could feel it, that shared heartbeat of all here in this moment. The song of Alola pulsing within them all.

The great weave that linked all life singing out their names.

The four Tapu, watching still, all silent in voice and mind. They saw. And understood. Found themselves unable to question the place those two had claimed.

Alola, which they kept, held peaks above them still. Solgaleo and Lunala, the emissaries of the light, and their two chosen with them too. The highest of highs.
Those were these children down there on that stage.

Solgaleo met Nebby's eyes, the two sharing a silent moment between elder and child. Look, Solgaleo seemed to say, at how strong this young one is. Look harder, Nebby answered back, at how brightly my connected shines.

Look, both turned their heads, to an empty space beside the field, where the fifth heart besides they and the two with them was watching from. Do you see how wonderful they are?

Far away in Kanto, Lillie nodded without knowing why, blinking intently against the tears. The emotion of those linked together, she could feel it so strongly. As if she were there.

In the hearts of Moon and Hau she was.

Kukui, seated opposite the Moltres flame, carried from across the world to add this League to all others, witnessed the greatest of battles there could be. Smiled wide at the sight of those two and two. Of Moon and Decidueye, and Hau and Primarina, below. The final battle.

“Give it all you've got, yeah!”

The crowd roared loud as Moon and Hau gave this battle's last commands.

Decidueye vanished through leaves, arcing rays of ice unable to catch her as she drew back arrows that flew swift through the air, bursting through the bubbles Primarina sung that sapped their momentum and left them clattering to the ground, the Soloist Pokemon surging at speed across the field, water wrapping its form, mist again flowing in its wake. Decidueye disappeared amongst the mist. Primarina's form wavered and vanished too. Ice and arrows and song and wind and water and leaves and attacking again and again and again.

Everything. Give it everything. Moon and Hau's minds were singular points of focus, neither sight nor sound guiding them but simply the flow of their and their partner's hearts. The four of them here sharing this dance as one. The song of Alola one that they sung.

The journey they shared leading them all to this place.

And the final act's smile written over both's face.

Leaf Blade cut through Hydro Pump, throwing Primarina across the field. Ice Beam stopped Spirit Shackle, freezing over Decidueye's shroud. Moonblast crossed the stage, Decidueye taking it to shatter the frost. Brave Bird faster than ever before, slamming them together in a Flying-type burst.

Again they attacked. And again. Evaded. Created new combinations. Took more damage and powered through. Everything. They gave everything. Their absolute.

And in this moment linked together, the absolute carrying them both, Moon and Hau knew at last how this would end.

Moon set the Z-Crystal given to her, the signature of her first partner, into her Z-Power Ring.

Hau did the same.

“Huh?”

Kahili shot to her feet. So did Acerola. So did every competitor in the stands. Across the stadium all those seated rose.
Moon took a stance. Hau did too. The noise of the crowd disappeared. Wait, was he... no. No, right?

Moon began her pose. The Ghost-type Decidium-Z, an attack far more direct than Bloom Doom could ever be. Only this power would reach Primarina. Decidueye wished to show the strength she had gained that was hers and Moon's as one. So she would.

Sinister Arrow Raid.

Hau's arms shifted, from side to side. The Water-type Z-Pose, tied to the Primarium-Z his grandfather had given to him. The song, the flow, had guided him to this. No thoughts to question it. No mind to doubt. Simply action. He felt in his heart that power rise. Primarina's full focus forward. Very well then.

Oceanic Operetta.

Z-Aura flared around them.

The moment lasted longer than any other. The long draw back of the arrow Decidueye held. The high-rising notes of Primarina's song. The Z-Power surging around them both, twin bonfires of Alola's light given form. From Primarina a mass of water born of song. From Decidueye an arrow that was twenty loosed with all the power there could be.

Attacks cast between one another, the two came together and played out the final dance.

Decidueye's attack split, arrows arcing, pulling in different directions within the almighty bubble, bouncing through it as the water hardened and softened under Primarina's control. If even one arrow pierced through that bubble's surface, it would destroy the attack. If even one arrow still had strength after that and struck Primarina...

But if every arrow failed, the attack would continue on. Grasp Decidueye in its might. And the both of them had spent so much strength now. Any Z-Move would end it.

This truly was their final attack.

One arrow splintered, crushed by pressure upon it. Another. Two, three, five, ten more. One closed in upon the edge of the watery sphere.

A block of ice fell from it, frozen around the arrow quill, Primarina's focus strong enough to do such in this moment. More arrows slowed down to nothing. The strength behind each shot lost. Still Primarina sung. Still gave all they had. Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen.

The final, twentieth, arrow of Z-Power burst free, flying true towards Primarina's form.

The Z-Move behind it collapsing, water washing out across the field.

And the arrow point striking the Soloist Pokemon in the chest with all the force that remained.

So little left.

The quill, not even leaving a scratch behind, dropped freely to the ground.

Silence held in its wake.

Moon stared, quiet, across the field. Only now did she realise, just what Hau had done. How long
had it been since Raichu's Z-Move? Still way too short. She knew that for sure.

How far had Hau gone?


Those thoughts remained with him still.

As slowly he wavered, swayed, and fell, caught by Solgaleo's head to support and lower him down to the ground.

No thoughts left to think, no consciousness left to fight.

Rest now, for you gave all you had. Your promise kept. You have done well.

The silence remained still. Slowly, shaking for the intensity with which they were faced, the judge walked to where Hau lay. Knelt down beside him, turning the boy's head, the soft breaths of unconsciousness all that remained. That was that. Slowly, so slowly, they returned to their feet.

And raised their hand with the final call.

“The winner is: Moon!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm proud of them both.
The End Of Her Journey

Chapter Notes

This chapter uses a custom style - for best readability, please ensure the "Show Creator's Style" button at the top of the page is active.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The First Alolan Pokemon League Champion

(Tournament Structure Image Link)
The roar of voices and thunderous applause washed out, over, and around Moon, the storm never breaking, a constant rain of cheers pouring across the field. Moon stood there, silent, heartbeat hammering within her chest so hard. She... Hau... all but lost in the moment, Moon could do nothing but stand there as the barrier before her flickered and disappeared, the two Pokemon within staring as silently as she.

Decidueye and Primarina, so exhausted from their clashes – three in total shared together – and their Z-Moves used, barely had any strength left to give. Had Moon and Hau continued, of course they would have fought on. But the ending was so close all the same. One of them would have fallen soon. But even they did not know which.
Nebby, rising up behind Moon, nudged her with its head and pushed her forward a step. As if in a trance Moon continued to move, almost unable to hear the endless waves of sound around her. To Decidueye's side she strode, her partner raising a wing for Moon to slip beneath and grasp hold, the first partner of Moon relaxing against her Trainer as exhaustion settled hard within the Arrow Quill Pokemon's chest.

Solgaleo, watching over Hau as the judge for this match called those who cared for fainted Trainers to approach, shifted, the overseer jumping back in surprise at the movement of the gigantic Legendary Pokemon. Bringing its face down to Hau, Solgaleo breathed, a flare of light pulsing within its starlit brow. Power given, Hau stirred, rising to his feet amidst the noise but feeling disconnected from it all the same. He had enough to stand, and walk, but his thoughts were barely moving now that the intensity of the battle with Moon was gone. He was so, so tired.

The Sunne Pokemon gave Hau's back a slight shove, the same as Nebby had done for Moon, sending the young boy stumbling slowly forward. Step by step he crossed the distance to where Primarina remained, his first partner giving Hau their support. Helping Hau move forward further still.

Across the field to where Moon and Decidueye stood.

At the field's centre they met, Moon and Hau, Decidueye and Primarina. Between the two Pokemon raised side by side, there was appreciation. A good fight. They'd give it even more next time too. And as many times as came after as well. Always they'd compete alongside those they'd partnered with. And they'd love it.

This was everything they'd ever dreamed of and more.

Hau, blearily, focused upon Moon, who despite the intensity of everything about their battle, and the release of that tension upon its conclusion, was still alert and composed. He smiled.

“Hey Moon... you did it. Congrats.”

Each time the meeting of competitors was a handshake of acknowledgement. A battle well fought. Pushing off from Primarina to stand up properly, Hau raised a hand high. That wasn't their style though. A proper high five to bring it to a close. That was better.

Moon took a step forward from Decidueye as well.

And wrapped her arms around Hau in a tight hug.

In the wake of that conclusion, the remainder of the night passed in a blur for Moon and Hau both. A trophy was given, a ceremony was held, but all too soon the finalists of the League were seen to take their leave. None could blame them for needing to rest. Few who'd seen their battle did not.

But come the next day, the celebration in Iki Town lasted from dawn to dusk and beyond, Moon and Hau celebrated by all with absolute pride. The Kahuna and Captains all were present, and many more figures besides; a gathering of all who'd affected those two – and been affected by them – in this moment of joy.

Many, but not all, of the competitors from the League itself were here. Invitations were given in full, but some were either not for parties, had other obligations, or did not consider it a place for them to be.
Sabrina had taken her leave, already on the return trip to Unova. Invited to take part in this League as a figure of note to help draw it attention, she had enjoyed the opportunity to see the Trainers of Alola at this height. She hadn't been explicitly asked to investigate Moon, when Samuel Oak nominated her for the role, but she'd always considered it implicit. *Use your best judgement to learn what you can.* Her gaze into Moon's heart on their first meeting, it had pried a little deeper than Sabrina had intended. She wondered whether the effort she'd made to reveal Tapu Koko's strength to Moon was just apology.

What would Sabrina say, if asked of what she had seen in her time here in this League? *“Alola has more than one shining star to be aware of. But everyone should know that by now.”*

She was happy for what she had seen.

And for the future those two would claim.

Benga, the other Trainer from Unova nominated to take part – this time by Professor Juniper of his home region – had not left as quickly. Firstly because you never turned down an invitation to a party and secondly because he could feel Alola still had more for him yet. Pitaya's invitation to come and stay with the Dragon Tamers Guild, at this point Benga felt like he had to take that up. Grow stronger still, and bring all that strength back to Unova to motivate his buddies to work harder too! And if, by chance, he got to have a rumble with Moon or Hau as well, well he'd not pass that up at all!

Captain Ilima of Melemele Island, also in attendance today, kept watch awaiting his chance to speak with this fellow Pokemon Trainer and maybe arrange a battle to share.

How could he not, after all?

Guildmaster Pitaya was here. Large crowds and loud parties were both neither her thing, and her showings at the League had been as capable as they had due to her own discipline calming her against the massive crowd. But this was a celebration of two figures, two youths of Alola of incomparable heart and soul, and one a student she cared for so very much indeed. All of those who'd trained under her Pitaya considered precious, and any celebration of their feats she would join to do the same.

For the moment, having spoken with Benga's grandfather about the young man staying in Alola for a time, Pitaya was happily regaling Benga himself about Alder's shameless attempt to flirt with her yet again. *“Decades pass but that man does not change!”*

Benga is currently wishing the earth beneath his feet would open up and swallow him whole.

Sina and Dexio were reaping what they'd sown. Originally dispatched to Alola to observe the interplay between Z-Moves and Mega Evolution, the two had made full use of their invitation to Alola's first Pokemon League to stay the majority of a year on the research funding provided. In theory they'd done the work requested: first giving Moon a Key Stone and Mega Stone – though that was a decision of their own initiative rather than direct command – and then working with the Captains and Kahuna of Alola to study Z-Move and Mega Evolution interaction, but the entire time Sycamore couldn't help but get the feeling the two were employing minimal effort for maximum gain.

If they'd had a long enough holiday to post pictures from every cruise, park, attraction, and tourist spot across Alola, then it was about time for them to get back to Kalos and back to proper work. There were things that, unfortunately, their specific talents really were the best for.
With the air of moroseness about the two on their plane back home, you'd think they hadn't just spent almost a full year having a tropical vacation paid by their employer in full.

Grimsley was back in Mahihinu. Big parties very much weren't his thing; he'd give Moon and Hau his praise when they came around for surfing again. It wouldn't be too long until summer returned, and he was sure those two kids would want to get back out on the waves. They'd enjoyed it so much the last time after all. For the moment he'd content himself with relaxing in his retirement, and teaching those who asked him the basics so they could take up Pokemon Surfing as well.

This time keeping Mantine on hand for those eager to learn.

Jackson, absent too, was also back on the job. As head of the Pokemon Rangers in Alola, he did have constant work to do in ensuring the beautiful and wild region remained safe to people and Pokemon, and honestly after spending so long amongst crowds of people, he felt better about being back out in the wild. Amongst the tables of food present in the party today, a number of baskets of fruits gathered from across Alola had been delivered in the Pokemon Rangers' name. That was satisfying enough.

Parties really just weren't for him.

But even with those absent, Iki Town was still full of so many people and so much noise. Ryuki, as a semi-finalist, had accepted the invitation gallantly and then arrived in town with a full speaker set to plug into, so he and his bandmates – Ryuki manifesting a trio of his Pokemon with a grin – could put on a proper show. He was hoping Moon would finally get to hear him play this type of music too.

At the volume Ryuki went, Moon would have had to have been on another of Alola's Islands to not.

Moon and Hau were present. Each still somewhat awed, each still somewhat shaken, the ultimate battle they had fought taking so much, the summation of such a long struggle, now on the other side of it neither was entirely sure what to do. What was next? There wasn't really anything next. Asuka had swept in to speak to Hala and Jewellery, organising a plan for Moon and Hau to continue their schooling now that their journeys were done, but Moon and Hau themselves were simply... resting. They needed to rest.

Nebby was with Moon. All of her Pokemon were, as were all of Hau's, enjoying the celebration festival in Iki Town as well. Pokemon were mixed about the people, those of the final two competitors of the League wreathed in braided flowers, woven cloths, and decorations of all forms made in praise of their great efforts. Salamence was presently enjoying a game with all the town's children where they attempted to throw rings of flowers around the Dragon Pokemon's neck.

Set atop all the rooftops of Iki were various flying Pokemon, the Volcarona of Moon and Talonflame of Hau among them. Naganadel swooped this way and that, attempting to bait others to join it in flight, the Ultra Beast tirelessly hyperactive. Once it set its eyes on Nebby for attention though, the Moone Pokemon simply shifted its wings and in a flash teleported Naganadel halfway across Melemele.

Absolutely delighted by this Naganadel, once returned at full speed, demanded Nebby do so again. Thus that particular Pokemon found occupation for its boundless energy for the rest of the day.

At midday, with the sun at its highest overhead, Solgaleo – to this point remaining lying about, most people too intimidated to approach the Sunne Pokemon – rose to its feet. Hau, no longer connected to the Emissary of the Sun, still knew.
Still broke away from all others to stand before it and say farewell.

“Solgaleo.” He bowed his head. “Thank you.”

The coarse tongue of the Sunne Pokemon ran up Hau's face once, before Solgaleo looked up into the air overhead. Roaring loud, loud enough to overwrite even Ryuki's song, in answer the sky cracked, rainbow light washing out. Nebby, resting atop one of Iki's small houses, crooned out, gaining Solgaleo's attention, a momentary look shared between the two.

Then Solgaleo rose higher, walking on the air itself, accelerating in pace until it was a blazing light rising into the sky. Then in a flash as it reached that rainbow light it vanished, the sky sealing tight behind. The Emissary of the Sun moved on to where it next needed to be.

Hau, looking up into the blue sky overhead, felt the deepest of thankfulnesses swelling within his chest. Thanks to Solgaleo, he'd been able to reach this fight. To meet with Moon in the final battle of the League and battle her with everything he had. He was happy. And one day, he was sure, he'd see Solgaleo again.

He'd do his best to impress it next time with how much he'd grow.

Mina sought out Moon, speaking with the young girl, the League Champion of Alola, about her plan going forward. Now that the League was done, it was time for the former Captain to take her break from Alola. Not that she didn't love this region with her whole heart but- Moon nodded, understanding. They'd spoken about it before. The Tapu.

“I said before that I think they'll probably bug you next once I'm gone,” Mina turned, looking away from Moon upwards, to where the Legendary Lunala rested over a nearby house's roof. “But things have definitely changed since then. I don't think they'll hassle you at all.”

And even if they did, Moon smiled lightly, she'd be firm in telling them when they were being rude. *And* hold off on smacking them when they were. The artist smiled wide in response.

“There you go.”

Kukui, Hala, and Kahili watched the celebration from the steps of the hall the Kahuna of Melemele kept. So much energy. So much life and love of Alola. This was the result.

The best there could have been.

“Not one of those who'd opposed the League when you first proposed it still do.”

Hala's words were a strong compliment. Kukui grinned at the older man. “I knew that'd be the case, yeah! A true Pokemon League, the spirit of it is the spirit of an entire region! Once everyone saw Alola up there, it was always going to be this way!”

*This way?* Kahili's incredulous response made Kukui turn red and Hala laugh. “No-one was prepared for any of this. That's what makes it so important.” Turning to look out over the celebration, Kahili wore a wistful look. “It was beautiful. The Alola League you made. Thank you.”

“Will you compete again?” The question from Kukui came fast. Kahili was as much a core part of this League as any other in his eyes. The woman, only slightly younger than him, spent a moment silent. Then gave a sharp grin.

“You'd have to stop me, and frankly I don't think you could.”
Hala, seeing these two younglings giving their vicious and delighted grins, couldn't help his own smile. Good. He couldn't have Kukui running about without people capable of keeping the Professor humble.

“I am heading back to Kalos soon though.”

“Completely understandable. Give my regards to Viola.”

“I will.”

Others in Iki Town had formed groups to discuss as well. The Captains gathered, Sophocles moving from hanging around Molayne to spending more time with Lana, Kiawe, and Mallow. For a long time the Captain of Hokulani Observatory had remained pretty remote, but slowly the times the Captains gathered lured him out of his shell. He was happy spending time with them.

Samson Oak, who'd observed the entire League with a deep pleasure to see the light of Alola he'd grown to love shown to the world, was presently enjoying a rapid-pace conversation with Moon's Rotom-Dex, the Pokedex recounting all of its observations from the League battles. Now that the League was done, the Rotom-inhabited device was delighted to announce it would be following all of Moon's battles from right beside her going forward once more.

No doubt it would record plenty more amazing feats following the first Champion of the region.

Gathered nearby, beneath one of the trees whose roots stretched into Iki Town itself, four women watched over the scene. Jewellery, standing furthest forward, kept watch for Moon, tracking her daughter's movements amongst the crowd. As a League Champion – the first Champion – of Alola, Moon would have more required of her than ever now. This sort of celebration, especially with Hau with her, would help Moon practise speaking to people and dealing with crowds. That didn't stop Jewellery from hovering though. She was Moon's mother and her daughter was still only twelve!

A voice from another woman leaning against the tree carried laughter to her tone.

“You can relax, Jewel, you know she'll be fine.”

Kahuna Olivia smiled as Jewellery turned around with a sigh, understanding on her face mixed with complaint at being caught out so. Burnet, third of the four women gathered here, seated amongst the tree roots, topped up one of the glasses from the bottle the four were sharing.

“How are you feeling?”

“Stressed.” Jewellery's immediate response made all three of the other women laugh, Olivia taking the glass from Burnet and passing it to Jewellery, then taking the woman's arm and pulling her closer back to the tree to join the others. “I know- I know she's learning, and growing – so fast – but I'm still her mother and-”

“And you're keeping watch over her as she grows.” Wicke, the fourth of those gathered here, having come to Iki Town with Gladion to join the celebration, felt for Jewellery. Had felt similar seeing Lillie leave for Kanto before. The relationship between them, Wicke as an employee of the Aether Foundation caring for the children of Lusamine as best she could over the past years, wasn't quite that of parent and child, but it was still closer to that than most other things. Wicke imagined she could feel something of what Jewellery felt.

But every time she heard from Lillie, of how that young girl was growing and becoming more of the person she wanted to be, the pride that swelled in Wicke's heart was so much greater than any of the fear and worry at seeing Lillie go out on her own.
And she was sure that was what Jewellery felt too.

“Would you have it any other way?”

“Never ever ever.”

Gladion, not particularly one for crowds or events himself, was remaining close to Moon and Hau, the latter actually taking the time to tease Gladion for being out of sorts despite being older and ‘cooler’ – Hau making sure to make the appropriate gestures to frame that word – than him and Moon. Gladion bit his tongue at that. When the next Alolan League came in two years’ time – the one everyone could apply to join and battles would be in a larger stadium to filter down numbers in the hundreds – he'd be ready to stand in front of that crowd, and fight his way to the top as well.

It wouldn't be just Moon and Hau rising up that high.

Both of them welcomed that challenge to hear it.

Molayne joined Kukui to discuss the Elite Four system going forward. Jace and Ilima, unable to avoid riling each other up now that they were in a relaxed setting such as this, started a battle of one against one, a crowd circling the two Trainers standing atop the wooden platform at the centre of town. Attention drawn away from them, Moon, Hau, and Gladion retreated, their Pokemon spread about Iki either enjoying watching the fight or continuing to preen under the attention heaped upon them. Acerola had climbed up onto Pangoro's shoulders and was directing the Daunting Pokemon about the town. Tristan was failing to convince Golisopod to let him up onto its back so they could wrestle with the Captain of Tapu Village and the Pokemon she rode.

Along the path of Mahalo Trail Moon, Hau, and Gladion walked. On the night she and Hau had met – Moon told the other two – she'd met Lillie here first. Nebby was out on the bridge – now repaired – being attacked by Spearow. Moon went to help, but Nebby lit up in a bright light and the bridge broke.

It was only thanks to Tapu Koko that Moon was saved from that fall. And given the Sparkling Stone that was now her Z-Power Ring. Hau made a thoughtful noise. Gladion spoke up.

“That's what it means to practise Alola, isn't it? Helping other people in need? Tapu Koko saved you, and you saved... so many people. I'm glad for that.”

Turning to the teen two years older than them both, Moon and Hau looked at him with surprise to hear such kind words. Quickly Gladion's face could be seen turning red.

“Come on.”

Pushing past them, Gladion moved to the bridge of Mahalo Trail, Umbreon manifested and following behind him. Moon and Hau, with Sylveon and Espeon having followed after them as well, crossed over too.

At the entrance to the Ruins of Conflict they were awaited. By tradition, if it were to appear at all, Tapu Koko would grace those who prayed at its altar within the ruins with its presence. But Moon and Hau's approach, after the feeling those two had lit within the hearts of all four of the Tapu, the Island Deity of Melemele could not help but come out to greet.

“Here's good.”

Picking a quiet spot nearby, where a fallen pillar would let the three sit, they settled onto it as Gladion activated the tablet he'd brought along. Once Moon was out from the League last night,
she'd ended up collapsing into sleep soon after. So she hadn't yet been able to speak to Lillie.

Time to change that.

Tapu Koko, having watched the three children swerve and walk away from it, floated over to see just what was so interesting going on.

Lillie, awaiting this moment in Kanto, almost leaped to her feet as the tablet she held announced the incoming call. Activating it as quickly as she could, Sunny scrambling over her after being disturbed from her lap, Lillie brushed loose hairs out of her face as the call loaded in, and the faces of her brother, and two closest friends, appeared.

And...

“Is that... Tapu Koko?”

Moon, turning around, attempted to shoo Tapu Koko off. The deity did not budge. Hau laughed.

“I guess it is!”

The four spoke. Lillie began with her congratulations to Moon and Hau, for they had done such an amazing thing. Both of them, surprising one another, admitted they felt like they'd heard Lillie cheering for them. Lillie’s face clearly reddened to hear that.

Gladion reaffirmed his intent to join the first open League in two years' time. Made a joke about making sure Lillie supported him no matter who he was matched against, which Moon took louder – playful – umbrage at. Hau, as the conversation went on, quickly found himself stuck pushing Tapu Koko away from the tablet screen, the deity ever-curious but also remaining on the side of the trio where Moon was not. Watching Hau's reservations about dealing with the Island Deity disappearing before her eyes, Lillie felt herself grow sure Hau would become as fine a Kahuna as could be.

Moon and Gladion would readily agree.

Moon asked Lillie what her plan was.

“I'm still staying here.” Lillie's statement was resolute. “This Pokemon Journey I'm on... it won't be over quickly but... I can already tell I'm growing from it. And I like who I'm becoming because of it. I want to keep going, until I've reached the end. Then... then I'll come back home. So keep Alola safe for me, alright? I know the three of you can no matter what happens.”

Disasters already the three had done their part in staving off. Lillie believed fully that no matter what more the future brought, these three that meant so much to her would rise to the challenge.

And the future day that she returned on, she'd imagine so often in the months and years between now and then.

Moon, Hau, and Gladion would all do the same.

When the three Trainers and three Pokemon with them – Sylveon, Espeon, and Umbreon happily walking side by side – returned to Iki Town, the crowd's attention returned to them quick. Their slipping off from the event had gained notice after a few moments, and many of those organising here had been tasked to keep people from racing off to find the trio. Nanu, complaining after accepting the invitation to be here, told the three to stop challenging him with everything they did. Not one of the three agreed to that request, earning sharp laughs from the other three Alolan Kahuna listening in.
Hapu pulled Moon and Hau aside, Gladion retreating to the outskirts of the celebration where Wicke joined him to ask of the conversation with Lillie.

“You know,” Hapu, the young Kahuna of Poni Island, spoke once she had Moon and Hau's attention, Milotic shifting through the crowd to half-circle them and give them a moment's space, “we all did great things. And I want to say, I'm very proud to call you both my friends. The future of Alola is something all the youth of Alola are responsible for but... as Kahuna, as future Kahuna, and as first Champion, what we do matters a lot.” Hau, whose wish to become a Kahuna was to him still only that, tried and failed to convince Hapu not to treat it as a given. The young girl shook her head. Absolutely not.

“Nothing any of us did, nothing any of us will keep doing, will be easy. But as friends we'll be there to help each other all the same. I just wanted to say that again. It means... so much to me that you both helped me on my journey. And that I was able to help you on yours. And as friends-”

“Hapu.” Hau was the one to key in here. He'd known, from Hapu's own mouth when they'd spoken in times before, how isolated from other children the granddaughter of Kahuna Koa had been, living on the sparsely populated Poni Island. This repetition here, the attempt to reaffirm their friendship by reminding Hau and Moon to rely on her, it wasn't necessary. They were part of Alola and they were true friends. It was a given.

“Thank you for being our friend.”

The celebration continued on into the afternoon, even as many of the guests from further afield returned home. The Captains each made sure to give both Moon and Hau their praise: Tristan, Acerola, Lana, and Ilima insisting on arranging future battles with the two; Mallow, Kiawe, and Sophocles on each visiting them at their Trial Sites again. Kiawe walked away with Mallow and Lana patting his shoulder at the expression Moon was unable to hold back when asked to visit Wela Volcano once more.

As the evening came on, the party began to wane. Those who'd been enjoying the festival food all this time were full, Hau's partner Raichu, with swollen belly full of pancakes, napping under one of Iki's trees. Pitaya moved to speak with Moon, catching Asuka and Jewellery as well to discuss what would work best for the young girl, in time spent learning in school, and also training with her Pokemon as well. Gladion returned to the Aether Paradise, but not without Hau making him promise to come by again. Gladion was their friend too and needed to get used to visiting friends for the sake of visiting, not just whenever there was special occasion to.

Wicke promised on Gladion's behalf to get him out and about more often. The disapproving look Gladion gave her in response was nothing but performative and everyone there knew it.

Showing energy reserves worthy of an Ultra Beast, only by the evening did Ryuki Oda slow down – just a little. Catching up with Moon, he made his report on what came next.

“Time for me to get moving on,” the rocker and Trainer grinned wide. “Know for sure I'll pop up again, and we'll have to battle some more, but I'm a wandering soul, Moon – I got a whole world to explore and more stars to battle and heights to shine from! Keep an eye and ear on the news and you'll hear about me again, got that?”

Moon nodded. She would. And...

Thank you. Ryuki... he'd helped her find her drive, fanned the sparks in her heart with his energy that allowed her to surge forward the way she had. She could tell in his music too – that was what he did. Lifted the hearts of others. She was glad to have met him.
Smiling and waving goodbye, Ryuki kept his composure only as far as Moon couldn't see him wipe at his eyes.

As the long celebration came to a close, three Pokemon returned to the partners that had set them loose this day. Decidueye to Moon, Primarina to Hau, and Incineroar to Kukui, the trio enjoying a day of rest with one another. The last time they'd been together in one place had been the Battle Royal. And before that when Decidueye as Rowlet and Primarina as Popplio had gone to Moon and Hau to begin with.

Though despite calling it rest, any who'd overseen the three would have noticed the amount they were obviously baiting at one another and play-wrestling when one rose to the challenge.

Kukui greeted Moon and Hau at the edge of Iki Town, to walk home with Burnet to his lab, accompanying Jewellery and Moon along the way. Hau waved Moon goodbye for today, but it would be no time at all before the two were back together in one place again. Theirs were linked hearts too, tied by the challenge and struggle they'd shared and the height they'd reached. The best of friendships there could be.

Two pillars of Alola that would only grow and shine more with each day to pass.

“Thank you.” Kukui’s words were spoken as the four walked, on the path south from Iki, the path Moon had walked during her first days here, led by Kukui to Iki Town to receive her first Pokemon, and meet with Lillie and Hau. The day, it felt, like her life had truly begun.

Moon looked at Kukui as he spoke.

“This League... it was meant to be a celebration of Alola. Something to lift the hearts of everyone here, and show to the world how great our Trainers can be. Moon, you may have only been living in Alola for a year, but your heart is as Alolan as they come. You showed everyone, you and Hau showed everyone, what Alola truly is. It’s thanks to you two that my dream really came true. So thank you. I’m so glad you came to Alola, Moon.”

Jewellery lifted her head, meeting Burnet's eyes and smiling.

Moon nodded.

She was too.

In the southern reaches of Ula'ula Island, where caravans set on the eastern side of the ruined Tapu Village rested near the gates to Haina Desert, others celebrated today as well. Just four, but four who had not been together in this place before. Three had: the first living here now, the second and third visiting her, but the fourth had never made the journey. First because he'd been banned from this portion of Alola.

Second because, if Guzma had faced Rosia, mother of Holei, and Rosia had asked with her voice so reminiscent of her daughter, Guzma might not have been able to carry on his revolt. And if he couldn't hold onto the rage that had let him form Team Skull, what could he do? What would he have left? He wasn't able to face that. So he'd just stayed away. Ignored the letters Rosia sent him with Plumeria, whenever her granddaughter visited.

Today was the first day Guzma greeted her again, after eleven long years had passed.
The celebration wasn't exactly for the first Champion of Alola. At least it wasn't out loud. Guzma made a big deal about Plumeria bringing down Tapu Bulu, which Riley – the other in attendance here – echoed loudly, much to Plumeria's embarrassment. She was ready to put that behind her now. They needed to figure out what was next. Guzma complained loudly about Hala continuing to insist he move to Iki Town, and take up tutelage under the Kahuna. Rosia said that would be an excellent way to continue on Holei's teaching of him, which upset Guzma further since that was what Hala had said too.

Riley mentioned what some of the other former members of Team Skull she'd kept in contact with were up to: those who'd taken up jobs here and there, those who'd gone back home, even one who'd gone across the sea to Unova. But Riley wasn't sure what she wanted herself, and insisted on getting Plumeria to figure out what she wanted to do so Riley could follow her too. As big sister of Team Skull, even if it was disbanded, Plumeria still found herself looking after those they'd brought under their care.

She'd figure herself out, and help Riley do so too.

“What about me?” Guzma huffed as the two made plans. Plumeria stuck her tongue out and playfully reminded Guzma he was old enough to look after himself. Rosia and Riley quickly agreed, the latter for the first time so caught up in the flow she found herself teasing the once feared boss of Team Skull.

Guzma just barked a laugh.

Yeah he'd find something new.

It really felt like a new day in Alola after the longest of nights.

And so the wheel of time spun once more. The passage of days, into months, into years progressed. Ilima, Captain of Melemele Island, celebrated his twentieth birthday soon after the first Alolan Pokemon League, and at that time, with Kahuna Hala's given permission, nominated Hau to take on his role, and become Alola's youngest Captain in history. Joyfully Hau accepted the role, and began with bright eyes and a deep love for Alola guiding those beginning their Island Challenges forward.

As the famous finalist of the first Alolan Pokemon League, new Island Challengers appeared quickly to begin their journey with Hau, and the number of Trainers taking on the Challenge swelled over the years.

Gaining experience every day in helping people, practising resolving conflicts, giving advice, and guiding both Trainer and Pokemon, Hau grew more and more into a person who would become the greatest of Kahuna one day. His grandfather with deep pride watched over the young boy's growth.

Kiawe's retirement as Captain of Wela Volcano came a year after that, with his first request, being for Moon to take on his role, politely but firmly rejected. He understood, Wela Volcano really wasn't for her but still... it stung a little. Moon joined his retirement party at Mallow's family restaurant, and wished him the very best going forward with his plans to study dance, and Kiawe felt very better after that.

The second Alolan Pokemon League, the first open Alolan Pokemon League, came two years after the first. So many took part. Moon and Hau again amongst them. And many fine battles were had.

Lillie, in the Kanto Region, bloomed too. Her study under Professor Samuel Oak honed the natural
intelligence and sharpness of the young girl, and as a second, and third, Pokemon joined with her team, Lillie ventured further afield, with friends and alone, to train and battle the Gyms of the region, always reporting her successes to friends and family back home.

Gladion, working hard with the Aether Foundation to take on the role of its leader one day, grew sharply too, his friendship with Hau and Moon one of the few things that drew smiles from the focused boy. That and his Pokemon partners which he truly loved with his whole heart.

The Poke Pelago, grown into something great and wide-spanning, became a resort for Pokemon, Moon and Gladion helping Mohn begin the project, connecting him to the Captains and Kahuna of Alola so they might help too. Facing the father whose memory of his past was truly gone, Gladion struggled with it, but found himself supported by friends and family all the same. He visited Kanto, soon after Mohn's project began – drawing attention to the man and his face onto the news – to tell Lillie, and Lusamine, about what had happened and what he had found.

Gladion returned to Alola telling Moon and Hau that Lillie had been very upset with him for keeping that from her for so long. Moon didn't need Gladion to tell her that. Lillie had called her up to tell Moon off as soon as she'd found out.

After long years of work, the scientist Colress arrived in the Galar Region with a smile. His study of Ultra Evolution had borne fruit: a device that allowed the mimicking of both halves of the phenomenon – Z-Moves and Mega Evolution – at a weaker level, allowing even regular Trainers to unleash the energy that transformed any Pokemon into a greater empowered form for a time. It needed much more research and testing to truly perfect, but the battle-crazed Galar Region was the perfect place to introduce the Colress Dynamic Evolution System. The snappier name the Galar League Commission gave it kind of weighed heavy on the scientist's brow though.

The next Captain to retire was Mallow, three years after the first Alolan Pokemon League concluded, one year after the second. She, like Kiawe, went to Moon and asked her such: would Moon be willing?

And this offer Moon, who had truly fallen in love with the Wahiola and Lush Jungle region in her visits there before, took happily. Decidueye, her eternal partner, thrived as a constant presence within the jungle, more aware of its length and breadth than even Moon herself. A partnership whose light never faded even the slightest.

As a Captain at fifteen, with Hau three years her senior in the role, Moon bore a grin through Hau claiming seniority to anyone who would listen. And more people than ever moved to become Island Challengers, knowing that Moon would be there along the way to guide them in the journeys they'd undertake.

Moon, who had once with great regret changed her appearance, her hair colour and style and the clothing she liked to wear, grew to enjoy the act once it was under her control. It soon became difficult to spot the first Champion of Alola, for the rate at which she changed herself while travelling the region. The day Moon visited Mahihinu and Plumeria, with hair tied back in a deeply pink ponytail reminiscent of the one Plumeria herself had worn so many years ago, the once big sister of Team Skull simply was not prepared to handle.

“At least style it differently!” She was heard to complain with a smile on her face.

And still the world went on. Still more happened around Alola, around Moon, and Hau, and all those who lived in the region and called it home. Ancient legends rose from beneath the earth. Criminal elements invaded from other worlds. Seekers of lost light came from beyond time and space. And through these turbulent, dangerous, exciting times Moon continued on. Rose to meet every
challenge, as she always did. And so many rose with her.

The spirit of Alola they shared lifting them all higher still.

Searching out and helping those who’d fallen through the cracks the way he and all of Team Skull had before, Guzma – who’d found his role as something of a wanderer of Alola too – was often quoted as being frustrated at the sheer volume of trouble Moon and her friends got into and out of. Never without a little bit of a smirk at that much trouble though.

Some things never changed.

In her later teens Moon found herself approached by two she had not seen in years; Looker and Anabel returning to discuss how Moon – and her gift for working with Ultra Beasts, as well as partnership to the Legendary Lunala – might help resolve these situations going forward. She was not yet an adult, and the two would not ask her to make a decision now: they simply wished to let her know that if she wanted to, they would welcome her help with open arms. The Ultra Beast Task Force had improved in capability significantly over the years, thanks in part to the collection of scientists donated by the Aether Foundation to the cause.

The third Alolan Pokemon League followed four years after the second, the time between them now consistently set. Moon attended, age eighteen. More fine battles had. As should be.

As was right.

And then the day came. The message received. A journey completed. Word sent from across the sea. Lillie’s face bright on that screen.

“I’m coming home.”

Lillie, who was as much a part of Moon’s heart as Alola, as her Pokemon, as her best friends. No, who was more. Connected to her through Nebby, but even before that. Moon had always felt something, even though as an eleven year-old been unable to parse just quite what it was. But Lillie had said it, when they’d spoken after Ultra Necrozma's attack. And Moon had known for sure.

Seven long years apart, but each had grown, faced great challenges, and become more and more the person they wanted to be.

And so...

Along a beach of Hau’oli City a number were gathered. The ship that would carry Lillie home – the young woman opting to take the longer journey by sea to fully travel the path she had left by back – pulling in from the open sea. As the ship passed by the beach, those here would wave to her, and Lillie on its deck would wave back. Then everyone would race to the docks to try and be the one to greet her first.

It was generally understood by everyone they’d be making sure Moon was the one to pull ahead.

Moon. Hau. Gladion and Wicke. Kukui and Burnet. Jewellery. Hala and Hapu and Acerola. Floating behind them was Nebby, the Moone Pokemon remaining with Moon over all the years to pass. Awaiting this day.

The ship, passing by the beach, they all waved to. And from its deck the one waving back, that tall woman dressed in white, surely that must be...
In a loud cry Nebby beat its wings and took off, soaring over the water, sending up a spray of surf. In moments across the sea, all the way to the ship the Moone Pokemon flew up and above, before spiralling down to circle the one it could feel. She was here. She was here.

And then Lunala lifted, then Nebby returned to the beach, and grasped in its psychic hold was a young woman laughing loud, embraced by the first she had linked her heart to. Nebby circled over the beach and lowered Lillie down, leaving her standing on the Alolan sands.

Looking up at those gathered before her.

Lillie returned. Far taller than before, having grown to similar heights as her brother, long blonde hair tied around itself in a hanging ponytail. She showed the signs of any who took a Pokemon Journey, toned body from long travels, slight scratches from Pokemon scuffles, and bright eyes full of light and love for the world. She stared up, breathless, at the group before her.

Hau, raising a hand, set it on Moon's back and pushed her forward.

In stumbling, awkward, surprised steps Moon moved forward. Her hair was black again, returned to an appearance Lillie would remember from the last time they were together. Cut short, but not so short Moon couldn't tie it back, just a little. She wore a red dress of swirling dragons, and a shirt of Alolan flowers. A Captain's pendant hung around her neck where a Key Stone had been worn before. Moon's efforts, as Captain of Lush Jungle, had toned and built herself even more than any Pokemon Journey could on its own.

Before Lillie, Moon stood.

Before Moon, Lillie.

With a smile, Lillie raised her arms.

“Hi'm back.”

And in answer a smile, an embrace, and the words she'd been waiting to hear.

“Welcome home.”

Chapter End Notes

First thing's first, I'd like to give a shoutout to this art of Moon drawn by Jack @Drooling_Demon. Jack's an excellent artist and I love his rendition of my girl.

SO. That's it. Eighteen months, six-hundred and fifty-five thousand words. Wow. When I began Eldritch, in my heart I knew I was going to go crazy on it. If I didn't, I'd have been working on it forever, and I am someone who simply has too much they want to do. So I went crazy. And this is the result. I'm proud of this. I'm deeply, deeply proud of what I made here. And thankful, so thankful, for all of you. So many readers, so many commentors, I was able to experience such wonderful interactions with so many of you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. It's not incorrect to say a powerful driving force behind Eldritch was all of you as well. As much as this story was written for me, it was written for all of you too. Thank you for reading and enjoying it. It means the world to me.
Here, I admit to one mistruth. It's not *quite* it. Later this year, probably some time after Sword & Shield comes out, I'll have a little more to post. Somewhere in the range of one to three (depending on how I split it) chapters of author's notes, where I talk about the writing of Eldritch, what I did, what I'd change, what my thoughts were in various places, and about characters, and everything. I'll tell you more about most of the characters I've written, so look forward to hearing about that if you'd like to. I definitely have a lot to say.

For those who enjoyed my writing so deeply as to want more, beyond my existing AO3 archive, please consider following my writing twitter @TaurusWrites where I will be sharing all writing projects I am part of, whether on AO3 or not, going forward. I'm, understandably, going to be resting for a little while after this, but writing's in my heart so know for sure I'll be back with more stories to tell soon enough. I can't promise any plans for future Pokemon work, but given my love for the series and this version of the Pokemon world I've written, chances are I'll have more to say about it again in the future.

I think that's it. For now, once again, thank you so, so much to everyone who has read this fic. Creating content that people enjoy means the world to me, and hearing from so many of you just how you enjoyed it lifts my heart more than you can imagine. Thank you for following the journey of Moon, a girl who began this story with a defining trait of otherness, who by its end became such a deeply interwoven part of Alola that it's impossible to imagine her apart from it. She, and all these characters, are everything to me, and I'll carry them in my heart forever.

I hope you do too.

Alola.

Works inspired by this one: One Night In Akala by Alexilulu, Fallout by Mewr11

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!